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### Abstract

The present study sought to ascertain a contextualized perspective of established practitioners' subjective reasoning underpinning their practices. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996) was adopted as an in-depth qualitative approach to explore nine, UK-based applied sport psychologists' perceptions and experiences. Three superordinate themes emerged: literature underpinning professional practice, the importance of the sport setting and context, and the need for professional judgment. The study provides a valuable insight into the influences on sport psychologists' behavior, the role this plays when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes and, how such advice is operationalized and applied.

## 53 Why Do We Do, What We Do?

54 Within the field of sport psychology, practitioners adopting an evidence-based  
55 approach follow a working model of theory-research-practice. This is an example of  
56 translational research, which involves the application of theories, research findings, and  
57 intervention techniques across psychological domains (Smith & Smoll, 2011). Attending to  
58 these three reciprocal linkages enables sport psychologists to ensure that the knowledge,  
59 research, and interventions will support one another and advance the field as a scientific and  
60 applied discipline.

61 Specifically in the realm of performance sport, appropriate self-directed thought  
62 processes prior to and during task execution have been shown to make a significant  
63 difference to the level of performance attained (Moran, 2009). This bearing that cognitions  
64 and mental strategies have upon performance, as well as the ability to suppress conscious  
65 activity as athletes seek to prepare for and then execute movements, constitutes a remarkably  
66 worthwhile area for applied practitioners to consider (Singer, 2000). An important consulting  
67 area therefore, is the manner in which experienced performers are advised to allocate their  
68 attentional resources (Jones, 1995).

69 Unfortunately, however, applied sport psychology may lack adequate guidelines of  
70 what constitutes a recommended approach to the optimal combination of techniques and  
71 methods regarding the bearing that cognitions and mental strategies have upon elite  
72 performance. Winter, MacPherson, and Collins (2014) examined some of the current issues  
73 in this ongoing debate, suggesting that there was a lack of clarity from the available literature  
74 to determine guidelines for best practice. Furthermore, experienced sport psychologists have  
75 emphasized the need for this related knowledge, in addition to the application of techniques  
76 to foster productive consultations in their applied work (Simons & Andersen, 1995). It is  
77 therefore in our professional interests to determine the influences on best practice from

78 experienced practitioners who are currently working in this field, both specific to this  
79 important topic and also, in a more general sense, as an exemplar of how professionals  
80 develop their practice.

81         Such a double thrust appears timely. Presently in the literature, substantial progress  
82 has been made in identifying the qualities and characteristics necessary for effective sport  
83 psychology consulting (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Furthermore, research has supported the  
84 effectiveness of psychological interventions to enhance athletic performance and positively  
85 influence cognitive affective states (e.g., Greenspan & Feltz, 1989). However, there has been  
86 much less attention focused on how consultants can best implement and extemporize from  
87 these techniques (Gould & Damarjian, 1998). Reflecting this concern, recent review of the  
88 evidence base for the efficacy of interventions in applied sport psychology (Gardner &  
89 Moore, 2006) concluded that “empirical research on these interventions provides little  
90 guidance for the practitioner interested in best-practice procedures” (p. 83).

91         Throughout the consulting process, the goal for many sport psychology practitioners  
92 is to help athletes achieve at optimal levels by adopting an evidence-based approach. Of  
93 particular relevance here is the recognition that evidence-based practice is important for  
94 “allowing sport psychologists to make informed decisions regarding the most effective  
95 interventions” (Gardner & Moore, 2006, p. 67). However, it has been suggested that the  
96 evaluation of applied effectiveness and the development of an evidence-base to guide practice  
97 have been limited (Martindale & Collins, 2007).

98         Underpinning this, a practitioner’s effective professional philosophy contributes to  
99 understanding what the athlete is experiencing and the specific interventions applied in  
100 practice (Stainback, Moncler, & Taylor, 2007). The predominant professional philosophy  
101 utilized by sport psychology consultants is the cognitive-behavioral approach (Ravizza,  
102 2002). Implementing this philosophy requires the allocation of appropriate techniques to

103 allow the performer to transform maladaptive cognitions to those that are readily adaptable  
104 (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Notably and appropriately, however, intervention techniques and  
105 methods vary greatly as a result of the dynamic context within which the consultant operates  
106 and, importantly, current knowledge regarding effective sport psychology practice  
107 (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004).

108 If our field is to continue to progress then a greater understanding of effective practice  
109 must be obtained. Accordingly, the primary focus of this study was to ascertain a  
110 contextualized perspective of established practitioners' subjective reasoning underpinning  
111 their sport psychology practices. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the  
112 influences on sport psychologists, when advising elite performers on allocation of their  
113 thought processes. Given the breadth of potential scope but the clear importance of this  
114 factor, investigation was delimited to the cognitions and attentional foci pertaining to the  
115 execution, practice, and preparation for performance.

## 116 **Method**

### 117 **Methodology**

118 An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn,  
119 2008) was adopted as an in-depth qualitative approach to explore applied sport psychologists'  
120 perceptions and experiences. The aim of IPA is to explore in detail the processes through  
121 which participants make sense of their own experiences, by looking at the respondent's  
122 account of the processes they have been through (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Therefore,  
123 "IPA offers psychologists the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts – the  
124 research participants themselves" (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p.20). Additionally, IPA  
125 shares a connection with social and cognitive psychology in that it is concerned with mental  
126 processes (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005). Hence, given the purpose to examine the  
127 influences when experienced practitioners advise elite performers on allocation of their

128 thought processes, IPA enabled a consideration of personal and social worlds while retaining  
129 a focus on mental processes.

### 130 **Participants**

131       Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, nine British applied  
132 sport psychologists were purposefully selected to participate in this study. The sample  
133 comprised five males (age:  $M = 41.8$  years,  $SD = 4.76$  years) and four females (age:  $M =$   
134  $39.75$  years,  $SD = 5.44$  years). As an idiographic method, IPA sampling is purposive and  
135 broadly homogenous so a small sample size provides a sufficient perspective given adequate  
136 contextualization (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008). We employed the re-  
137 accreditation criterion stipulated by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
138 (BASES), in which practitioners continue to spend a minimum of 150 hours per year on  
139 professional delivery. Collectively, participants reported having a mean of 18.67 years'  
140 experience as accredited practitioners ( $SD = 4.36$  years) all of whom initially through  
141 BASES, while eight were now also British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered  
142 psychologist. Furthermore, all participants were registered as practicing sport and exercise  
143 psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the UK organization  
144 which governs standards of professional practice in this area. Participants' applied  
145 experiences ranged from working full-time with elite performers through the English Institute  
146 of Sport (EIS) or through their own private consultancy practices, through to consulting with  
147 a range of different sports alongside their academic positions within higher education  
148 institutions.

### 149 **Interview Guide**

150       The interviews followed a semi-structured approach. This method was adopted on the  
151 recommendation of previous research as the exemplary method for IPA (Smith & Osborn,  
152 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and the participant to engage in a

153 mutual dialogue, where initial questions envisaged by the researcher are adjusted and  
154 restructured during the course of the interview in light of participant responses (Smith &  
155 Osborn, 2008). As the order of questions is subordinate, the researcher is free to explore  
156 interesting areas and follow the participant's interests (Smith, 1996).

157         Prior to data collection, a pilot interview (Gratton & Jones, 2003) was conducted with  
158 a BASES accredited practitioner who met the required study criteria. This allowed for  
159 revision, where necessary, of the interview guide and ensured the schedule provided enough  
160 opportunities to gather the required richness of data. Following the pilot interview, an  
161 evaluative discussion was held between both authors and an independent academic  
162 experienced in qualitative methods. No significant changes were made to the actual  
163 interview guide, but it was agreed greater time should be allocated explaining and providing  
164 an opportunity for answering any participant questions, before commencement of each  
165 interview.

166         The final interview guide commenced with the most general question: "Tell me about  
167 your experiences working as a sport psychologist?" as advised in IPA research (Smith &  
168 Osborn, 2008). Most importantly for this phenomenological approach, the researcher invited  
169 concrete accounts of actual experiences that had occurred. Therefore, following this initial  
170 rapport-building conversation, the interview guide progressed to allow participants to  
171 produce explanations about the influential factors on their evidence-based practice. The  
172 interview guide focused on the underpinning this has for the practitioners when advising elite  
173 performers on the allocation of their thought processes. As general questions can sometimes  
174 produce insufficient responses, an assortment of probing questions and prompts that were  
175 intended to elicit more specific information (Smith & Osborn, 2008) were utilized. These  
176 probes included questions such as: "In your experience / how would you describe?" "How do  
177 you feel about?" "Can you tell me about?" Collectively, these guiding questions provided a



178 basis for the participants to discuss their current advice and approaches to cognitive strategies  
179 based on their previous experiences of working in the elite environment.

### 180 **Procedure**

181 Prior to the interviews, information sheets were provided that explained the purpose  
182 and procedure of the study (Gratton & Jones, 2003). Participants were informed that all  
183 information would remain completely confidential and that they could stop the interview at  
184 any time. Following the completion of informed consent, convenient times and locations for  
185 the interviews were agreed. Interviews were conducted by the first author face to face in an  
186 environment comfortable for the participant. Interviews lasted approximately an hour ( $M =$   
187  $64.75$  min,  $SD = 16.72$  min), which is typical for interviews in IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### 188 **Data Analysis**

189 All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The  
190 transcribed data were read and reread in their entirety until an in-depth familiarization of the  
191 data was reached. Smith (2004) states through a process of interpretative engagement with  
192 the transcription and texts, the meanings of the individual's experiences can unravel. During  
193 this reading and rereading, the transcript was annotated in the left-hand margin, to ensure the  
194 researcher's understanding of the participants' accounts. In addition, preliminary comments,  
195 associations and summaries were also noted on the left margin. Using the preliminary notes  
196 as a guide, the emergent themes were then documented in the right-hand margin. The titles  
197 of themes represent more precise psychological terminology, whereas notes reflect  
198 participants' comments in vivo (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

199 The emergent themes identified, reflecting the richness of the participants'  
200 experiences, were then collated and combined with quotations from the transcripts to ensure  
201 that the connections worked for the actual words of the participant (Nicholls et al., 2005).  
202 Such procedure enabled the clustering of the subordinate themes into the overarching

203 superordinate themes. During the course of analysis, the two authors had extensive  
204 discussions on the transcriptions and emerging themes to help uncover any biases in the lead  
205 author's analytic approach. In event of disagreement, the original transcripts were reread and  
206 further discussed until a consensus was reached (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

### 207 **Establishing Trustworthiness**

208 Two specific techniques (bracketing and member checking) were adopted to enhance  
209 the trustworthiness of the findings.

210 **Bracketing.** IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher in the research process.  
211 Access to an individual's personal account is both "dependent on, and complicated by, the  
212 researcher's own conceptions which are required in order to make sense of that other personal  
213 world through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith, 1996, p. 264). Therefore, the  
214 authors were careful to avoid imposing their own views onto the participants' accounts, or  
215 interpreting their words purely in the content of their own experiences. To help "bracket"  
216 personal views and consider the influence of personal values, and experiences on the research  
217 (Smith & Osborn, 2008), the lead author engaged in a reflexive journal. The second author  
218 facilitated this procedure through engaging in a process of advocacy and analytic discussions.

219 **Member checking.** Secondly, member checking was performed with all participants  
220 to ensure the themes identified accurately captured their experiences (Creswell, 2007) and  
221 offered the opportunity to add any additional points (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Participants  
222 were provided with a copy of their transcript, and a summary of findings for their  
223 interpretation and confirmation that they were a true and accurate reflection of their  
224 responses. Following this process, all participants confirmed to the authors that a precise  
225 portrayal of their experiences had been represented.

### 226 **Results**

227 A range of factors influenced the sport psychologists' personal experiences of

228 advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes. This section presents the  
229 emergent themes from the participants' interviews with representative verbatim quotes. In  
230 total, three superordinate themes emerged: literature underpinning professional practice, the  
231 importance of the sport setting and context, and the need for professional judgment. Notably,  
232 the first two superordinate themes underpinned the third, the need for professional judgment,  
233 with quotations integrated and demonstrating significant implications within these themes.

#### 234 **Literature Underpinning Professional Practice**

235 Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of  
236 knowledge. It is concerned with answering the questions of what is knowledge, how is it  
237 acquired, and how do we know what we know (Klein, 2011; Luper, 2004). In this  
238 superordinate theme, the participants discussed whether the literature was influencing their  
239 knowledge and subsequent advice when consulting with elite performers on the allocation of  
240 their thought processes. Specifically, three sub themes emerged as dominant: inconsistency  
241 in literature usefulness, positivist approach to sport psychology research, and importance of  
242 practice based evidence.

243 **Inconsistency in literature usefulness.** To develop control over cognitions,  
244 participants advocated the use of pre-performance routines, as a preparation tool for the  
245 performers they were working with. When discussing where the sport psychologists'  
246 knowledge regarding pre-performance routines was derived, the academic literature was not  
247 perceived as being completely supportive to practice:

248 Pre-performance routines, that's an evidence base that you don't really want to try and  
249 work from. There are some components of it that you think well that's relatively  
250 sound but I think you would be branded a fool if you thought your work on routines  
251 was guided exclusively by the literature, because I've no idea what that pre-  
252 performance routine would look like or the duration of it. (Steve)

253 Practitioners documented the use of specific cognitive-behavioral techniques within  
254 these pre-performance routines, to control and direct performer's emotions, thoughts, and  
255 attention. For example, a strategy participants used when athletes are both preparing for, and  
256 during performance was through the use of self-talk and specifically cue-words: "A few very  
257 holistic cues they're looking at or thinking to help them to perform, simple holistic cue that  
258 represents the type of action they want to achieve" (Ben). Discussing the underpinning to  
259 these holistic cues, participants were unclear where exactly what they did came from, with a  
260 certain literature base advocated to only partially guide the participants in their practice:

261 There's a link between those holistic cues and process goal literature. I think from an  
262 applied practitioner point of view there is some evidence to support the use of those in  
263 limited situations with limited numbers of people but it's yet to be nailed down as I  
264 think pretty much everything else. (Steve)

265 Offering an alternative viewpoint Paul stated: "The whole self-talk literature I think is  
266 a...I don't know...it's a bit of a mess." This was in stark contrast to the literature  
267 underpinning another commonly used cognitive-behavioral technique: "Imagery is one of the  
268 strategies that has a relatively substantial evidence base" (Emma), a similar view held by all  
269 the interviewed psychologists.

270 Overall, the literature supporting practice was conveyed with mixed emotions: "I  
271 think you do learn from academic literature, but there's very few papers in recent years where  
272 I read that and I think, oh that's had a profound effect on what I do" (Ryan). A similar  
273 opinion also emerged by this participant who now consults on a full-time basis:

274 I probably don't read very much sports psychology literature now. That's partly I  
275 think because you stop being a lecturer, you stop reading journal articles a bit, and  
276 they also don't seem as relevant sometimes to the actual practice of what you do. (Jo)

277           **Positivist approach to sport psychology research.** Another interesting debate  
278 emerged surrounding the knowledge base underpinning the applied experiences of the  
279 participants, with the following quotation highlighting the potential for an epistemological  
280 divide between research and practice:

281           So something that's meaningful for an applied practitioner is embracing the  
282 complexity and trying to deal with it and deal with that uncertainty, and the approach  
283 from a researcher is quite often to ignore the complexity and to reduce the uncertainty  
284 to a minimum and then say something about a very small amount of something which  
285 has meaning to a point. And then you throw in the fact that there's a specific type of  
286 sport, or specific number of people involved, and all of a sudden that starts to  
287 challenge the veracity of that information from that sort of reductionist approach.

288           (Steve)

289           A further caveat highlighted was the research approach that had been used to  
290 investigate a particular characteristic or psychological strategy: "You're comparing apples  
291 and pears and it isn't appropriate. And so a single subject case study approach is certainly  
292 how I've tried to base a lot of my applied practice" (Tom). The following quotation  
293 demonstrates the difficulty of always being able to guide applied work from the academic  
294 literature:

295           From an applied practitioner's perspective I guess there's so much that you see that  
296 you then look to try and establish what the foundation for that might be, and you  
297 come up short because the research isn't up to date. (Ben)

298           Conversely to this, Claire stated: "I feel uncomfortable if I'm not theory-research-  
299 practice because my effectiveness is so hard to measure, that's one tick box...I've done  
300 things which are evidence-based." A thought-provoking point regarding a philosophical  
301 questioning of the underpinning to applied practice was made: "So that whole thing of what

302 is evidence and what's appropriate for an applied practitioner to use that influences their  
303 practice is a really interesting debate" (Ryan).

304       **Importance of practice based evidence.** Further discussions emerged concerning  
305 how practice based evidence significantly influenced delivery: "I'd like to see there being  
306 more about what practice can do to influence theory than the classic theory influencing  
307 practice. I see too much top-down and not enough bottom-up" (Claire). The academic  
308 literature is widespread, with an increasing number of journals with an applied focus  
309 emerging. However, this participant highlighted a limitation to reporting practice based  
310 evidence: "I've wondered whether practice based evidence, there isn't a real forum for it, I  
311 wonder in the literature if that's the best way of communicating it" (Ryan). This was  
312 specifically explained by the constraints imposed by the academic journals:

313       The style of academic writing and what's expected to get things accepted, gives it this  
314 rigidity that sometimes is very difficult to convey your messages, whereas I think  
315 verbally it's much easier to do that. Sometimes I think academia puts constraints that  
316 everything must be referenced and I think you run the risk of losing out on some of  
317 the richer experiences of people. (Ryan)

318       The following quotation summed up the perceived disparity between practice based  
319 evidence and research within the field of sport psychology:

320       The unreported information you get from experience and there are fellow academics  
321 who would not consider that I have evidence unless it's a controlled trial. And my  
322 particular perspective on that as an applied practitioner is that they're deluded and  
323 they have a poor understanding of human functioning because the world of sport, you  
324 are unable to reduce and control variables. Because the whole nature of that scenario  
325 is to deal with the complexity and you can simplify but you can't dismiss it as if it  
326 doesn't matter. And if you do then coaches will tell you, performers will tell you that

327           you're missing the point and that you will fail as an applied practitioner as a result of  
328           not embracing the true complexity of it. (Steve)

### 329 **The Importance of the Sport Setting and Context**

330           The next superordinate theme concerned the importance of understanding the specific  
331 context in which the sport psychologists were consulting, with three sub themes emerging:  
332 acquiring contextual intelligence, integration within the coaching team, and exposure to  
333 pressure situations.

334           **Acquiring contextual intelligence.** Participants advocated the development of sport-  
335 specific knowledge to aid their applied practice:

336           Contextual intelligence, so this whole notion of understanding the context within  
337 which that person's experiencing their sporting world is the thing that's influenced my  
338 practice the most in the last couple of years, and what that's led to is me spending a  
339 greater amount of time understanding the context than I spend working on, say,  
340 classical mental skills with the performers. (Steve)

341           This was further discussed as the specific psychological demands of the sport within  
342 which the participants were consulting: "I'd say you look at the sports specific nature of what  
343 their event is, you use your understanding of the psychological demands of that particular  
344 sport" (Emma). The following example highlights the necessity of this sport-specific  
345 knowledge, integrated with the experience of the consulting sport psychologists:

346           So for instance, if a golfer came in and said he knew what he wanted to work on,  
347 immediately I'd start thinking through my knowledge of the practice environment in  
348 golf where you've got sport specific knowledge and where you've encountered that  
349 sort of issue before and dealt with it successfully. (Ryan)

350           With regards to advising performers on the allocation of their attentional foci  
351 pertaining to execution, this was perceived as highly dependent on contextual factors:

352 Take tennis as a sport...it demands assets that are played in very multi-dimensional  
353 ways, so there's a heavy cognitive demand on the player in terms of decision-making  
354 and information processing for long periods of time. (Paul)

355 **Integration within the coaching team.** The fundamental reason participants  
356 provided for developing contextual intelligence was dependent on their integration within  
357 their consulting sport:

358 That's influenced significantly by the environment, and the attitudes of the coaches  
359 towards that integration into the training context, and sometimes that's clearly not an  
360 option, and sometimes it's encouraged and developed. (Lisa)

361 The following quotation highlights the need for immersion of the sport psychologist  
362 within the training environment, to be able to advise effectively in this specific context:

363 I can be quite heavily involved in running practical sessions so they have a  
364 psychological theme with coach support as well. We do, wherever possible, try to  
365 mimic situation...so that then gives us a better idea to then work on some of those key  
366 strategies when they're in situ effectively. So for a lot of them it does come down to  
367 concentration and focus, which then provides us with an opportunity to go in and  
368 work on those interventions. (Tom)

369 During the preparation section, participants discussed the use of a number of  
370 cognitive-behavioral techniques with their clients. The training environment was deemed  
371 necessary for athletes to practice their strategies, with Tom emphasizing how this is  
372 beneficial in collaboration with the coaching team:

373 It's kind of in action all the time rather than talking about it and then going to have to  
374 do it somewhere else. So they're modifying as they go, they're experimenting with  
375 what their routine might be and because the coaches are there as well they can then  
376 reinforce the things when I'm not present.



377           Conversely, the following example highlights the necessity of the participants  
378 developed contextual intelligence within this different consulting arena: “In motor sport they  
379 get very little practice time, so I’ve always believed that they have to make more use of  
380 imagery skills because they lack physical practice time” (Ryan).

381           **Exposure to pressure situations.** Through the participants developed experience of  
382 the sporting environment, they advised the exposure of their clients to stressful situations:

383           People need to understand themselves, expose themselves to chaos, pressure, and then  
384 learn to cope, because that’s in reality the environment they’re going to go and  
385 perform in. So that’s what a lot of work with the coaches is. Looking to see the gap  
386 between what they do in training and competition, and if they’re miles apart,  
387 highlighting that and thinking of ways to make them more similar. (Jo)

388           With regards to attentional resources per se, the purpose of developing these  
389 contextually relevant situations was to stimulate similar thought processes to the competitive  
390 environment:

391           You’re trying to make practice as contextually relevant as you can, so the thinking  
392 process is the same...so the setting up situations which are more a simulation of what  
393 happens psychologically in the game as well as physically. (Ryan)

394           This was further demonstrated in the following quotation, where Ryan highlighted  
395 how the pressure of the performance environment can affect the performer’s cognitions in  
396 relation to their skill execution:

397           In something like golf where if you become more highly aroused or anxious, people  
398 start getting very technical with their swing. It’s how do I do this, and numerous  
399 thoughts, and they get quite mechanical and jerky, they become more effortful and  
400 because it isn’t a sport where you can place physical effort into the thing, you place  
401 that effort into thinking, and I do believe that.

## 402 **The Need for Professional Judgment**

403 In ascertaining a contextualized perspective of established practitioners' sport  
404 psychology practices, the inclusion of professional judgment and decision-making was  
405 advocated as an important underpinning factor. The following sub themes emerged within  
406 this superordinate theme: philosophical approach underpinning practice, importance of  
407 underlying cognitions, and advising in the technical development setting.

408 **Philosophical approach underpinning practice.** Participants initially discussed the  
409 importance of reflection as influencing effectiveness in their working context:

410 I would say that the two biggest influences on my development have been knowledge  
411 and that ability to reflect on what I do and identify the key markers that make me  
412 more or less effective and try to change as a result of that. (Steve)

413 It was described by participants that those who adopt a reflective stance are willing to  
414 explore the assumptions that inform behavior, by making sense of experiences and increasing  
415 effectiveness. Having a network of professional psychologists to share these reflective  
416 experiences was emphasized as a crucial component of good practice: "The real value is  
417 having a wide network, both within and out of sport psychology, so a lot of my ideas about  
418 developing have come from clinical or organizational psychologists" (Jo).

419 All participants discussed their practice as being underpinned by a cognitive-  
420 behavioral stance. In addition, two participants stated they were predominantly cognitive-  
421 behaviorist in orientation, but aware of humanistic principles when interacting with clients,  
422 and one participant said they adopted a mixture of gestaltism, and cognitive-behavioral,  
423 depending on the athlete and situation they were in. Participants noted how professional  
424 judgment has influenced the philosophical approach they adopted in relation to their applied  
425 work in the elite environment:

426 Beyond traditional performance enhancement type of techniques, I certainly started to  
427 look more deeply at the cognitive behavioral philosophy, as in really looking at the  
428 types of cognitions, and beliefs that athletes were possessing. (Paul)

429 The cognitive-behaviorist approach was the dominant philosophy expressed by these  
430 sport psychologists. Relative to this approach, and advising performers on the allocation of  
431 their thought processes, participants emphasized the importance of cognitions:

432 It's a mix of further training and recognition of what's made a difference for those  
433 people I've worked with. I've been most effective when I've influenced the thoughts  
434 that the performers are having in relation to their performance. (Steve)

435 The types of thoughts were perceived to have differing impacts on performers, with  
436 this participant reflecting on how they are looking to influence them: "You're trying to  
437 displace those dysfunctional cognitions with more appropriate, controllable thoughts in order  
438 to help them to perform more successfully" (Ben). Implementing this approach required the  
439 allocation of cognitive-behavioral techniques. However, participants highlighted how the  
440 research can be misleading to the universal application of these preparation techniques:

441 When you know the performers, if you've had consistent input with them, there's an  
442 element of where you've got professional judgment that you can go, 'Well that sort of  
443 strategy is never going to work for them, they're not going to take that on very easily,  
444 I'll try a different approach.' I would say most of them are effective in some way,  
445 shape or form and that's why I use them. (Lisa)

446 **Importance of underlying cognitions.** Cognitive-behavioral techniques were seen  
447 as an invaluable approach, but discussions also arose following the participants' experience  
448 with athletes requiring more fundamental changes in core beliefs to overcome performance-  
449 disrupting issues. The following quotation highlights how, through a process of professional  
450 judgment, Steve decided to engage in further training courses: "It was a desire to develop

451 myself, no one suggested it, I just tried to find something that I felt was going to take me to a  
452 different place in terms of my applied practice, extend my skillset.” As a result of further  
453 training, a limitation to the traditional mental skills training (MST) approach was highlighted  
454 and a move towards rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1957):

455         The first thing is the impact of beliefs, the training I did there reinforced the impact of  
456         that belief element and that certainly affects the types of approach I take with  
457         investigating the underpinning cognitive influences on a performer. (Paul)

458         The participants discussed how athletes can develop an ability to alter their beliefs; in  
459         addition, however, the ‘disputational’ nature of REBT was noted as requiring professional  
460         judgment:

461         I’m always working with an eye to looking at how I can get a depth of change and  
462         that’s probably going to come from the core beliefs than from the surface talk. If I  
463         can influence the core beliefs more fundamentally then that’s where I’m aiming at  
464         really, it takes a bit more time and guts. (Steve)

465         **Advising in the technical development setting.** When discussing advising elite  
466         performers on allocation of their thought processes within the training environment,  
467         participants debated whether they would have an input when it came to skill learning: “If  
468         they’re learning, and I say ‘if’ because I don’t meet that experience very much, coaches being  
469         open to saying ‘come and help me’ it doesn’t happen that often” (Claire). Ultimately, this  
470         was perceived to either be dependent on the coaches the sport psychologists were working  
471         with, or how the athletes had already been taught the skills they possessed: “I think most of  
472         the time you’re dealing with people who’ve been taught explicitly” (Lisa). Two different  
473         learning approaches were mentioned by the participants, which are conceptualized in the  
474         literature as explicit and implicit motor learning. However, this seemed to be a somewhat

475 questionable area, testing the participants' professional judgment regarding the transferability  
476 of implicit motor learning to the practice arena:

477         Part of me still feels uneasy because part of me still doesn't know how to do it  
478         properly yet, I don't think there's enough, when we spoke about self-talk and imagery  
479         I could reel of 10-15 papers that specifically talk about interventions and what they  
480         did and how they did it, even though I'd like more of those, where as with the  
481         explicit-implicit it's very experimental in nature, it's talking about random-letter  
482         generation, it's constrained to particular activities. (Claire)

483         A further applied issue arose regarding the levels of training and education of the  
484         participants as to whether, through their professional judgment they felt competent advising  
485         in this technical development setting. Irrespective of knowledge base, however, this was  
486         perceived to be a somewhat challenging area for sport psychologists to advise coaches on:

487         Very hard to make any in-roads with coaches in that area, and I guess from an applied  
488         perspective you've got to choose your battles. So you may see things going on which  
489         you think well that's contrary to the literature but it's probably going to take you back  
490         in trust and rapport with those key people because you're challenging something  
491         which is fundamental to their knowledge base. (Steve)

492         Participants acknowledged that the literature is only going to influence their practice  
493         to a certain extent and that, once again, a requirement for professional judgment was  
494         apparent: "While there are an increasing number of applied studies they can only provide a  
495         framework for you...it's then the professional skill to take the findings and apply it to the  
496         situation" (Tom). This was demonstrated in the following example, where participants noted  
497         that a potential discrepancy existed in the literature between the concepts of athletes being in  
498         an automated state, compared to feeling in conscious control when they are performing.  
499         Accordingly, this discrepancy required the participant's professional judgment and



525 another and advance the field as an applied discipline (Smith & Smoll, 2011). However, this  
526 notion of translational research is potentially challenged when noting the views expressed by  
527 the experienced practitioners currently working in the field. Specifically, participants  
528 articulated their dissatisfaction with the usefulness/effectiveness of the literature, resulting in  
529 some stating they use limited research from applied sport psychology to inform practice.  
530 Additionally, it was felt the academic journals were not always the best medium for  
531 conveying the applied consulting experiences of the practitioners.

532 In this regard, Silva, Conroy, and Zizzi (1999) believe that applied sport psychology  
533 has taken on two very different meanings. “One interpretation focuses on conducting applied  
534 research, while the second interpretation describes the application of sport psychology  
535 principles with clients” (p.301). In slight contrast, Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, and Robinson  
536 (2002) added that both the research-oriented and the practice-oriented branch of applied sport  
537 psychology influence and inform each other. The Anderson et al. (2002) viewpoint may be  
538 viewed as an idealistic epistemological stance, rather than a true reflection of our applied  
539 discipline, when taking into account the perspectives of the participants. Furthermore, there  
540 is a growing concern within the profession of sport psychology over whether we are  
541 providing evidence-driven models for understanding, conceptualizing, assessing, and  
542 intervening with athletes (cf. Gardner & Moore, 2006). Therefore, the reasons why literature  
543 in our domain is often not seen to inform practice, is something we feel requires further  
544 discussion.

545 The applied sport psychology work delivered from those practitioners who work in  
546 academia, is often not valued in the same vein as those publishing research. For example, the  
547 research excellence framework (REF) is the new system for assessing the quality of research  
548 in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The primary purpose of the REF is to produce  
549 assessment outcomes for each submission to inform the funding bodies’ selective allocation

550 of their research funding to HEIs. On a similar note, research publications are usually the  
551 most important requirement for colleagues from the United States and Canada seeking to  
552 obtain the most prestigious, and the most coveted 'tenured' positions.

553         It seems that sport psychologists who wish to practice or apply their specialization  
554 could be differentiated from that of research specialists whose primary aims are related to  
555 REF/Tenure eligibility. Whether this is/would be a positive or negative differentiation is a  
556 topic for significant debate! Meanwhile, the contention underpinning this situation is that  
557 different aims within any scientific discipline generate distinctly different types of  
558 knowledge. In our field of sport psychology this relates to: psychology through, of, and for  
559 performance (Collins, 2008; Collins & Kamin, 2012). The more descriptive ideographic  
560 material from psychology 'for' performance knowledge is most likely to drive forward  
561 support-practitioner behavior, compared to psychology through, or of performance resulting  
562 in the generation of literature that is publication-focused rather than on the applied  
563 implications per se. The participants in this study expressed concern if their practice could  
564 not be evidence-based. However, as Cascio (2008) stated "to date, much of the effort by  
565 academics to reach out to practitioners has focused on the diffusion of scientific knowledge,  
566 not its creation. For genuine change to occur, it is necessary to promote much closer  
567 collaboration between academics and practitioners" (p.455). Gaining an understanding of  
568 how this knowledge underpins subsequent judgments and decisions that has the potential to  
569 offer significant insight into the construction of expertise in applied sport psychology,  
570 (Martindale & Collins, 2007) is an issue we will return to later in this section.

571         The experienced sport psychologists in this study acknowledged their consultation  
572 involved more than knowledge of techniques and cognitive strategies. It also required an  
573 understanding of the context in which they are consulting (i.e., knowing what to do, and how  
574 to do it) termed contextual intelligence (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005). Contextual



575 intelligence involves knowing the culture and context of the specific setting in which the  
576 individual operates, and is the foundation by which consultants earn legitimacy, trust, and  
577 respect, and is thereby considered a strong predictor of real-world success in professional  
578 practice (Terenzini, 1993). However, contextual intelligence is considered tacit knowledge,  
579 and so difficulties may exist in terms of verbalizing, teaching, and learning from this  
580 perspective (Brown et al., 2005).

581         This idea also holds implications for the professional development of sport  
582 psychologists. Tod, Andersen, and Marchant (2011) highlighted that it can often be difficult  
583 to fully prepare practitioners within a sterile learning environment and, therefore, it is likely  
584 that the necessary experiences for developing contextual intelligence can only be gained  
585 through practice. However, a disparity existed from the participants in this study as to the  
586 level of integration and immersion they held within their consulting contexts. This was seen  
587 as dependent on a number of factors including the sport environment, attitudes of the coaches  
588 towards that integration, nature of the consulting role (i.e. whether utilized in the practice  
589 environment) and whether the participants themselves felt competent advising in the  
590 technical development setting.

591         The influences on sport psychologists advising in the training environment, when  
592 athletes are learning, practicing, or technically developing their skills received the most  
593 uncertainty from the participants, compared to the preparation and competitive contexts. This  
594 was partly due to underpinning research areas such as implicit motor learning, which are  
595 experimental in nature and constrained to particular activities (Masters, 2000). Hence  
596 resulting in participants expressing unease with the application, due to a perceived lack of  
597 transferability to the high-performance sporting environment. Therefore, if contextual  
598 intelligence is the foundation by which sport psychologists earn legitimacy, trust, and respect,

599 a need for further research designed to be impactful in applied settings is greatly required (see  
600 Winter et al., 2014).

601 Contextual intelligence is typically associated with practical know-how that rarely is  
602 formally described or taught directly (Wagner, 1987). Rather than assuming that contextual  
603 intelligence is an unalterable tacit skill, however, the emphasis within our profession has been  
604 on developing skills that help the consultant provide contextually intelligent, and therefore  
605 culturally appropriate, interventions. In this regard, Terenzini's (1993) research has  
606 straightforward implications for sport psychology programs that seek to train intelligent  
607 performance, by providing frameworks for determining contextually appropriate  
608 interventions. However, as Brown et al. (2005) stated "there are few, if any, models for  
609 actually navigating the vicissitudes of the context in which performance occurs" (p.55). Our  
610 field therefore needs to better address contextual intelligence in continuing education and  
611 professional training programs, if we expect sport psychologists to engage in intelligent  
612 consultation, and aid their professional judgment.

613 Professional judgment and decision-making (PJDM) literature has an empirically  
614 based rationale and is already effectively used in other branches of mainstream psychology  
615 such as psychotherapy (e.g., Eells, 2002). The critical analysis and evaluation of PJDM in  
616 sport psychology however, is currently lacking formal content, method, and criteria against  
617 which to reflect (Martindale & Collins, 2007). The exploration of why sport psychology  
618 practitioners are doing what they are doing is an initial step in this direction. Interestingly,  
619 determining the factors that guide and influence the practitioners' professional judgment in  
620 this study were multifaceted, and certainly not generic across participants.

621 The case for engaging in reflective practice was reported, and has been well  
622 documented in the literature (e.g., Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004). However, by its  
623 very nature, reflective practice is a reactive process focusing on understanding what has

624 happened for the purpose of refining future practice (Martindale & Collins, 2007). Arguably,  
625 a more optimal approach is proactive thinking, involving foresight in anticipation of future  
626 decisions. Hence applied sport psychologists' professional judgment and subsequent  
627 decision-making can be defined as a proactive process (taking place before and refined  
628 during the event). Thus, in effect, PJDM has the capability to represent the entire  
629 perspective, which reflective practice is, arguably, unable to capture.

630         Pertinently to these ideas, Martindale and Collins (2013) highlighted this current gap  
631 in reflective practice; we have a tendency to reflect more so on 'what' we have done than  
632 'why' we have done it. In addition, we could reflect on 'why' with greater complexity. The  
633 professional philosophy adopted by the practitioners was another influential factor  
634 influencing their subsequent judgments and decisions why specific interventions were applied  
635 in their practice (Stainback et al., 2007). The predominant philosophy utilized by the  
636 consultants was the cognitive-behavioral approach: a major premise being that athletes may  
637 need to learn cognitive strategies, through mental skills training (MST) to cope with the  
638 various demands of training and competition (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). However, a  
639 limitation to the traditional MST approach was reported through the participants' experience  
640 and a move towards REBT (Ellis, 1957).

641         Notably, the use of REBT is seldom documented in the sport psychology literature  
642 (Turner & Barker, 2014), even though the beliefs of athletes have an important influence on  
643 performance. The disputational nature of REBT was noted as particularly requiring the sport  
644 psychologists' professional judgment. In accordance with this approach, the participants  
645 deliberately challenged their clients, displaying characteristics that may be considered  
646 unfavorable but judged appropriate by the consultants (e.g., disputing the client's thoughts  
647 and core beliefs). However, this was deemed necessary if a depth of change was to be  
648 achieved, through investigating the underpinning cognitive influences on a performer.

649 Interestingly, it was the participants' own professional judgment to engage in this further  
650 training, not a requirement of their professional bodies (e.g., BPS, BASES).

651 It has been highlighted in this study that effective practice relies on the careful  
652 consideration of knowledge base, professional philosophy, and theoretical orientation  
653 adopted, client needs, past experience, and situational context, among other factors.  
654 Reflecting on PJDM encourages a deeper level of conceptualization and coherence of  
655 practice, providing a platform from which to further develop our expertise in providing  
656 applied sport psychology support (Martindale & Collins, 2013). A scenario-based approach  
657 could be adopted to incorporate the use of case studies in an attempt to facilitate the  
658 acquisition of decision-making expertise in applied practice. Furthermore, this information  
659 would indicate which areas require development, and be invaluable for the professional  
660 training of novice sport psychology practitioners.

661 While the present findings exemplify a range of influences on best practice from  
662 experienced sport psychologists who are currently working in this field, they are not without  
663 their limitations. The themes that emerged from the interviews represent the experiences of  
664 the current participants and not necessarily those of all practicing sport psychologists.  
665 Though an IPA analysis may not strive for generalizability, however, neither should it merely  
666 be the retelling of respondents' accounts (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Carradice, Shankland,  
667 and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research should be  
668 evaluated by applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others involved in the  
669 phenomenon. The inductive nature of IPA allowed the authors to discuss their analysis in the  
670 light of varied existing psychological literature, and apply to both neophyte and professionals  
671 in the field.

672 Overall this study provides a valuable insight into the influences on practitioners'  
673 behavior, the role this plays when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought

674 processes and, how such advice is operationalized, and applied. It was demonstrated that  
675 literature, contextual intelligence, and professional judgment were the key factors influencing  
676 why sport psychologists do what they do. However, it was clearly conveyed that further  
677 research, designed to be impactful in the applied setting, and addressing the needs of the  
678 practitioners is needed if our discipline is to advance and remain as evidence-based.  
679 Furthermore, the sport psychologists who sometimes felt constrained by the rigidity imposed  
680 by the academic journals would welcome alternative methods of presenting the richer  
681 experiences of applied practice. Finally, we would advocate the importance of PJDM and  
682 developing contextual intelligence in continuing education and professional training  
683 programs of novice sport psychology practitioners.

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