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**The Quest for Professional Self-Understanding: Sense Making and the Interpersonal Nature of Applied Sport Psychology Practice.**

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### Abstract

Several authors within the sport psychology literature have acknowledged an interpersonal dimension of applied practice, with several publications highlighting the significance of developing and maintaining effective working relationships with a range of key stakeholders (i.e. athletes, managers, coaches, sports physicians, parents). Through the use of a longitudinal series of semi-structured interviews across an eighteen month period, this article explores the experiences of four trainee practitioners and two qualified sport psychologists, and their perceptions of working with multiple stakeholders, examining how such encounters serve to shape and inform their professional self-understanding in a contextual manner. Key themes constructed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis accounted for *finding one's place, picking your battles* and *being seen to do a 'good' job*. Upon acknowledgement of self-perception and recognition from others as being fundamental factors in shaping a practitioner's professional self-understanding, the present article encourages early career practitioners, and the professional bodies who train them, to increase their engagement with other fields and professions, with a view to better preparing sport psychologists for the everyday interpersonal demands of successful applied practice.

*Keywords:* stakeholder; professional self-understanding; micropolitics; interpretative phenomenological analysis

**Lay Summary:** This article explores trainee and qualified practitioners' experiences and reflections of working with multiple stakeholders to better prepare sport psychologists for everyday interpersonal demands of successful applied practice.

**Implications for practice:**

## THE INTERPERSONAL NATURE OF APPLIED PRACTICE

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- The current article further highlights the inherently micropolitical nature of applied sport psychology contexts, illuminating the significant influence that interpersonal relationships with key contextual stakeholders can have upon a practitioner's professional self-understanding.
- The current article serves to support practitioners' efforts in seeking to better manage their interpersonal relationships with key stakeholders, enhancing their ability to 'survive and thrive' as applied practitioners.
- The novel theoretical lens adopted within this study, provides a basis to help scaffold developmental activities relating to professional self-understanding, micropolitical activity, and contextual understanding.

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3       **The Quest for Professional Self-Understanding: Sense Making and the Interpersonal**  
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5                               **Nature of Applied Sport Psychology Practice.**  
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8               Over two decades ago, Simons and Andersen (1995) documented personal  
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10 perspectives of eleven highly experienced sport psychology practitioners regarding the  
11 development and future of sport psychology. Their key message for aspiring practitioners  
12 looking to develop their career within sport psychology was for them to “learn who they are  
13 and know what they can and cannot do” (p. 463). More specifically, Simons and Andersen  
14 (1995) encouraged early career practitioners to “bring themselves to the dance” (p. 463) and  
15 “know thyself” (p. 466). Similarly, a number of scholars recognized that practitioners and  
16 their individual attributes are central components of their applied practice experiences (e.g.,  
17 Andersen, 2000; Anderson et al., 2004; Poczwadowski et al., 1998). As a result of such  
18 developments, aspiring early-career practitioners sought to publish their own personal  
19 accounts of their formative applied experiences with a view to better coming to know,  
20 understand, and accept their applied ‘self’ (e.g., Cropley et al., 2007; Holt & Streat, 2001;  
21 Lindsey et al., 2007; Rowley et al., 2012; Tonn & Harmison, 2004; Woodcock et al., 2008).  
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37               Publications produced by aspiring practitioners demonstrated how they developed  
38 their awareness of different approaches to doing sport psychology (Cropley et al., 2007);  
39 increased their awareness of personal beliefs and values (Lindsey et al., 2007); and became  
40 more self-assured in their own practice (Woodcock et al., 2008). Furthermore, this  
41 autoethnographical style of writing has provided a fascinating insight into early-career  
42 practitioners’ personal experiences, demonstrating how they made sense of their thoughts,  
43 feelings, and behaviours in a contextually informed manner (Woodcock et al., 2008). Taken  
44 collectively, these reflective accounts have presented applied sport psychology as an  
45 interpersonal endeavour, illuminating the impact of contextual stakeholders on the sense of  
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3 self that practitioners in turn develop (e.g., Cropley et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2007; Rowley  
4  
5 et al., 2012).

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8 The significance placed upon stakeholder interactions was further exemplified by  
9  
10 McDougall and colleagues (2015), who interviewed six experienced UK practitioners and  
11  
12 found that they strived to remain unaffiliated with any one 'group' of stakeholders, as this  
13  
14 enabled them to better address the fundamental professional and ethical considerations that  
15  
16 may arise when developing multiple professional relationships. Furthermore, the findings  
17  
18 documented by McDougall et al. (2015) also illustrated how practitioners were often required  
19  
20 to reflect on whether the behaviours and actions of other key stakeholders were in keeping  
21  
22 with their own professional beliefs, values and sense of self. As such, McDougall et al.  
23  
24 (2015) called for the development of a knowledge base that better reflects how "sport  
25  
26 psychology delivery and its place, role, function, and/or influence may vary, and indeed be  
27  
28 tested, depending on the sport, sporting culture, and the athletes and individuals who coexist  
29  
30 within a particular environment" (p. 267).  
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34  
35 With several publications highlighting the apparent importance of a practitioner's  
36  
37 ability to understand the context within which they operate (e.g., Brown et al., 2005;  
38  
39 Chandler et al., 2016; Fifer et al., 2008; Holder & Winter, 2016; Mellalieu, 2017), the present  
40  
41 article looks to further explore the inherently micropolitical nature of elite sporting contexts  
42  
43 (cf. Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b), as a means of accurately depicting the everyday  
44  
45 interactions and sense-making of applied practitioners. Indeed, McCalla and Fitzpatrick  
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47 (2016) outlined some important factors for practitioners to consider when attempting to  
48  
49 integrate sport psychology within a team-based performance enhancement setting, with their  
50  
51 interactions with other stakeholders, and the micropolitical nature of applied sport  
52  
53 psychology contexts as being of particular importance. More recently, Rowley and colleagues  
54  
55 (2018) provided a reflective, ethnographic analysis of the micropolitical nature of 'everyday  
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3 life' within a professional rugby league academy from the perspective of an early-career  
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5 practitioner. Here, the lead author's accounts of applied practice highlighted how issues of  
6  
7 power, conflict, and vulnerability typified the day-to-day interactions and experiences of both  
8  
9 the practitioner, and other key stakeholders.

12  
13         Aligning with calls for further research within sport psychology that investigates the  
14  
15 development of practitioners' identity as a factor in determining how they respond to ethical  
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17 dilemmas and balance competing stakeholder interests (cf. Tod et al., 2017), the present  
18  
19 article aims to build on work of Rowley et al. (2018), by adopting Kelchtermans' (2005,  
20  
21 2009a, 2009b) workings around professional self-understanding as a novel theoretical  
22  
23 framework to help explore the momentary stories of practice shared by sport psychology  
24  
25 practitioners. Kelchtermans purposefully avoided any suggestion of 'identity' within his  
26  
27 workings however, suggesting that the term implied a static essence and ignored the dynamic  
28  
29 and biographical sense of understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009a). Kelchtermans also rejected  
30  
31 the notion of the 'real' self, choosing to instead acknowledge that self-understanding is  
32  
33 inherent within the act of 'telling', and can only account for associations made in accordance  
34  
35 with contextual circumstances. Accordingly, Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b) conceptualisation  
36  
37 of *professional self-understanding* is comprised of five components: *self-image* (i.e. the way  
38  
39 a person typifies themselves in their role), *self-esteem* (i.e. appreciation of actual job  
40  
41 performances), *job motivation* (i.e. the motives or drives that make people choose to become,  
42  
43 remain in or to leave the profession), *task perception* (i.e. the idea of what tasks and duties  
44  
45 are required to do a good job) and *future perspectives* (i.e. a person's expectations about their  
46  
47 future career trajectory).

53  
54         Therefore, the current article aims to further consider the utility of Kelchtermans'  
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56 (1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) workings around organizational life in schools, as a heuristic  
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58 device for enriching conceptual understandings of trainee, neophyte and qualified  
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3 practitioners' experiences of working with a range of contextual stakeholders, and how this in  
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5 turn influences their own 'professional self-understanding' (cf. Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a,  
6  
7 2009b). The proposed significance of this article, therefore, lies in its response to calls for the  
8  
9 development of an understanding of how practitioners' knowledge, beliefs and convictions  
10  
11 serve to influence their judgement and deliberation of interpersonal interactions (McDougall  
12  
13 et al., 2015), and "how a practitioner's self-understanding is impacted upon by the social  
14  
15 recognition and engagement that they (may or may not) receive from key contextual  
16  
17 stakeholders within a given applied setting" (Rowley et al., 2018, p. 16). Secondly, the  
18  
19 present article aims to demonstrate how a practitioner's self-understanding—as enacted  
20  
21 within their discursive practices—serves to represent a momentary positioning of their  
22  
23 ongoing process of sense-making (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). As Kelchtermans  
24  
25 (2018) stated, this concept can be seen to encompass some of the ambiguities that can  
26  
27 characterize professional roles, with self-understanding being seen as both a process and  
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29 product, as being situated between agency and structure, and as being caught between  
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31 intentionality and vulnerability.  
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## 37 38 **Method**

### 39 40 **Paradigmatic Assumptions**

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42 The present study was conducted from an interpretivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln,  
43  
44 1994; Sparkes, 1992). This was with the primary focus to "understand the complex world of  
45  
46 lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221) with  
47  
48 the central focus being to explore applied practitioners' experiences of working with a range  
49  
50 of contextual stakeholders, and how this influenced their own professional self-  
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52 understanding. Interpretivist research recognizes the social construction of reality (Willig,  
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54 2007) and accordingly this paper also adopts a social constructivist epistemological  
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56 standpoint to recognize the assimilation process a participant adopts in developing knowledge  
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3 via new experiences. This paradigmatic approach recognizes that knowledge is seen to be  
4  
5 constructed to reflect an individual's understanding of the world, their lived experiences,  
6  
7 personal reflections, and their interactions with others and their environment (Smith &  
8  
9 Sparkes, 2016). Thus, such an approach enables the exploration of how an individual makes  
10  
11 sense of critical incidents to navigate the inherently complex social world of applied sport  
12  
13 psychology.  
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15

### 16 17 **Participants**

18  
19 Purposeful sampling was employed, and several prerequisites were established to  
20  
21 determine a participant's eligibility (Merriam, 2002). All participants ( $n = 6$ ) had completed  
22  
23 the Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP) Stage 1 (and therefore held a  
24  
25 Master's degree in Sport and Exercise Psychology that was accredited by the British  
26  
27 Psychology Society (BPS)), and had completed/or were in the process of completing BPS  
28  
29 QSEP Stage 2, possessing a minimum one year of experience delivering sport psychology  
30  
31 services within a sporting organization. Three participants were in the process of completing  
32  
33 BPS QSEP Stage 2, one obtained their Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)  
34  
35 accreditation during the data collection process, and two were already HCPC accredited,  
36  
37 possessing over five years of professional experience apiece as qualified practitioners.  
38  
39 Through the process of purposive sampling, the current study sought to explore the  
40  
41 perspectives of practitioners across a range of professional roles and experiences, and  
42  
43 therefore, understanding of working as part of a multidisciplinary team was an important  
44  
45 eligibility criterion within the present study. Also, participants provided an insight into the  
46  
47 role of a sport psychologist operating at different organizations from a range of sports (e.g.,  
48  
49 soccer, swimming, athletics) either on a part-time, full-time, or consultancy basis. Additional  
50  
51 demographic information (and participant pseudonyms) are summarised in the table below.  
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58 *INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE*  
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### Data Collection

The present study adopted a longitudinal approach (Caruana et al., 2015) to data collection to better understand any temporal change in a practitioner's self-perceptions in accordance with any changing contextual circumstances. This prolonged engagement with participants provided scope for follow-up questions and elaboration around points raised in previous interviews, thereby increasing the credibility of study. The different facets that comprise Kelchtermans' (2005; 2009a; 2009b) theorizing around professional self-understanding were utilized to help inform the individual interview guides, with open questions being posed to help explore the practitioner's unique perspectives and sense-making. Questions such as "can you describe a typical week within your current role?", "how would you describe your interactions with (a specified key stakeholder)?" and "can you describe any developments in your relationships with (a specified key stakeholder)?" guided the overarching discussion, and participants were encouraged to lead the conversation and introduce topics that were meaningful to them beyond the interview guide. The interview guides utilised as part of the current study can be made available upon request from the first author using the correspondence details provided.

The objective of the data collection process was to capture participants' accounts of formative experiences throughout their professional careers to date. To help achieve this, participants were first asked to produce a timeline of the applied roles and responsibilities that they had held within sport psychology. This included the organizations they worked at, the duration of their involvement in the organizations, the competitive level of athletes (youth/senior, international, club level) the participants supported, and the key stakeholders that the participant primarily worked with. These timelines served as a memory aid during the subsequent interviews (Kolar et al., 2015), facilitating a recollection and sequencing of personal events (Berends, 2011). Also, to develop a detailed understanding of the

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2  
3 participants' current roles, data were collected over an eighteen-month timeframe. During  
4  
5 this period, six participants took part in seven interviews, with one participant taking part in  
6  
7 six interviews due to personal circumstances. This allowed participants to reflect more  
8  
9 comprehensively on their professional experiences in a more temporal manner, as opposed to  
10  
11 obtaining "snapshot data" (Murray et al., 2009, p. 959) of lived experiences that were specific  
12  
13 to a particular time and place. As a result, a more holistic understanding of participants was  
14  
15 developed, and the researcher was able to gather "thick" descriptions of individual  
16  
17 experiences (Vincent, 2013). At the time of data collection participants were based at seven  
18  
19 different locations across England. Therefore, to increase access to geographically disparate  
20  
21 participants, data collection was conducted as a combination of face-to-face ( $n = 5$ ) and  
22  
23 online interviews ( $n = 37$ ). In recent years, telephone/online interviews have been recognized  
24  
25 as an effective method of obtaining rich, vivid, detailed, and high-quality data, particularly  
26  
27 from geographically disparate participant samples (Smith & Sparkes, 2016; Sturges &  
28  
29 Hanrahan, 2004). Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes, were reordered onto a voice  
30  
31 recorder, and were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts yielded 447 pages of 1.08 spaced  
32  
33 interview data.  
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#### 40 **Data Analysis**

41  
42 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was utilized to  
43  
44 develop an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and the personal  
45  
46 meaning attributed to key events. In the present study, the data analysis took six steps:  
47  
48 reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections  
49  
50 across emergent themes, moving to the next case and looking for patterns across cases (Smith  
51  
52 et al., 2009). First, the data analysis process was performed on a case-by-case basis.  
53  
54  
55 Transcripts were read and re-read several times in order to become as familiar as possible  
56  
57 with the accounts. Descriptive and interpretative notes for each meaningful unit were added  
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3 to capture the essential quality of what was being said within the verbatim transcripts (Smith  
4 & Osborn, 2015). Next, the data analysis process took an analytical shift and focused on  
5  
6 mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between initial exploratory notes to  
7  
8 identify emergent themes for a single case (Smith et al., 2009). Connections between the  
9  
10 emergent themes were made before then moving to another case and repeating the process.  
11  
12 As the clustering of the themes emerged, they were checked against the data to ensure the  
13  
14 connection to the actual participants' accounts. Finally, all themes were analyzed together to  
15  
16 identify patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).  
17  
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21  
22 The theorizing of Kelchtermans (2005, 2009a, 2009b) was used as an interpretative  
23  
24 lens that allowed the researcher to make sense of participants' own expressed experiences.  
25  
26 More specifically, Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b) aforementioned work around professional  
27  
28 self-understanding was employed to explore the personal meaning and significance that  
29  
30 practitioners placed upon their interactions with key contextual stakeholders, and how this in  
31  
32 turn served to impact and influence their own understanding of their professional self  
33  
34 (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b).  
35  
36

### 37 **Rigour**

38  
39 To ensure rigour and to reflect the philosophical assumptions of an interpretivist  
40  
41 research paradigm, a relativist approach to conceptualizing validity was adopted (Burke,  
42  
43 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Accordingly, this investigation  
44  
45 seeks to demonstrate *credibility* through a prolonged engagement (eighteen months) with the  
46  
47 participants during data collection, and to make a *substantive contribution* to the  
48  
49 contemporary knowledge by increasing our understanding of how practitioners develop their  
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51 self-perception, and to what extent the interactions with contextual stakeholders influence  
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53 their sense of self. Also, the present article may hold significant implications for the  
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55 discipline by giving attention to a novel theoretical lens as a tool to develop practitioners  
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3 sense-making within their applied contexts. Extensive data excerpts and ‘thick descriptions’  
4  
5 of the contextually situated meanings that practitioners have attributed to their professional  
6  
7 experiences are presented to ensure *width*, and a detailed description of the extensive  
8  
9 procedure and data analysis processes seeks to provide *transparency*. Readers are also invited  
10  
11 to judge the *resonance* and *impact* of the present article and reflect on whether the findings  
12  
13 represent their own interpretations of key interactions that they have had with key  
14  
15 stakeholders within the context of their own professional practice. Therefore, the *naturalistic*  
16  
17 *and analytical generalisability* is best judged by the resemblance of the findings to the  
18  
19 reader’s own experiences of working with a range of contextual stakeholders, and how this in  
20  
21 turn influences their self-understanding within the specific context of their professional  
22  
23 practice.  
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### 28 **Results**

29  
30 Following the completion of data analysis, three key themes were generated to  
31  
32 illustrate practitioners’ sense-making of their interactions and relationships with contextual  
33  
34 stakeholders. These themes were *finding one’s place*, *picking your battles* and *being seen to*  
35  
36 *do a ‘good’ job*.  
37  
38

#### 39 **Findings one’s place**

40  
41 Upon discussing their professional roles and formative experiences, all practitioners  
42  
43 interviewed as part of this study expressed their passion and love for sport. Each of the  
44  
45 practitioners sampled in the current study had been active within sport since an early age,  
46  
47 with their subsequent interest in sport psychology often originating from their own  
48  
49 experiences as a competitive/grassroots athlete. In this regard, their current professional roles  
50  
51 allowed them to effectively foster an ongoing passion for the sporting world, with Alice  
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53 reflecting:  
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3 I never wake up in the morning thinking “I do not want to do this; I do not want to go  
4 in!” I suppose it is because of the enjoyment and the passion for it, so yeah like not  
5 feeling like I am coming to work. Like every day is different! I enjoy every day! The  
6 challenges that it brings, the challenges of a fast-paced environment and trying to  
7 overcome these challenges with a really good group of people. I think that this is a  
8 massive part of it (Alice, Interview 2).  
9

10  
11 Alice’s comments indicate that alongside the value placed on working within elite sport, she  
12 relished an opportunity to work alongside other people. Indeed, several other practitioners  
13 described their passion for helping people to develop and achieve personal growth, with  
14 practitioners expressing a desire to work effectively with their athletes, whether that be in a  
15 direct manner through one-to-one sessions or group workshops, or in a more indirect sense  
16 through working with coaches and/or other related stakeholders. Such an approach was  
17 underlined by an aspiration to support athletes on their respective career journeys, and to help  
18 them maximize their potential, with Jake stating that:  
19

20  
21 There is a sense of achievement that I get from those roles, from working with a client  
22 where they get a breakthrough. It is a feeling that it is a tangible outcome... I am not  
23 getting performance related pay, but helping someone to understand why, when they  
24 are standing over a putt, they think in a particular way, and this is probably a career  
25 changing or life enhancing moment for them. When you see that, the level and sense  
26 of achievement. This is beyond anything that they can pay me for assisting with that  
27  
28 (Jake, Interview 6).  
29

30  
31 It was also apparent that the practitioners in the present study recognized that each  
32 professional context was different, and they were required to pay attention to “bespoke detail  
33 of how [each] context functions” (Jake, Interview 3). In one such example, Steve suggested:  
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3 It is about doing it [service delivery] in a slightly different way and appreciating and  
4 understanding that every sport is different. [Understanding] that some sports would  
5 like to sit in rooms with spreadsheets for 5 or 6 hours to capture learning and others  
6 would like to have a chat over a coffee here and there to progress over the month  
7  
8  
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11  
12 (Steve, Interview 3).

13  
14 Whilst the nature of the support they offered may have differed in accordance with the sport  
15 in which each practitioner worked and the responsibilities attributed to their specific role, all  
16 practitioners collectively repeatedly stressed the importance of considering how they could  
17 best contribute to the existing practices of the coaches and other stakeholders they worked  
18 alongside. Several practitioners emphasized how they looked to move away from working in  
19 isolation, providing one-to-one sessions with the athletes, and attempted to integrate  
20 psychology into performance programmes. Correspondingly, it was apparent that  
21 practitioners made a significant attempt to better understand the individuals they worked  
22 alongside, with Alice suggesting:  
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35 I think that is really, really, important to understand other people beliefs and values  
36 and how they look up to them. We are very different, and we will need to work  
37 together at the end of the day. Some people do not have the same values, and we need  
38 to find a way of working together because we are in the same environment. I think  
39 that in those situations when someone has a different opinion of what sport  
40 psychology is and how it looks like. I think that for me is that understanding of their  
41 point of view and where they are coming from (Alice, Interview 7).  
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51 In particular, coaches were identified as key stakeholders who have the most contact with the  
52 athletes, and as individuals who may hold a potentially significant role in aiding the athletes'  
53 psychological development. Indeed, supporting coaches in 'unlocking' athletes'  
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3 psychological potential was identified by practitioners as an important aspect of their role, as  
4  
5 summarised here by Alice:

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8 We need to make sure that the coaches have an awareness of what psychological  
9  
10 characteristics they want to develop in their sessions – having a psychological  
11  
12 outcome is a massive part of their practice. This allows us to ensure the psychology  
13  
14 programme is running as soon as they [*the players*] step through the door, all the way  
15  
16 until they leave for a day... I think that one of the focuses for us is to raise the  
17  
18 awareness of the staff in terms of their role in the development of the psychological  
19  
20 elements of the player (Alice, Interview 4).  
21  
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23  
24 Despite the majority of practitioners expressing positive experiences of working with  
25  
26 coaches, several examples provided highlighted the potentially turbulent nature of such  
27  
28 associations. For example, Tom reflected on his experiences of working alongside a soccer  
29  
30 coach:

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33 I suggested things, but it was more ‘coach is king’. He was doing what he was doing,  
34  
35 and whatever I did was separate to that. It was not, how we can collaborate? How  
36  
37 can we work together? It was, “Look after your psychology staff, I do not really want  
38  
39 to know about it.” He was a big advocate of it and was very keen on it, but he saw it  
40  
41 as a separate thing. “You work with the players, and I will coach” (Tom, Interview  
42  
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44  
45 7).

46  
47 This potential for disagreement when attempting to integrate psychological provision  
48  
49 alongside existing coaching practices was exemplified by several practitioners of the present  
50  
51 study. The practitioners explained that other professionals often evaluated situations from  
52  
53 the perspective of their own discipline, forgetting about athletes’ psychological needs. More  
54  
55 specifically, the coaches tend to focus on the technical and tactical aspects of performance  
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3 whereas the strength and conditioning coaches put athletes' physical needs as their main  
4  
5 priority. In one such example, Alice described her sense-making of a coaching intervention:  
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8       There were occasions when a coach said something that I have fundamentally  
9  
10       disagreed with and I disagree with the delivery of it. I remember on one occasion  
11  
12       where I was almost really angry with the way he presented this [full-time team talk]  
13  
14       and what he was trying to get across to the players. I thought that it was very  
15  
16       damaging to some of the players in the room in terms of their overall self-esteem and  
17  
18       I thought that it was an overall wrong way to go about the messages that he was  
19  
20       sending. In that situation it has a potential to cause a really big clash between him and  
21  
22       myself (Alice, Interview 2).  
23  
24

25  
26 Such experiences were of particular significance during the early stages of practitioner's  
27  
28 careers. More specifically, several practitioners interviewed within this study "felt very  
29  
30 unprepared" (Alice, Interview 1) for the realities of applied practice when they left university.  
31  
32 Indeed, the practitioners expressed that early in their career they doubted themselves and their  
33  
34 abilities as an applied, or trainee, practitioner. Such insecurities and concerns for self were  
35  
36 effectively exaggerated as a result of their relative inexperience of working alongside  
37  
38 stakeholders. In one such example, Dan recalled an instance where feedback received from a  
39  
40 coach had left him to question their own role, albeit as a result of their own interpretations of  
41  
42 less directive interactions with a coach. More specifically, when reflecting on the early stages  
43  
44 of his career, Dan recalled:  
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48  
49       I would overthink certain conversations. So, if a coach would say, "Look, we do not  
50  
51       need this [*psychology*] today." I would go away and think, shit, have I, what does that  
52  
53       mean? Doesn't he want me anymore? Doesn't he want the work? Does he not value  
54  
55       it?" In the early days, I would overthink those things. I would go home overthinking  
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3 certain things. It would then make me come in the next day worrying about it! (Dan,  
4  
5 Interview 1).

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7  
8 The practitioners in the present study recounted similar examples of where they have found  
9  
10 themselves on a “tricky ground” (Jake, Interview 7) when trying to offer suggestions as to  
11  
12 how to improve existing practices at the club. More specifically, a number of participants  
13  
14 recalled how they felt as some key stakeholders could perceive such offering as a “personal  
15  
16 attack” (Dan, Interview 3). The potential for ‘saying the wrong thing’ was exemplified by  
17  
18 Dan, who recalled an instance whereby:  
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21 I was delivering a workshop, and then the coach walked in halfway through. I noticed  
22  
23 that the boys [*players*] had changed. They were very open and honest with me before,  
24  
25 and when the coach walked in, they shut off and did not say anything. When I fed this  
26  
27 back to the coach, he took it in the wrong way. The coach thought that I was trying to  
28  
29 outcast him from psychology workshops, and that this was something that he should  
30  
31 not be involved in. Whereas the only thing I was trying to do was to offer him some  
32  
33 feedback. Later this week, the players had a video analysis session, and I went in to  
34  
35 listen. The coach looked at me and said, “No, I do not want you to be a part of this”  
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37  
38 (Dan, Interview 4).  
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42 Taken collectively, the data presented here can be seen to highlight the significant  
43  
44 effort the practitioners made to try and integrate their own applied work alongside the  
45  
46 existing practice of numerous key contextual stakeholders. Whilst all practitioners generally  
47  
48 felt supported regarding the perceived importance of sport psychology provision within the  
49  
50 contexts of their practice, it was apparent that stakeholders’ perceptions of sport psychology  
51  
52 played a vital role in practitioners’ ability to work collaboratively at a wider systemic level.  
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54 Clashes with other key stakeholders were apparent at times, and in such instances,  
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56 practitioners all highlighted the importance of continually working to further develop or  
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3 redress their relationships with corresponding individuals, with the ongoing potential for  
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5 conflict being recognised as a key characteristic of organisational life.  
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### 7 **Picking your battles**

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10 Whilst the very notion of ‘finding one’s place’ within an organization may have  
11  
12 ultimately meant that the practitioners were, at times, somewhat hesitant to challenge the  
13  
14 opinions of more established contextual stakeholders, practitioners also gradually came to  
15  
16 recognize the importance of putting their own opinions forward, even if that might potentially  
17  
18 lead to further debate and potential conflict. Indeed, several practitioners recalled that in  
19  
20 order to become an important member of a multidisciplinary team, they had to be prepared to  
21  
22 suggest alternative ways of doing things, with Steve reflecting that;  
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24

25  
26 People working in high performance need to be comfortable in dealing with and  
27  
28 managing disagreements. People need to be willing to rise their thoughts and  
29  
30 challenge others, and they need to be willing to be challenged...If you have a  
31  
32 multidisciplinary team meeting and you have a representative of each discipline, you  
33  
34 may have 10 or 11 people there. You will not have 10 or 11 people agreeing with you  
35  
36 and each aspect...I have been in multidisciplinary team meetings where practitioners  
37  
38 had completely polar opposite views. So, you know there is a high level of conflict.  
39  
40 You have a physiotherapist that wants to manage the situation one way, you have a  
41  
42 strength and conditioning coach that wants to manage the situation completely  
43  
44 differently, and you know you have a doctor that wants to measure is completely  
45  
46 different. So, you have a lot of conflict in terms of what is going to be the best for the  
47  
48 athlete (Steve, Interview 4).  
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53  
54 As such, it was evident that as the practitioners progressed through their career and spent an  
55  
56 increased amount of time in a specific context, they started to perceive conflict as a  
57  
58 potentially “healthy and useful thing” (Steve, Interview 4), which allowed practitioners to  
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3 collectively consider the best course of action for a particular athlete or team. Indeed, such  
4  
5 collaborative sense-making was particularly evident in an interview with Alice, who recalled:

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8 So, this is the biggest organization I have been working for so far, and the elite  
9  
10 environment needs people that can be open and honest...we are almost like a family in  
11  
12 the way that we work. You need to be able to disagree on something, but then still be  
13  
14 able to work together. Still build work through that and still have a strong relationship,  
15  
16 because you spend so much time together (Alice, Interview 4).

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18  
19 This concept of working together and successfully negotiating conflict however, also required  
20  
21 practitioners to effectively assess the broader contextual situation, and utilize their  
22  
23 professional judgement, with Jake, acknowledging:

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26 What you are doing you are managing risk. So, most of the times you think “Right,  
27  
28 okay, is this the best time to raise this issue?” Especially when it is really obvious who  
29  
30 is the key decision maker in this situation. Then, you have to read them and their  
31  
32 current state and make a professional judgement. Whether this is the right time or  
33  
34 whether you are being foolish in trying to address something that is openly critical or  
35  
36 challenging at that point. You know, you got to apply some basic common sense and  
37  
38 understanding that moment and how this person is and how amenable they may be to a  
39  
40 challenge. If you are not able to do that, then you can get yourself in hot water, where  
41  
42 you needed to be a bit more conscious and you were not at a right time (Jake,  
43  
44  
45 Interview 7).

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48 Indeed, several of the practitioners interviewed within this study reiterated the significance of  
49  
50 “picking their battles” (Alice, Interview 7) and “weighing up the outcomes” (Jake, Interview  
51  
52 5) of their interactions with the stakeholders, with the longer-term preservation of positive  
53  
54 working relationships being identified by Steve as a key factor that needed to be considered:  
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3 If you have good relationships with people then it is the importance of your voice of  
4 your opinions, with your professional knowledge and your professional skills. [*If you*  
5 *have good relationships*] then people will listen to you because they actually think  
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7  
8 “Ah yeah, this guy, yeah, I got on with him really well, he actually knows what he is  
9 talking about. I have seen the value he has I have a great relationship with him so I  
10 will listen to what he has to say.” I think that this is key for me (Steve, Interview 5).

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17 The sentiments just outlined were echoed by multiple practitioners and highlighted how the  
18 maintenance of positive relationships permitted them to put “own stamp on things” (Alice,  
19 Interview 4) when it came to offering their professional expertise as part of the wider  
20 multidisciplinary team. It was also suggested that positive relationships could effectively  
21 serve to further enhance the actual positioning or ‘credibility’ of psychology within this  
22 multidisciplinary context, with Tom who acknowledged that:

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31 I feel like what helped me in that position was creating a good relationship with the  
32 coach. So, creating a good relationship with the coach where he valued my input, I  
33 think that helped me gained credibility, and therefore sport psychology gained  
34 credibility (Tom, Interview 1).

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40 Similarly, Alice reflected how the support she received from her academy manager allowed  
41 her to implement an impactful sport psychology programme whilst working with part-time  
42 coaches:

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47 This is where I had a really good support from academy manager. We would do  
48 workshops; they would take place for the first 15 minutes of training so they would let  
49 me do my own input with the coaches before the session. This would take place, and  
50 that little tiny bit of time, over time drips in and they [*the coaches*] make some kind of  
51 adjustments. A lot of them got thinking and then you get questions coming to you. I  
52 think that really helped, being able to have that support from the manager to  
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3 say, “Yeah, they can miss the first 15 minutes of training to have that conversation.”

4  
5 This was absolutely valuable, and I think it was one of those things that help to change  
6  
7 their perceptions [*about sport psychology*] (Alice, Interview 1).

8  
9  
10 The reflections offered by practitioners here serve to further exemplify the  
11  
12 interpersonal and strategic nature of practitioners’ day-to-day interactions with key contextual  
13  
14 stakeholders. The potential for conflict and the benefits of effective communication and  
15  
16 collaboration between members of multidisciplinary team members were seen to be inherent  
17  
18 features of professional life. Furthermore, the manner in which a practitioner could  
19  
20 successfully engage in such dialogue and debate was seen to potentially influence their  
21  
22 perceived standing within the organization, as well as the overall significance placed upon  
23  
24 psychological support within the specific context of their applied practice.  
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### 28 **Being seen to do a ‘good’ job**

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31 The aforementioned notions of ‘findings one’s place’ and ‘picking your battles’ were  
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33 found to correspond with the practitioners’ desire make a substantial and impactful  
34  
35 contribution to their organizations within their professional roles. Upon reflecting on some of  
36  
37 their formative experiences within the field, a number of practitioners expressed how they  
38  
39 went “above and beyond” (Dan, Interview 7) to seek to maximize personal developmental  
40  
41 opportunities, with all the practitioners sampled demonstrating a desire for continuous  
42  
43 learning and self-improvement. Such dedication was particularly evident in Dan’s approach  
44  
45 throughout his voluntary experience:  
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49 Instead of coming in just one day a week or two days a week, I was there 5 or 6 times  
50  
51 a week for 8 or 9 hours a day. I spent a lot of time just being in and around the place  
52  
53 and the players, writing notes and reflections. So basically, I was spending time at the  
54  
55 [*soccer*] club instead of with my family and my girlfriend (Dan, Interview 7).  
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3 Whilst personal development was of great importance to the practitioners of the present study  
4  
5 however, they also wanted to demonstrate their willingness and commitment to the other  
6  
7 stakeholders within their respective settings. Such an awareness of how one's actions may be  
8  
9 perceived by key stakeholders was exemplified by Amy, who recalled an instance whereby:

12 I was at a wedding. It was probably around 7 p.m. on a Saturday when I got a text  
13  
14 from one of the coaches saying, "I cannot get hold of your supervisor and this athlete  
15  
16 needs to talk to a psychologist ASAP!" I felt that I needed to show that I was willing  
17  
18 to help this athlete... that I am someone who is willing to contribute to the team and  
19  
20 be there, be available (Amy, Interview 5).  
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22

23  
24 Similar dedication was depicted by several other participants interviewed within this study,  
25  
26 who anticipated that "doing a good job" might in turn lead to beneficial changes in their  
27  
28 applied roles, with Tom reflecting:

30 I sort of went on the basis of if I can demonstrate my value, if [*stakeholders*] will see  
31  
32 value in this, then they may create a position for me. So, it was always around trying  
33  
34 to do a good job really. I always thought that if I will do a good job if I work hard and  
35  
36 I show a willingness to have a positive impact on their environment, then that was the  
37  
38 only way I would ever get an opportunity and a full-time position (Tom, Interview 1).  
39  
40

41  
42 The concept of "doing a good job" was also associated with the significance of mirroring the  
43  
44 behaviours and/or attitudes depicted by others in relation to their professional roles. This was  
45  
46 particularly apparent within an interview with Alice who recalled how she looked to "match"  
47  
48 the commitment of the coaches she worked alongside:  
49  
50

51 I think that you can see coaches going to extra games and watching the first team  
52  
53 games, even if they are not getting that payment for that because they are just trying to  
54  
55 push their development and push themselves on that journey... I think that if I want to  
56  
57 be immersed into the sport as much as I can, and coaches will go to the first team  
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3 games, I need to go to those games, watching how the games unfold, and learning  
4 about the game... and yeah physios will do the same, and sport science will do the  
5 same. I think that when you in the same boat all together you do drive each other on  
6 because this is what you expect from each other and you do not want to let each other  
7 down in some way (Alice, Interview 3).

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9  
10 Similar conclusions were made by Steve, who reflected on how he found himself operating  
11 alongside highly experienced professionals who were perceived as leaders in their field.

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13  
14 When working within such settings, Steve recalled how he found himself in a “stretch  
15 territory” where he did not want to let people down and wanted to ensure high quality of the  
16 services that he provided. In Steve’s own words:

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18  
19 I was at the holding camp. Everyone out there was so passionate, and you could tell  
20 that they were so committed to delivering their best performance! So, you do not mind  
21 waking up at 5 a.m. and working all the way through till 10 p.m. because you are a  
22 part of the culture where everyone turns up! You know that everyone is prepared to  
23 work hard! So, when I was in that holding camp if I had free time, I was reading  
24 journal articles. I may be working 13 hours a day, and I will get home, and I will read  
25 journal articles. Once we got back from a practice competition at 1 a.m., and I read  
26 two journal articles and went to bed at around 2.30 a.m. I was so motivated to develop  
27 and to learn because I was surrounded by people that were at an incredible level  
28 (Steve, Interview 2).

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30  
31 Clearly the practitioners sampled within this study were eager to demonstrate their own  
32 unique contribution as part of a wider multidisciplinary team, in the hope that their  
33 professional commitment would in turn be recognised and valued by other key stakeholders.  
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35 Whilst it is not accounted for directly within the stories of practice shared here however, the  
36 authors of the current paper also wanted to highlight the potential risk to practitioner  
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3 wellbeing that may arise if individuals find themselves compelled to go ‘above and beyond’  
4  
5 as part of their applied practice. Whilst such devotion to one’s professional role can  
6  
7 understandably be seen as a key indicator of effective practice, it is felt to be important that  
8  
9 practitioners can ideally assert some control over their respective work-life balance as a  
10  
11 means of protecting and preserving their own health and wellbeing.  
12  
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14  
15 Whilst the vast majority of applied experiences shared within these interviews  
16  
17 portrayed the corresponding practitioners as being valued and integrated members of their  
18  
19 wider multidisciplinary teams, some also recalled prior negative experiences whereby  
20  
21 stakeholder interactions were negatively impacting upon their own self-perception. This was  
22  
23 particularly evident during the earlier stages of practitioners’ careers, where a number of  
24  
25 instances highlighted how being questioned and/or undermined by colleagues had negatively  
26  
27 affected their self-appraisal at the time. In most cases however, the temporal nature of  
28  
29 professional self-understanding meant that they were willing to remain within their roles and  
30  
31 seek to positively influence any factors of perceptual issues which were impacting upon their  
32  
33 own self-esteem. In one extreme case outlined within this study however, Jake had ultimately  
34  
35 realized that his own aspirations for practice would not be matched within one particular  
36  
37 applied context, and as such he described how he was willing to leave the role in question,  
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39 with a view to seeking alternative employment elsewhere:  
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45 On one occasion I was going in and I think that it was a three hours’ drive to get to  
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47 that team. I arranged everything to arrive early and spend a day there. However, they  
48  
49 decided that they will take a day off on that day and there was nobody in, including  
50  
51 the coaches. At that point I thought, that is not something that you would expect from  
52  
53 a system that bought into your service delivery and sort of was acknowledging its  
54  
55 relevance. That was the big turning point for me. I did six hours of driving for  
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57 nothing. It struck me that this was the way things would go, and it was not a high  
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3 enough priority for them... I had a conversation with the head coach and just said that  
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5 I did not think that it was working and I thought that it would be better if they would  
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7 look for someone else for the psych support...I just felt like a bolt on and I was not  
8  
9 integrated into that team or into that environment at all... That is a good example  
10  
11 where I was in that position where I did not care how much they were paying me.  
12  
13 That was not work that I would like to be involved with. I could easily take the money  
14  
15 and disappear, and I do not think that they would care much but I think that the  
16  
17 professional thing to do was to come out of that situation (Jake, Interview 2).  
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20  
21 Generally, the data presented here suggest that practitioners' actions within their  
22  
23 respective professional roles were often underlined by their own motivation for professional  
24  
25 and personal development, as well as highlighting how the perceptions of other key  
26  
27 stakeholders could in turn influence how they came to evaluate their own role-related  
28  
29 performance and future prospects. It was apparent that practitioners understandably strived to  
30  
31 develop a reputation as a knowledgeable, hard-working and dedicated practitioner, capable of  
32  
33 delivering high-quality support services. The practitioners sampled for the present study  
34  
35 believed that such a representation in the eyes of the key stakeholders would allow them to  
36  
37 either progress their career, in terms of securing a paid position and/or a full-time role, or  
38  
39 would allow them to establish themselves as an important member of the multidisciplinary  
40  
41 team. In some instances, however, the perceived absence of this desired recognition and  
42  
43 apparent value to the organization has been shown to lead practitioners to question their  
44  
45 desire to remain in a particular role. Indeed, in more extreme circumstances such as those  
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47 outlined above, practitioners might be even be willing leave a professional position in order  
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49 to seek more desirable working conditions.  
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## 55 Discussion

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3 The present study sought to further explore the inherently micropolitical nature of  
4 applied sport psychology contexts (cf. Rowley et al., 2018), and to consider how experiences  
5 of working with a range of contextual stakeholders influenced trainee, and qualified, sport  
6 psychologists professional self-understanding (cf. Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). The  
7 stories of practice presented here illustrate how a practitioner's interactions with key  
8 stakeholders, and their perceived understanding of wider contextual and organizational  
9 factors, can in turn influence their own professional self-understanding. The key themes  
10 presented, highlight the apparent importance of *finding one's place* within a particular  
11 applied context, *picking your battles* when choosing to engage in conflict and dialogue with  
12 other key stakeholders, and *being seen to do a 'good' job* when reflecting on how one's own  
13 role-related performance is assessed and evaluated by others. Taken collectively, these  
14 themes can be seen to reflect the dynamic and temporal nature of professional self-  
15 understanding (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b), whereby the very act of 'telling' has  
16 enabled the practitioners interviewed within the current study to offer valuable insight into  
17 their own self-perception, in association with the contexts of their applied sport psychology  
18 practice. It is proposed that such insight can help further develop understanding as to how  
19 sport psychology practitioners successfully operate within the often stressful, pressurised,  
20 competitive and success-orientated contexts of their applied practice (Brady & Maynard,  
21 2010; Nesti, 2010; Reid et al., 2004; Williams & Andersen, 2012; Woodman & Hardy, 2001).

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47 At a fundamental level, practitioners 'job motivation' and 'task perception'  
48 (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b) were underlined by passion for working with people in a  
49 sporting context and the responsibility to help athletes achieve personal growth. This can be  
50 seen to reflect the idea that applied sport psychology is not a neutral, technical endeavour, but  
51 implies value-laden choices, moral consideration, and ethical stances (cf. Chandler et al.,  
52 2014; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). However, the importance of  
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3 *finding one's place*, highlighted practitioners' shared appreciation that the very nature of their  
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5 applied work should alter to meet the specific requirements of the role that they held at that  
6  
7 particular time. In particular, the viewpoints of others were seen to play a critical role in  
8  
9 helping to define the parameters of practitioners' practice. Such sentiments are in keeping  
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11 with Tod et al.'s (2007) conceptualisation of service-delivery competence, which was  
12  
13 depicted as a multidimensional process that required the practitioner to meet the clients'  
14  
15 needs and expectations, and develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships,  
16  
17 alongside their attempts to successfully apply disciplinary knowledge in an appropriate  
18  
19 professional manner.  
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24         Indeed, numerous practitioners highlighted the perceived importance of developing  
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26 and maintaining good relationships with key contextual stakeholders, potentially to further  
27  
28 advance the broader perception and perceived standing of sport psychology support within  
29  
30 the organization. Such aspirations for practice can be seen to develop understanding as to  
31  
32 how contextual stakeholders might impact on the sense of self that practitioners develop  
33  
34 (Cropley et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2007; Rowley et al., 2012). More specifically, such  
35  
36 insight is indicative of how the perception of others can influence practitioner's own 'self-  
37  
38 image' (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). Such sense-making was particularly evident in  
39  
40 practitioners efforts' of *being seen to do a 'good' job*, where the significance of going 'above  
41  
42 and beyond' (i.e. working outside of their contracted hours) served to not only show  
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44 practitioners' commitment and attempts to mirror the apparent dedication shown by their  
45  
46 colleagues, but also their hope of potentially advancing their own positioning within the  
47  
48 organization. Such behaviours could be seen as an indication of their 'future perspectives'  
49  
50 (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b), with a number of practitioners suggesting that they  
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52 immersed themselves into their roles in the hope of securing additional opportunities for  
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54 further employment as their careers progressed.  
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3           Whilst the practitioners sampled here largely spoke of their relative success in  
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5 working effectively alongside multiple key contextual stakeholders, a number of them also  
6  
7 acknowledged the potential for disagreements and conflict when working as part of a  
8  
9 multidisciplinary team. Indeed, such factors were often portrayed as being a fundamental and  
10  
11 necessary component of organizational life. As such, practitioners outlined a necessity to  
12  
13 develop a level of comfort amidst such interpersonal dynamics, with the manner in which  
14  
15 they were able to successfully articulate their own viewpoints, and their ability to recognize  
16  
17 wider contextual considerations when *picking their battles*, being seen as key components of  
18  
19 effective practice. The ability to identify when to engage in potentially disruptive situations  
20  
21 appears to be a salient attribute, particularly as practitioners might often find themselves in  
22  
23 settings prone to competition and conflict between stakeholders (Reid et al., 2004). Indeed, it  
24  
25 was acknowledged that practitioners coexisting within the same organizations may often have  
26  
27 different opinions and may differ in their interpretation of the problem and the appropriate  
28  
29 solution (Reid et al., 2004). Understandably, several instances highlighted that practitioners  
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31 within the current study had felt challenged or undermined by colleagues, which will likely  
32  
33 have negatively affected their 'self-esteem' (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b).  
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40           Therefore, the accounts of practice presented here add to the emerging sport  
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42 psychology literature that explores how practitioners constantly construct, and reconstruct,  
43  
44 their sense of self in relation to encountered situations (Tod et al., 2020; Wagstaff &  
45  
46 Quartiroli, 2020). Also, while acknowledging that such sense-making is influenced by past  
47  
48 experiences and future expectations (Tod et al., 2020), the findings presented here serve to  
49  
50 illuminate the significant influence that interpersonal relationships with key contextual  
51  
52 stakeholders can directly have upon a practitioner's professional self-understanding. Such  
53  
54 findings, in turn, may hold significant implications within sport psychology in relation to the  
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56 professional growth of applied practitioners (e.g., McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2011; Tod  
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3 et al., 2017; Tod et al., 2007). In particular, while researchers have previously acknowledged  
4 the influence of high-performance culture (cf. Eubank et al., 2014; Eubank et al., 2017;  
5 McDougall et al., 2015; McDougall et al., 2019) on practitioners' sense of self (e.g., Champ  
6 et al., 2020; Tod et al., 2020), the present study further illustrates how stakeholder  
7 recognition (or lack thereof) might also considerably influence practitioners' sense-making of  
8 themselves and their role-related performance and development. Therefore, the proposed  
9 conceptualization of professional self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b)  
10 may hold significant implications for the discipline by providing an increased understanding  
11 of how practitioners perceive their interactions and experiences with key stakeholders, as  
12 well as how they ultimately make sense of situations, interpret them, and how they decide on  
13 what to do and how to act (Kelchtermans, 2018).  
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28 The present article therefore, adds to the previous findings reported within sport  
29 psychology literature, illuminating further that becoming a member of an organization is not  
30 a passive process of sliding into an existing context but rather an interactive and ongoing  
31 relational endeavour which can, in turn, strongly influence a practitioner's professional self-  
32 understanding. Also, while Mellalieu (2017) highlighted how an understanding of the  
33 sporting context might allow applied practitioners to clarify working relationships with the  
34 various stakeholders regarding consent and sharing of confidential information, the present  
35 article illustrated how interactions with significant others might impact practitioners' abilities  
36 to provide a dissenting voice, or alternative opinions (McDougall et al., 2015). Indeed, while  
37 recognizing that attempting to integrate oneself into an elite sporting organization might be  
38 like "bringing a knife to a gunfight" (Larsen, 2017, p. 127), the present study may serve to  
39 better support practitioners who feel challenged or undermined by colleagues, and seek to  
40 identify when to challenge, and ultimately enhance their ability to maintaining an overall  
41 positive assessment of their own role-related performance.  
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3 More specifically, the recognition of the temporal nature of professional self-  
4 understanding and the dynamic balance between ‘self-image’ (i.e. what I am doing within my  
5 role) and ‘task perception’ (i.e. what I ought to be doing to do a good job), may serve to help  
6 support neophyte practitioners’ appreciation of their actual job performances, in turn serving  
7 to decrease their experiences of anxiety and self-doubt in a temporally reflective manner (cf.  
8 Tod et al., 2007; Tod et al., 2020). The present study may also help practitioners to seek to  
9 better manage their interpersonal relationships with key stakeholders by ‘picking their  
10 battles’ and seeking to positively influence any factors of perceptual issues that were  
11 impacting their own self-esteem (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). Overall, by increasing  
12 practitioner’s professional self-understanding, the present study holds the potential for  
13 helping practitioners of all levels of experience enhance their ability to ‘survive and thrive’  
14 within the applied practice (Gilmore et al., 2018; McDougall et al., 2015).

### 31 **Implications for Practice**

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33 Insights offered within the current article have gone some way towards illuminating  
34 the often contested, and potentially ambiguous, nature of applied sport psychology practice,  
35 and echo the importance of a practitioner working to receive ‘buy in’ from the key  
36 stakeholders with whom they work (Eubank et al. 2014). As with any professional  
37 occupation, the acknowledgement that sport psychologists do (or do not) receive social  
38 recognition from others, can potentially influence our own role-related performance and  
39 satisfaction, and in that respect, such recognition can be viewed as a ‘gift’ which one receives  
40 from others, albeit in a temporary and partial manner (Kelchtermans, 2018). As such, readers  
41 of the current article are encouraged to examine their own day-to-day interactions with key  
42 stakeholders in a purposeful and meaningful manner, and to reflect upon how such  
43 encounters may have subsequently served to—either positively or indeed negatively—shape  
44 their own professional self-understanding.

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Upon acknowledgement of self-perception and recognition from others as being fundamental factors in shaping a practitioner's sense of self within their professional roles, key challenges are also highlighted for the professional bodies and academic institutions who seek to train and prepare neophyte practitioners for the everyday demands and requirements of successful applied sport psychology practice. Several of the stories shared within this article demonstrated early career practitioners felt largely unprepared for the social and interpretative encounters that they held with a vast array of differing contextual stakeholders. Practitioners of all experience levels should ideally endeavour to develop a comprehensive theoretical and tacit knowledge of applied contexts however, to help them better seek to meet the demands of such complex and changeable environments (Sly et al., 2020). As such, practitioners should actively engage in ongoing learning and the development of 'contextual intelligence', supported by professional bodies via education, case study analyses, and experiential learning processes (Sly et al., 2020). The theoretical lens adopted within the present study, can provide a theoretical basis to help scaffold developmental activities relating to professional self-understanding, micropolitical activity, and contextual understanding. As such, we hope that this article will stimulate further debate and discussion among academics and professional accreditation bodies as to how some of the more tacit and experiential aspects of applied practice can be better developed in the absence of actual lived experience. One key consideration would be to encourage (or indeed compel) students and trainee practitioners to increase their exposure to—and their engagement with—other fields and professions, so that they can become more comfortable with translating the significance of their own work to those in the wider allied professions (McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

### 54 **Conclusion**

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The findings of the present study suggest that a sport psychology practitioner's professional self-understanding should be seen as the result of an ongoing, evolving and



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3 dynamic process of self- and contextual- evaluation. The interpretations of reflective accounts  
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5 highlighted that practitioners' deliberating, judging and choosing how to act was underlined  
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7 by their ongoing concern and striving for social recognition (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a,  
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9 2009b). Being acknowledged and valued was identified as one of the fundamental concerns  
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11 throughout practitioners' careers, and was directly related to the development of self-  
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13 understanding (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009a, 2009b), and the maintenance of a socially valued  
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15 understanding of oneself as a desired working condition (cf. Kelchtermans, 1996).  
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19         Considering that working conditions are encountered, rather than chosen or  
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21 constructed (Kelchtermans, 1996), future research should seek to examine how practitioners  
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23 look to navigate or influence their respective working conditions through their interactions  
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25 with key stakeholders. In particular, by acknowledging that social recognition depends on  
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27 others' perceptions and can therefore be easily questioned or withdrawn (Kelchtermans,  
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29 1996), further research investigating *professional vulnerability* (Kelchtermans, 1996) may  
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31 enhance understanding of how practitioners experience their respective contexts of applied  
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33 practice.  
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**Table 1.***Participants demographic information.*

<b>Participant (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Career stage</b>	<b>Qualifications/Accreditation</b>
<b>Dan</b>	Male	Trainee SEP	BSc, MSc
<b>Amy</b>	Female	Trainee SEP	BSc, MSc
<b>Tom</b>	Male	Trainee SEP	BSc, MSc
<b>Alice</b>	Female	Neophyte SEP	BSc, MSc/CPsychol, HCPC Obtained BPS accreditation during the data collection period
<b>Steve</b>	Male	Experienced SEP	BSc, MSc/CPsychol, HCPC 5 Years + BPS accredited
<b>Jake</b>	Male	Experienced SEP	BSc, MSc, PhD/CPsychol, HCPC 20 years + British Association of Sport Exercise Sciences accredited 5 Years + BPS accredited