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REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

19 **More than meets the (Rationalistic) Eye: A Neophyte Sport Psychology Practitioner's** 20 **Reflections on the Micro-politics of Everyday Life within a Rugby League Academy**

21

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Abstract

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Despite the welcome contributions of the reflective practice literature, understanding of the complexities, nuances and dilemmas of applied sport psychology practice is in need of further development. For example, there remains a paucity of inquiry addressing how practitioners make sense of, and subsequently write themselves into, the (micro)political landscape of a sporting organization. Utilizing a reflective, ethnographic approach, this paper examined the first author's engagement with the socio-political dynamics of everyday life within a professional rugby league academy. Key themes identified were that; a) players simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another; b) tensions exist between the coaches; and c) most players end up being released. The micro-political workings of Ball (1987), and Kelchtermans (1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) were used as the primary heuristic frameworks, thus promoting the utility of these theories to inform critical appreciation of the day-to-day realities of applied sport psychology practice. The paper concludes by highlighting the potential benefits of researchers, educators, and practitioners better engaging with the contested, ambiguous, and professionally challenging demands of practice than that which has been achieved to date.

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Keywords: reflective practice, ethnography, vulnerability, stakeholders

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Introduction

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The emergence and continued evolution of the reflective practice literature has provided valuable insights into the fundamentally human (and social) elements of

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

43 professional practice within applied sport psychology (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson,
44 2015). Such inquiry has shone some much needed light on the difficulties that neophyte sport
45 psychologists may experience (Huntley, Cropley, Gilbourne, Sparkes & Knowles, 2014).
46 These have included; the evolution of personal philosophies of practice (e.g. Collins, Evans-
47 Jones, & O'Connor, 2013; Holt & Streaun, 2001; Owton, Bond, & Tod, 2014; Tonn &
48 Harmison, 2004), the demands of fulfilling multiple roles within an organization (Jones,
49 Evans & Mullen, 2007), adapting practice to fit with organizational routines (Rowley, Earle,
50 & Gilbourne, 2012), and changes in practitioner's perceived competencies over time (Tod &
51 Bond, 2010). Collectively, this evolving line of inquiry has portrayed how neophyte
52 practitioners come to recognize some of the philosophical, developmental, and practical
53 issues which characterize applied work (Tonn, Gunter, & Harmison, 2016). In a similar vein,
54 Knowles, Katz and Gilbourne (2012) provided a valuable insight into the 'minutiae' of
55 practice from an experienced practitioner's perspective with issues regarding communication,
56 role clarity and acceptance were at the heart of the critical reflections offered.

57 This growing body of reflective literature challenges the often straightforward and
58 technical portrayals of practice that have traditionally characterized sport psychology texts
59 and, relatedly, many educational and professional preparation programs (Knowles et al.,
60 2012; Tonn et al., 2016). Such accounts of practice have typically been produced after major
61 international sporting events, and focus on the sport psychologist's role in supporting
62 effective athletic performance, and the problematization of such rationalistic representations
63 of practitioner experience, is consistent with wider calls for more nuanced and process-
64 orientated accounts of practice (Tod & Lavalley, 2011; Tod & Andersen, 2012). Here, for
65 example, McDougall, Nesti, and Richardson (2015) have argued for the evolution of a
66 knowledge base that better reflects how;

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

67 Sport psychology delivery and its place, role, function, and/or influence may vary,
68 and indeed be tested, depending on the sport, sporting culture, and the athletes and
69 individuals who coexist within a particular environment. (p.267)

70

71 Crucially, such arguments (and related lines of inquiry) represent a distinct shift away from
72 the historical emphasis placed on the implementation and assessment of psychological skills
73 training programs within the discipline.

74 Despite the progress outlined above, there remains little understanding as to how sport
75 psychologists experience and grapple with the day-to-day demands of practice. Indeed, there
76 remains a lack of published literature that directly explores how practitioners build, maintain,
77 and advance working relationships with various stakeholders, thereby recognizing how
78 stakeholders (and their interests) are connected with, and relate to, each other (Eubank, Nesti,
79 & Cruickshank, 2014). It is here that sport psychology research may benefit from adopting a
80 similar focus on the dynamic and frequently contested nature of inter-personal relations to
81 that which has been adopted in the sports coaching literature (e.g. Jones & Wallace, 2005;
82 Magill, Nelson, Jones, & Potrac, 2017; Potrac, Mallett, Greenough, & Nelson, 2017).

83 Specifically, researchers within sports coaching have increasingly challenged the
84 dominant, sanitized and functionalistic representations of practice within their domain
85 (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2016; Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2013). For example,
86 Potrac and Jones (2009a) highlighted how a coach was required to work with a diverse range
87 of individuals, who not only brought different traditions, values, and goals to the workplace,
88 but who actively sought to pursue them where opportunity permitted them to do so. Other
89 related work within high-performance sport contexts (e.g., Booroff, Nelson, & Potrac, 2016;
90 Huggan, Nelson, & Potrac, 2015; Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015), has similarly

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

91 highlighted how organizational life is characterized by the ‘dynamic and fluid process of
92 forging and re-forging alliances and working relationships’ (Cassidy et al., 2016, p.60); a
93 challenge that requires practitioners to read, initiate, and respond to the inescapably political
94 demands of the sporting workplace. Within such studies, (micro)politics is conceptualized as
95 pervasive feature of all shared endeavors, including all acts of collaboration, negotiation, and
96 conflict (Leftwich, 2005; Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b). Leftwich (2005) states that
97 (micro) politics consists of three key ingredients these are; a) people (who often have
98 different beliefs, ideas, and interests); b) resources (which may be material or non-material in
99 nature, and often limited in terms of availability); and c) power (the ability of a group or
100 individual to achieve desired outcomes).

101 Given that sport psychologists practice within these same high-performance contexts,
102 it is perhaps naïve to believe that they are somehow immune from the challenges and
103 dilemmas that accompany shared endeavors with others (Leftwich, 2005). Indeed, McCalla
104 and Fitzpatrick (2016) have, for example, illustrated how other stakeholders, and the micro-
105 political nature of such contexts, may potentially impact upon a sport psychology
106 practitioner’s attempts to integrate him or herself within a multi-disciplinary professional
107 support team. To date, however, there remains a paucity of inquiry addressing how sport
108 psychologists experience and respond to working with various stakeholders, who may hold,
109 and actively pursue opposing beliefs, motivations and goals (Cassidy et al., 2016; Potrac &
110 Jones, 2009a, 2009b). The current paper seeks to address this disparity, by offering an
111 analysis of the political context in which I (the first author) had previously practiced (cf.
112 Rowley et al., 2012); one which delves beyond the veneer of unproblematic subscription to
113 shared organizational goals and unified ways of working together (Jones & Wallace, 2005).
114 However, rather than just offering descriptive insights, this paper purposively seeks to aid

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

115 conceptual development within this topic area through the provision of a theoretically robust
116 scrutiny of contextual reflections. Here, the respective theorizing of Ball (1987) and
117 Kelchtermans (1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) are not only employed as heuristic devices for
118 interpreting personal meaning-making, but also as tools for enriching conceptual
119 understandings of the everyday ‘grit’ of organizational life in which applied sport
120 psychologists are embedded.

121 The significance of this paper therefore lies, therefore, in its response to calls for a
122 micro-political analysis of high-performance sporting contexts (Potrac & Jones, 2009a,
123 2009b). By scrutinizing my experiences, observations and reflections in this way, this study
124 contributes to an evolving body of knowledge, and related educational provision, addressing
125 how applied practice frequently occurs in settings that are characterized by varying degrees
126 of ideological agreement, co-ordination, and actual, or potential for, conflict (Cassidy et al.,
127 2016). Furthermore, this paper responds to ongoing calls for further ethnographic research
128 within sport psychology (Krane & Baird, 2005; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012),
129 promoting the utility of such inquiry as a vehicle for critical reflection (Knowles &
130 Gilbourne, 2010). Rather than seeking to unproblematically generalize the first author’s field-
131 based experiences and interpretations to other practitioners however, the reader is, instead,
132 invited to critically reflect upon the material, issues, and ideas presented in this paper. In
133 particular, practitioners working in various amateur, professional, and elite contexts are asked
134 to consider how, why, and to what ends they practically read, understand, and ultimately
135 respond to the political dimensions of practice (Jones, 2009; Potrac et al., 2013).
136 Accordingly, we encourage others to consider the merits of this piece in terms of both its
137 naturalistic and analytical generalizability (Smith, 2018).

138

139 **Method**

140 **Ethnographic Inquiry and Knowledge**

141 At the heart of ethnographic inquiry is the study of relational practices, and the common
142 values, beliefs, and shared experiences that feature in particular cultural or social settings
143 (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As Hamersley and Atkinson (2007) summarized,
144 ethnography involves a researcher;

145 participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of
146 time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions
147 through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact,
148 gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the
149 emerging focus of inquiry. (p3)

150

151 Within the context of sport psychology, ethnographic inquiry provides a valuable tool for
152 developing empathetic accounts of organizational life, reflecting the experiences of athletes,
153 coaches, and other stakeholders, and permitting practitioners to try and hear the voices of
154 those with whom they work (Krane & Baird, 2005). Such explorations may not only help
155 deepen our understandings of organizational life in sport, but they can also provide an
156 important avenue for enhancing the interconnections between theory and practice within the
157 applied domain.

158 The ethnography presented within this study was conducted from an interpretivist
159 perspective (Krane & Baird, 2005; Whaley & Krane, 2011), with its central focus being to
160 develop empathetic understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, this
161 research was informed by a 'relativist ontology' which assumes the existence of multiple,
162 subjective realities, and 'epistemological subjectivism', where knowledge is seen to be

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

163 constructed through interactions with others and the social and cultural environment (Smith
164 & Sparkes, 2016a). The current ethnography also provided a framework through which my
165 critical reflections on practice could be examined in juxtaposition with wider contextual
166 factors. Micro-political theorizing had subsequently allowed for a critical introspection of my
167 own applied practices throughout the data analysis process, but my time in the field had
168 initially sought to further enhance my contextual understanding as both a researcher and
169 neophyte sport psychology practitioner. Indeed, the combination of personal reflection-in-
170 and on-action (Schön, 1983, 1987) and ethnographic inquiry, permitted a prolonged, critical
171 engagement of my professional self, and my connection to the relational complexities of club
172 life (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010).

173

174 **Contextual Underpinning: The Academy and the Corresponding Participants**

175 A prior publication (cf. Rowley et al., 2012), provided a reflective account of practice from
176 the academy of this same Super League rugby league club. In keeping with the approach
177 adopted previously, the current paper offers a reflective account of applied practice; one
178 where the author's 'voice' is utilized as a tool to convey lived experience (Rowley et al.,
179 2012). As is documented within the preceding publication, my initial responsibilities at the
180 club had been to provide weekly workshop sessions for the academy players to assist their
181 respective development towards a potential first-team future. Over time, I had increasingly
182 sought to adapt my practice in accordance with my increased understanding of the day-to-day
183 organizational functioning, and as a result, I had come to spend an increased amount of time
184 with the players and coaches outside of the scheduled workshop sessions. Following the
185 completion of my formal sport psychology support contract with the club, and the
186 corresponding cessation of any formal applied workshops, I obtained permission to undertake

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

187 the ethnographic work reported in this study. Here, my already established effective working
188 relationships with specific ‘gatekeepers’ at the club, greatly facilitated my access. When
189 combined, my applied work and my subsequent research within the organization spanned a
190 period of three years. Specifically, this comprised of eighteen months of applied practice, ten
191 months of observational data collection, and four months of interview data collection. A
192 timeline portraying the changing nature of my association with the club can be seen in Figure
193 1 below.

194 At the onset of data collection, the club had introduced an Elite Development Scheme
195 (E.D.S.), which aimed to help a select group of players to progress from the academy to the
196 first-team squad. As with any top-level professional sports club, the demand for success at a
197 first-team level was highly apparent. However, the desire to see the first-team populated with
198 academy graduates was a vision that was seemingly shared by figures in the club’s coaching
199 staff and boardroom alike. As such, the E.D.S. provided selected players with the opportunity
200 to train with the first-team whilst remaining part of the academy setup. Accordingly, the
201 introduction of the E.D.S. had impacted on the roles and identities of the players and coaches
202 involved within this study in a number of significant ways suggesting that some individuals
203 were closer than others to potentially achieving their dreams of playing first-team rugby.

204

205 *INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE*

206

207 Following ethical approval granted from an institutional Ethics Committee, players,
208 coaches, and other stakeholders (e.g., administrators and support staff) were informed of the
209 purpose and processes associated with this research study. Opportunity sampling (Patton,
210 2015) was utilized, whereby I engaged in dialogue with individuals with whom I had already

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

211 established a rapport, and the data reported here is largely comprised of my observational
212 data, and interviews conducted with; a) four academy players (aged 16 to 18, three of whom
213 were in the E.D.S.); b) the Head of Youth Development (HoYD) whose role was manage the
214 academy and scholarship system as a whole; and c) the Player Performance Manager (PPM)
215 who was tasked with youth player recruitment and development across the academy system.

216

217 **Data Collection**

218 Krane and Baird's (2005) ethnographic recording process was utilized within this
219 study, with field notes being translated into a detailed research log within a 24-hour period. A
220 reflective journal was also kept which sought to make links to wider issues of research and
221 practice. Field based discussions and interactions with participants in turn helped to inform
222 the interview guide used in a series of semi-structured interviews (cf. Gobo & Molle, 2017).
223 These interviews allowed further exploration of the meaning-making that key stakeholders
224 ascribed to the everyday events and incidents that I had witnessed. Further detail regarding
225 each stage of data generation is provided below.

226

227 **Participant Observation and Field Notes.** Considered to be the 'backbone' of
228 ethnographic research (Krane & Baird, 2005, p.94), observation aims to provide 'thick
229 description' of the events and interactions that occur in a social setting, as well as the
230 meanings attributed to them by participants (Thorpe & Olive, 2016, p.125). In keeping with
231 the subjective epistemology of this study, observational data collection focused toward social
232 interactions and conversations, capturing the 'seemingly mundane' (Krane & Baird, 2005,
233 p.95) day-to-day functioning of the organization. Field notes usually took the form of brief
234 text typed up on my mobile phone, with these notes serving as the basis for my research log,

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

235 which provided a detailed account of context, and the interactions between stakeholders. I
236 also kept a separate reflective journal (comprised of 300 to 500 word extracts), which sought
237 to advance my critical analysis, and support my ongoing process of staged reflection
238 (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). This journal also encompassed my researcher-orientated
239 reflexive notes, as suggested by Krane and Baird (2005). In total, 11 observational visits were
240 recorded over a 10 month period, including attendance at training sessions and occasional
241 competitive fixtures when the coaches had granted me permission to travel with the team to
242 collect data. My prior role within the field had allowed for participant observation (cf.
243 Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) to occur, whereby a 'typical' day of data collection involved
244 me arriving in the morning to speak with the coaches and/or support staff, observing first-
245 team training from the touchline, and interacting with any players who were injured or not
246 involved in the specific drills. I would then remain at the club until late in the evening when
247 academy training took place. Here, I would spend time with the coaches, and talking with
248 individual academy players.

249

250 **Ethnographic- and Semi- structured Interviews.** The informal conversations which
251 took place during the observational period of this study are akin to what Gobo and Molle
252 (2017) termed as 'ethnographic interviews'. Such discussions were often recorded, with
253 verbal consent being provided by the participant, and sought to clarify the meanings that key
254 stakeholders attributed to any events and incidents that I had observed. These interactions
255 informed a series of more formal, semi-structured interviews, each of which were recorded
256 and transcribed verbatim by the first author during the ongoing data collection process. These
257 interviews were comprised of; 'questions of practice' and 'questions for practice'. 'Questions
258 of practice' related to the interviewees' own interpretations of their respective roles with the

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

259 club, for example ‘What do you feel are your primary responsibilities at the club?’ In
260 contrast, ‘questions for practice’ served to make more implicit links to my own applied
261 practice, for example; ‘What do you feel have the club done to try and nurture your talent and
262 enhance your development?’ My prior work with the club had allowed me to develop a
263 degree of trust, rapport, and empathy with the interviewees, qualities that are deemed to be
264 beneficial for effective interview data collection (Smith & Sparkes, 2016b). These interviews
265 took place in a private room at the club, typically lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. In an
266 attempt to ensure sufficient depth and richness of data, follow-up interviews were conducted
267 in each instance, allowing time and space to reflect on what had already been told (Smith &
268 Sparkes, 2016b), with specific questions being developed based around the transcripts of
269 prior discussions. In total, six ethnographic interviews and eight semi-structured interviews
270 were recorded with the four identified players, with two interviews also being recorded with
271 both the HoYD and PPM respectively.

272

273 **Data Analysis**

274 The various data that comprised the ethnographic record were subjected to an iterative
275 process of analysis (Tracy, 2013), focusing on the identification of critical incidents, phases
276 and persons amongst both participant and researcher sourced data. Specifically, Tracy’s
277 (2013) process model for the etic and emic reading of data was utilized. The first stage
278 entailed the organization and preparation of the data, which was all stored electronically.
279 During the following data immersion and primary-cycle coding phase, my supervisory team
280 were often used as critical friends (Patton, 2015) to aid the rigor and quality of the analytical
281 interpretations developed (Smith & McGannon, 2017). In this instance a manual coding
282 approach was adopted, whereby inductive, in-vivo coding (Patton, 2015) was utilized to help

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

283 ensure that the vocabulary of the participants remained apparent. During secondary-cycle
284 coding, hierarchical codes were then generated to help organize, synthesize, and categorize
285 data. Finally, prior to commencing the writing process, analytical memos were utilized to
286 ensure that the emerging higher order themes provided a logical, conceptual and
287 theoretically-robust account of the ethnographic record (Tracy, 2013). Indeed, the utilization
288 of analytic memos represented a key intermediary step between coding and analysis, serving
289 to define the codes and explicate their properties, provide examples of raw data that illustrate
290 the codes, and examine the relationship between the generated codes.

291 Throughout the analytical process, the interpretive creativity of the research team
292 allowed for a process of ‘prospective conjecture’ (Tracy, 2013, p.194), permitting the first
293 author to consider novel theoretical juxtapositions and seek relevant theorizing from other
294 fields of study. More specifically, the micro-political writings of Ball (1987), and
295 Kelchtermans (1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) were identified as particularly productive
296 explanatory tools. At the heart of their respective theorizing is the challenging of long held
297 and unrealistically functional accounts of working life. Importantly, rather than subscribing to
298 a view of organizational relationships that are characterized by authority (i.e. a hierarchical
299 organizational structure), goal coherence (i.e. the collective pursuit of shared organizational
300 goals), ideological neutrality (i.e. agreement upon the strategies which are deployed within
301 the organization), consent (i.e. an acceptance of organizational policies) and consensus (i.e. a
302 conformity in relation to organizational rules or ideologies), both authors articulate how
303 individuals and groups are, instead, actively engaged in varying degrees of negotiation,
304 conflict and collaboration. In particular, this corpus of theorizing acknowledges that power
305 (i.e. the influence which one individual or group may look to establish over another), conflict
306 (i.e. disputes or differences in opinion between organizational members), control (i.e. the way

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

307 in which individuals aim to influence policy decisions) and goal diversification (i.e. the
308 pursuit of alternative objectives by individuals within the organization), are inherent and
309 dynamic features of life within organizations.

310

311 **Ensuring Quality**

312 As qualitative research within sport psychology has continued to grow and develop,
313 critical discussions around concepts of rigor and quality have emerged (cf. Burke, 2016;
314 Smith, 2018; Smith & McGannon, 2017). Such dialogue encourages researchers to reflect on
315 the methodological strengths of their work, and challenges traditionally held notions of
316 validity and trustworthiness within qualitative research (Burke, 2016). In this instance, a
317 relativist approach to conceptualizing validity was adopted (Burke, 2016). Here a variety of
318 evaluative criteria that reflected the assumptions and beliefs of the interpretive paradigm were
319 employed. Accordingly, this investigation seeks to demonstrate *credibility* via the first
320 author's prolonged engagement with the research participants, and *transparency* through the
321 rich description of the multi-method approach employed, inclusive of the utilization of
322 critical friends to support the rigorous analysis of a substantive data set (Patton, 2015).
323 Furthermore, this study seeks to make a *substantive contribution* to the advancement of
324 contemporary knowledge by examining issues of practice through the adoption of a novel
325 theoretical lens. As such, the *resonance* of the paper is best judged by way of readership
326 response to the paper, and in relation to the timeliness and prevalence of the issues discussed
327 in relation to applied practice. Accordingly, we invite the reader to actively judge the *impact*
328 of this paper by reflecting upon their own understandings of applied practice, and to consider
329 whether the contextually-bound reflections and accompanying theorizations offered here
330 serve to disturb the rationalistic and descriptive accounts that have typified the sport

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

331 psychology literature to date. In short, we invite the reader to consider both the potential
332 naturalistic and analytical generalizability of this piece (Smith, 2018).

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Results

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Players simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another

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Throughout my time at the club, I always felt that the players were a generally cohesive group, and their interactions at training, and occasional social events which I was invited to, served to illustrate this. Nevertheless, there were occasions when the underlying competition amongst them to try and progress to the first-team became an apparent source of tension and personal vulnerability. This was highlighted in a reflective journal entry:

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I didn't speak to the coaches as much as usual today, but I did get to spend time with the players, and it is clear that there is an apparent degree of anxiety amongst them regarding their respective futures at the club. I overheard a number of conversations about; the amount of playing time they are getting; who is involved with the E.D.S. and who is not: and how their respective contract negotiations were progressing. Every player is subjected to a continued state of flux, and paradoxically, their peers are the people who they can relate with the most, but yet they are the same

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

355 individuals with whom they are competing to obtain opportunities to progress into
356 the first-team. An increasing number of players are now starting to disclose their
357 frustrations and concerns with me, and whilst I can offer a sympathetic ear and
358 compassionate support, I cannot directly appease the tension and uncertainty that
359 exists amongst them. **Field note: 8th December**

360

361 Competition amongst youth-level players with a view to progressing into the first-
362 team is not a revelation within professional youth sport. Naturally, I appreciated that not all
363 the players who I worked with would be fortunate enough to achieve their ‘dreams’ of
364 playing professional rugby at a Super League club. The manner in which some players
365 seemingly embraced the competition with their teammates had always interested me though,
366 reflecting an apparent marker of industrial culture, whereby players were required to
367 collaborate effectively, whilst at the same time attempting to prove their work in comparison
368 to others. This was particularly apparent within my interviews with one player, who stated:

369 I come to training with a competitive outlook, like I know he’s on my team but I
370 want to beat him you know? I don’t care if he’s my mate, my best mate, my
371 brother...when they pick that 17, you want to be in it don’t you? (**Participant 3,**
372 **Interview 1 of 2)**

373

374 During particularly turbulent periods of a given season though, such as periods of contract
375 negotiations, even the most assured players were left to feel vulnerable, with the same player
376 further recalling:

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

377 I was getting a bit worried because they don't really tell you much, they keep it in
378 the dark and I heard {one academy player} signed so your head starts thinking 'Oh
379 shit' and then I kept asking {P2} if he'd heard out [anything]. (P3, I1)

380

381 With players feeling as though they were being left 'in the dark', it was unsurprising that they
382 would seek any updates or further indications of progress from each other, aware of the
383 potential ramifications that their teammates' contract negotiations may have for them
384 individually. It was in these periods where every appraisal from a coach, and inclusion or
385 exclusion on a match-day team-sheet, seemed most pertinent.

386 Throughout this ethnography, this competition amongst the players was accentuated
387 further by the introduction of the aforementioned E.D.S. For those players who were on the
388 scheme, they could understandably take their status as a positive indication of their chances
389 of progressing, with one such player recalling:

390 When you got picked you were like 'Yeah I'm better than him' you know what I
391 mean?'...that's the way we were meant to think about how good it was...all the other
392 players think you're big headed and think you're first-team if you get on it. (P3, I2)

393

394 In contrast, those players outside of the scheme were left to reflect on their seemingly bleak
395 prospects of further progression, and accordingly, ruptures gradually emerged within the
396 academy. This was heightened by the fact that the players outside of the E.D.S. were left to
397 train separately on an evening. These individuals would often complain that they 'weren't
398 getting any progression' and were 'doing drills that we'd done when we first joined which are
399 shit.' (Participant 4, Interview 2 of 2). Having observed such training sessions from the

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

400 side-lines, I had witnessed this discontent amongst the players, and was left to consider how I
401 might try to support the players within these different sub-groups.

402 To my mind, the introduction of the E.D.S. had inadvertently created a chasm
403 between the different groups of academy players. Whilst I was not running scheduled
404 workshops during this ethnographic study, I still found myself talking to players about their
405 training and match-day performances, as well as their own perceived prospects of progression
406 towards a potential first-team contract. Such conversations with those players outside of the
407 E.D.S. had gradually become more focused around their lives and aspirations outside of the
408 club itself. In contrast, my conversations with the E.D.S. players had a different focus. The
409 time they had spent training with the first-team squad had left them feeling confident about
410 their prospects, but my discussions with the coaches also meant that I was aware of how they
411 rated each of the E.D.S. players, and the apparent likelihood of them receiving a professional
412 playing contract. The dilemma that arose from these interactions was concerned with how a
413 practitioner might balance performance-orientated objectives and wider welfare needs with
414 players, who may have little understanding of, or may misread, their own standing within the
415 organization. My personal objectives though, were to support the players throughout their
416 athletic development, attempting to adopt a holistic perspective which accounted for any
417 aspects of their sporting, or non-sporting lives which seemed important to them at a given
418 time. As such, my dialogue with them shifted over time in accordance with what *I felt* might
419 be most beneficial for them.

420

421 **Tensions exist between the Coaches**

422 As I spent time moving between the first-team and academy training sessions, it had
423 also become apparent that the coaches did not always share the same views or beliefs in

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

424 relation to their goals and objectives within the club setting. The academy coaches aspired to
425 see the first-team populated with academy graduates, and there was an apparent belief
426 amongst them that some of the players were talented enough to make that transition. This
427 view did not seem to be mirrored by the newly appointed Head Coach however, as was
428 highlighted in a reflective journal entry:

429 In my recent interviews with the coaches they have mentioned an incident where the
430 Head Coach allegedly went in to the changing rooms after the academy team had
431 suffered a heavy defeat, and told the players that they were ‘all shit’ and that he
432 would help them to look for other clubs to play for. A number of the players have
433 also mentioned this to me, which suggests that some form of lasting impact has been
434 felt. For those players who are not involved in the E.D.S., it may not have come as
435 a great surprise that the Head Coach did not see them necessarily having a first-team
436 future. But some of the players effected are part of the E.D.S., and have supposedly
437 been earmarked as having the potential to progress, which now seems increasingly
438 unlikely. **Field note: 28th May**

439

440 The appointment of a new Head Coach is always likely to result in a certain degree of change
441 within an organization. Prior to his arrival, there had been a genuine sense of anticipation
442 amongst the academy, as he had come with a reputation for developing youth players when
443 working as an Assistant Coach at his previous club. Following the frequently cited ‘you’re all
444 shit’ incident, this anticipation quickly dissipated however. As the PPM recalled:

445 Myself and [HoYD] tried dealing with it [the incident]...I tried to sit down with a
446 few of them who took it quite personally...It kind of, it popped the bubble so to
447 speak, we had this team ethos and it kind of felt like the fella who sits at the top of

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

448 that totem pole, who pulls all the strings and can say yes or no to your future has
449 turned around and said 'you're all shit'. Some of them was on that E.D.S. and just
450 fell even further behind because they were thinking, 'he don't rate me anyway' and
451 where do you go from there? **(Player Performance Manager, Interview 1 of 2)**

452

453 Similarly, the HoYD suggested that 'there was no pulling that situation round...The lads felt
454 disillusioned, the coaching staff at that age group felt disillusioned' **(Head of Youth**
455 **Development, Interview 1 of 2)**. In expanding upon his reaction to this incident, he also
456 depicted himself as being a 'long-term analyst', a position which he viewed as being in direct
457 contrast with the new Head Coach's number one priority of 'self-survival'.

458 My discussions with the academy coaches, had suggested that they held an
459 appreciation of the 'pressure' which the Head Coach was under. As part of these discussions
460 though, they also highlighted the importance of 'putting ourselves in the players' shoes', and
461 the 'duty of care' **(HoYD, I2)** that they felt they held as part of their roles. In expanding upon
462 this, and highlighting another conflict between the academy coaches and their first-team
463 counterparts, the PPM recalled:

464 There were a couple of lads who [the first-team coaches] wanted in during school
465 time...and it was a case of 'no chance' they're in their last year of education and we
466 scrapped it totally. They wanted them in because they are potential first team players
467 and its results based, they want the best players...on the flipside there's me pulling
468 my weight saying we've got to look out for what's best for the individual. **(PPM, I1)**

469

470 This particular incident suggested that tensions between the coaches extended beyond the
471 athletic potential of a given player, incorporating the holistic well-being of academy players

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

472 also. Interestingly, my discussions with the academy coaches allowed me to gain an insight
473 into their own sporting backgrounds, with both of them acknowledging that they had been
474 left without an education when they were released as former youth-level players from their
475 respective clubs. In that regard, I could understand why they contested the wishes of the Head
476 Coach in some instances, attempting to ensure that the players' non-sporting development
477 was taken into account.

478 For me, such insights were significant in helping me to recognize that the
479 organization was not the unproblematically cooperative and collaborative environment
480 that I had previously assumed it to be. Over time, I came to recognize how the first team
481 agenda, and the performance discourse in which it was enshrined, permeated the day-to-
482 day interactions, relationships, and culture at the club. This contrasted starkly with the
483 developmental ethos that I had observed in the academy, and as such, the academy
484 coaching and support staff (including myself) were left to reflect on the extent to which
485 they were willing to sacrifice or bend their personal beliefs, in order to conform with the
486 dominant performance discourse of the organization. Indeed, my own focus on player
487 well-being could be seen to be in conflict with the objectives and needs of the first-team
488 coaches and, arguably, the organization as a whole. This was a chastening and very
489 uncomfortable experience and is an issue that remains unresolved in my mind. Who am I
490 there for, those who pay me or those who I am asked to help? What should I be doing?
491 Where do my loyalties and obligations lie? Over time, I also came to recognize my
492 emotional and political connection to some members of the organization. Specifically, as
493 some of the players and coaches started to share their reactions to the 'you're all shit'
494 incident, I found it increasingly hard to remain impartial and refrain from harboring
495 negative feelings towards other figures, such as the Head Coach. For me, that incident had

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

496 significant repercussions for the individuals with whom I had previously worked, and, in
497 light of my own vested interest in their progression and well-being, I had found it
498 increasingly hard to emotionally detach myself from the fall-out which emanated from this
499 incident.

500

501 **Most Players end up Being Released**

502 Whilst the players all strived to obtain first-team contracts, there understandably
503 remained an implicit understanding amongst all stakeholders that opportunities to progress
504 to the first-team would ultimately be limited. The introduction of the E.D.S. had intended
505 on facilitating this transition for some players, but the Head Coach's overall appraisal of
506 the academy squad suggested that the E.D.S. players would still face a considerable
507 challenge in attaining a squad number for the following season. My discussions with the
508 coaches had served to reiterate this point. For example:

509 I talked with the coaches for a while about their thoughts on the 'you're all shit'
510 incident, as well as which players will be in the squad for the next match. [C7]
511 suggested that two particular players were 'pissheads' and were not trying hard
512 enough to get into the starting line-up. The coaches also spoke about all the players
513 being 'out on their arses next year', with the term 'shirt-fillers' being assigned to
514 those players whose futures have seemingly already been determined. For some
515 players, the writing has been on the wall for a while now, and regardless of whether
516 they have admitted it openly, I would assume that the 'shirt-fillers' have already
517 accepted that their futures lie outside of the club. For others, it would be fair to say
518 that they have received positive indications from various key figures at the club
519 regarding their chances of progressing to the first-team level. As such, I am

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

520 increasingly concerned about what the lasting impact may be if their contracts are
521 then not renewed for next season. **Field note: 27th June**

522

523 As part of my subsequent interviews with the academy staff, I had been keen to ascertain
524 exactly what they meant by the term 'shirt-fillers'. Although the HoYD stated his displeasure
525 at the use of the term, he did offer some elaboration, stating that:

526 There's no way in an academy Under 20's, have you got 25 players who are going
527 to end up being first-teamers...I don't like the term but everybody uses it, they're
528 shirt fillers. Because you've got to put a squad out there every week. **(HoYD, I2)**

529

530 This unfortunate group of players were largely comprised of those outside of the E.D.S. who
531 were left to train alone on the evenings. As a result, there seemed to be a pragmatism
532 amongst them in relation to their futures at the club, with one such player recalling:

533 We were just going through the motions. The majority of us didn't wanna be
534 there...we'd often say at the end of training 'Oh that was shit, get us home'.

535 **(Participant 4, Interview 2 of 2)**

536

537 Given that apparent acceptance shown by these players, I often pondered why they still
538 invested their time and effort at academy training, assuming that they were attempting to hold
539 on to their dream for as long as possible. For other players, their futures were seemingly
540 much less predetermined however, and ironically, it was often these individuals who
541 appeared to be the most vulnerable on account of this uncertainty. As one player stated:

542 We've kind of committed a part of our lives which we'll never get back you know?
543 Being 16, 17, 18 are probably the best years of your life aren't they?...and we've

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

544 dedicated it to rugby and given up loads for it, and at the end of it we get kicked out
545 because it's out of our control, it just doesn't seem fair (**Participant 2,**
546 **Ethnographic Interview 1 of 3**)

547

548 That player did indeed end up being released, and he subsequently highlighted how he had
549 been told by the Assistant Coach three weeks previously, that he would 'definitely be there
550 next season' (**P2, Interview 1 of 2**). He had voluntarily chosen to study a University degree
551 alongside his rugby commitments, expressing his thankfulness that he had left himself with
552 an alternative career path when he had been released by the club. Worryingly though, I was
553 aware of other players who had turned down programs of education or trade apprenticeships
554 in an attempt to focus solely on their rugby, and unfortunately, they too were left to share the
555 same fate of not having their contracts renewed.

556 During the prolonged periods of uncertainty that preceded players being released, the
557 consensus amongst them was that the coaches were directly avoiding discussing their contract
558 renewals. When I spoke to the HoYD about this, he offered his perspective, stating:

559 You've got to take into consideration, long term, what the Head Coach wants...and
560 it is very difficult and you have a lot of sleepless nights... and I've found that really
561 difficult this time round. Because you know, after two games he was saying 'well
562 you can get rid of him, you can get rid of him' you know and that ain't the way I
563 work. (**HoYD I2**)

564

565 Accordingly, the academy coaches were also left in an uncertain position, as the contract
566 negotiations they were engaged in with players were ultimately dictated by decisions made at
567 a first-team level. As a result, they were required to withhold information and prolong the

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

568 periods of uncertainty for a number of players, based upon the needs and requirements of the
569 first-team squad. My discussions with the coaches helped me to understand their role within
570 these negotiations in a more empathic manner, but ultimately the fact remained that the vast
571 majority of the players who I was working with would end up being released once the season
572 had concluded.

573 My increased understanding of the coaches' perspectives, and the way the club
574 functioned in general, meant that I was becoming more aware of issues behind-the-scenes
575 that had implications for the academy players. Within this complex and inherently political
576 context, I had become increasingly convinced of the significant role which applied sport
577 psychology practitioners might play by offering unconditional support to these players as and
578 when they seek it. I appreciated that my role in helping them to actually progress to the first-
579 team was always likely to be limited, and so instead, I increasingly believed that I needed to
580 simply be there for them; assisting them in their efforts to cope with the highly scrutinizing,
581 unforgiving and ever-changing sporting environment that they found themselves in. As such,
582 I think it is important for practitioners to spend time standing on the side-lines during
583 training, or waiting around after matches have finished, so that players and/or coaches can
584 approach them if they wish to do so. Somewhat frustratingly however, I also realized that no
585 matter how closely I might work with a player, there was always a distinct probability that
586 they would not be at the club for the following season. The label of an 'elite level athlete'
587 was likely to only be temporarily applicable for the vast majority of those who I was
588 affiliated with. Indeed, in this instance, the reality was that the majority of the academy
589 'players' I had worked with were young men who played professional youth rugby on an
590 always-temporary basis.

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Discussion

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The results presented reflect how my time-in-context within this particular ‘arena of struggle’, was typified by ideological diversity, poor coordination, and conflict between key stakeholders (Ball, 1987, p.19). The players all held a shared goal to progress into the first-team, but this effectively required them to compete amongst themselves, whilst simultaneously trying to harbor a cohesive team dynamic. Furthermore, the continued uncertainty regarding their future prospects meant that they were often left to seek assurances from the appraisals offered to them by their coaches. However, while the academy and first-team coaches seemed to share an apparent desire to promote youth players into the first-team, they had disagreements about how best to nurture a player’s overall development, and simultaneously manage the needs and expectations of a results driven industry. Furthermore, the lack of influence perceived by the academy coaches during important periods of organizational change had seemingly led to further rifts developing between them and their first-team counterparts. Such reflections depict everyday organizational life as a negotiated and contested activity for these key stakeholders, the roots of which can be traced back to their respective ideological standpoints (Ball, 1987). As Ball (1987) suggests, life within the club was found to be far from ‘mundane’, with a degree of power, conflict, control and goal diversification typifying some of the day-to-day interactions.

Here, Kelchtermans’ (2009a, 2009b, 2011) workings around professional vulnerability can also be used to exemplify the passivity and uncertainty which both the academy players and coaches experienced. Kelchtermans (1996) acknowledged how the narrative biographies of teachers highlighted the impact of critical incidents as sources of professional vulnerability, with such incidents serving to question the normal daily routines of teachers, provoking emotions of distress, unease, doubt and uncertainty (Kelchtermans,

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

1996). Given that ‘critical incidents’ such as the introduction of the E.D.S. and the ‘you’re all shit’ episode had generally typified my time-in-context, I was left to reflect on the apparent vulnerability of the players and coaches with whom I worked. Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b, 2011) depicted vulnerability as a structural condition, as opposed to a purely emotional experience, with a perceived lack of control, uncertainty regarding the efficacy of one’s actions, and the thoughts and opinions of significant others, all serving as apparent antecedents. Furthermore, Kelchtermans (1996) stated that the social recognition of technical skills, competences, and moral integrity, was a crucial element of one’s professional self (self-esteem and task perception), with appreciation from other key stakeholders constituting as a highly valued, non-material, social workplace condition. As such, the vulnerability experienced by the players stemmed from the continued requirement for them to try and impress the academy and first-team coaches with a view to ensuring a first-team future at the club. This structural vulnerability also extended to the professional lives of the academy coaches however, in that their own professional competencies and moral integrity were, at times, challenged in their interactions with their first team counterparts. My prolonged engagement with this micro-political context, and my continued dialogue with key stakeholders had led me to reject any previously held conceptions of assumed authority, goal coherence, consent and consensus within the club (Ball, 1987). Instead, I was left to reflect on the critical implications that this may hold for applied practice, and whether or not other practitioners found themselves battling with similar issues of practice.

636

637 **Applied Implications**

638 Whilst I was no longer delivering scheduled sport psychology sessions during the
639 ethnographic study presented here, my time spent with key stakeholders throughout the data

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

640 collection process had left me wanting to understand them more as *people*, as opposed to just
641 *coaches*, or *athletes* (Gilbourne & Priestly, 2011). Such a sentiment echoes the
642 acknowledgement made by Gilbourne and Priestly (2011) that;

643 The people we study are complex. They have fears, worries, weaknesses, and needs;
644 they are vulnerable, just like other people. In fact, they are *just people*. (p.230).

645

646 Within this context, the vulnerability that typified the professional lives of the players and
647 coaches, often extended beyond their role-related performances. In a similar manner, my own
648 emerging understanding of their perceived complexities, had led me to recognize how my
649 own professional vulnerability was always likely to be moderated by my ability to
650 successfully maintain effective relationships with any number of key stakeholders; a finding
651 increasingly highlighted within recent research (e.g., Eubank et al., 2014; McDougall et al.,
652 2015). Upon recognition of vulnerability as a structural condition (Kelchtermans, 2009a,
653 2009b, 2011), the realization that practitioners are not immune to the day-to-day functioning
654 of their applied contexts, highlights how social recognition from key stakeholders can be seen
655 to be a key antecedent of a practitioner's own professional self-understanding (Kelchtermans,
656 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b, 2011) work addressing
657 professional vulnerability and professional self-understanding has much to offer the
658 discipline, both in terms of analyzing the thoughts, emotions and behaviors of athletes and
659 coaches, and also in stimulating critical reflection on the work and careers of applied sport
660 psychologists.

661 During my initial period of professional practice at the club, my interactions had
662 always been restricted to the players and coaches within the academy. As such, I had always
663 judged my own accountability in relation to how my practice aligned with the interests, hopes

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

664 and needs of these individuals alone. My subsequent ethnographic study, and my
665 corresponding reading of the (micro)politics literature however, had provided me with a more
666 rounded insight into how the club's primary need to win matches regularly at the first-team
667 level, permeated all facets of organizational life. Accordingly, I can now understand why
668 some colleagues continuously challenged me to consider the following questions; how would
669 I seek to demonstrate the effectiveness of my practices to key stakeholders at the club?; how
670 would I justify my evolving approach to practice to a prospective new employer?; how
671 flexible might I need to be in terms of my applied practices to ensure that I can achieve the
672 necessary 'buy-in' from numerous key stakeholders?; how would I try and initially seek a
673 better contextual understanding when starting work within a new organizational setting?

674 Whilst my extensive time-in-context has permitted me to reflect upon some of the
675 factors which impacted upon my applied work there, comprehensive answers to the
676 aforementioned questions of identity and practice have remained elusive. As such, the research
677 team have purposefully refrained from offering any definitive recommendations for practice.
678 As a research team however, we would encourage readers of this paper to also consider their
679 responses to the questions above with respect to the critical reflections offered within this
680 paper, as well as their own encounters and their approaches to applied work. Furthermore, we
681 would encourage readers to reflect upon the fundamental suggestion made through the paper
682 that applied practice within sport psychology may be facilitated by a degree of *micro-political*
683 *understanding* and activity on the practitioner's part. Such emergent messages highlight the
684 need for practitioners to develop and utilize their micropolitical literacy when attempting to
685 develop, maintain and advance their working relationships with various organizational
686 stakeholders (Kelchtermans & Ballett, 2002a, 2002b). From our perspective, such an approach
687 to research and practice is essential if we are to bring into sharper focus the vulnerable and

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

688 often ideologically contested nature of sports work, as well as its connection with, and to,
689 applied sport psychology practice. In light of this, the current paper seeks to encourage further
690 academic debate within the domain, as to what a social analysis of applied contexts might mean
691 for the enactment of sport psychology practice.

692

693 **Strengths, Limitations and Future Research Directions**

694 Notwithstanding the potential implications of the multidisciplinary approach to understanding
695 applied contexts adopted here, the current study represents reflections from a single setting,
696 and as such, the experiences accounted are not necessarily representative of the experiences
697 of other practitioners. However, the key strength of this paper is in the adoption of a novel
698 theoretical lens to illuminate and examine applied practice issues within sport psychology, in
699 a manner that disturbs the rationalistic and descriptive accounts that have typified the
700 literature base to date. Consequently, we call for practitioners to not only reflect on whether
701 the issues highlighted here resonate with their own experiences and training, but to also
702 consider how they would address some of the everyday challenges and dilemmas which are
703 documented within this paper. Furthermore, we hope that this paper acts as a stimulus for the
704 development of critical and rich, reflective accounts of sport psychology practice, that allow
705 the profession to better consider issues of power, interaction, agency, ambiguity and
706 vulnerability, in a more contextually-informed manner than has been achieved to date.

707 Further research, which seeks to recognize the inherently (micro)political nature of
708 the high-performance contexts and, relatedly, the sport psychologist's role within such social
709 milieus, offers the potential to significantly advance our collective understanding of some of
710 the more tacit and understated challenges that practitioners are likely to encounter. More
711 specifically, scholarship which offers a critical insight into the relationships that practitioners

REFLECTIONS ON MICROPOLITICS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

712 seek to forge and re-forge, and the strategies that they adopt in order to survive, thrive and
713 learn within these settings, holds significant implications for the discipline. Furthermore, by
714 considering the utility of organizational analyses and theorizing from outside of the sport
715 psychology domain (cf. Ball, 1987; Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), future
716 research might also seek to examine how a practitioner's self-understanding is impacted upon
717 by the social recognition and engagement that they (may or may not) receive from key
718 contextual stakeholders within a given applied setting. Such multi- and inter-disciplinary
719 inquiry may provide a fruitful avenue for enhancing our knowledge of applied practice and
720 the preparation and development programs put in place to support it.

721

722 **Conclusion**

723 The current paper has offered a reflective, ethnographic analysis of everyday life within a
724 professional rugby league academy, with the goal of not only illuminating the micro-political
725 nature of organizational life, but also highlighting how such understanding could be
726 connected to applied sport psychology practice. By depicting how the issues of power,
727 conflict, and vulnerability featured in day-to-day organizational life, this paper problematizes
728 the rationalistic portrayals of practice that have traditionally dominated the literature base.
729 Arguably such accounts of practice have much to offer in terms of encouraging a
730 phenomenology of practice that includes (as a central component) reflection on the reflection-
731 in-action of practitioners within sports clubs and organizations (Schön, 1987). Such dialogue
732 and debate may also help the field to productively embrace the complexity and uncertainty of
733 applied practice and provide conceptual insights that better reflect the 'grit' of organizational
734 life in which applied sport psychologists are embedded.

735

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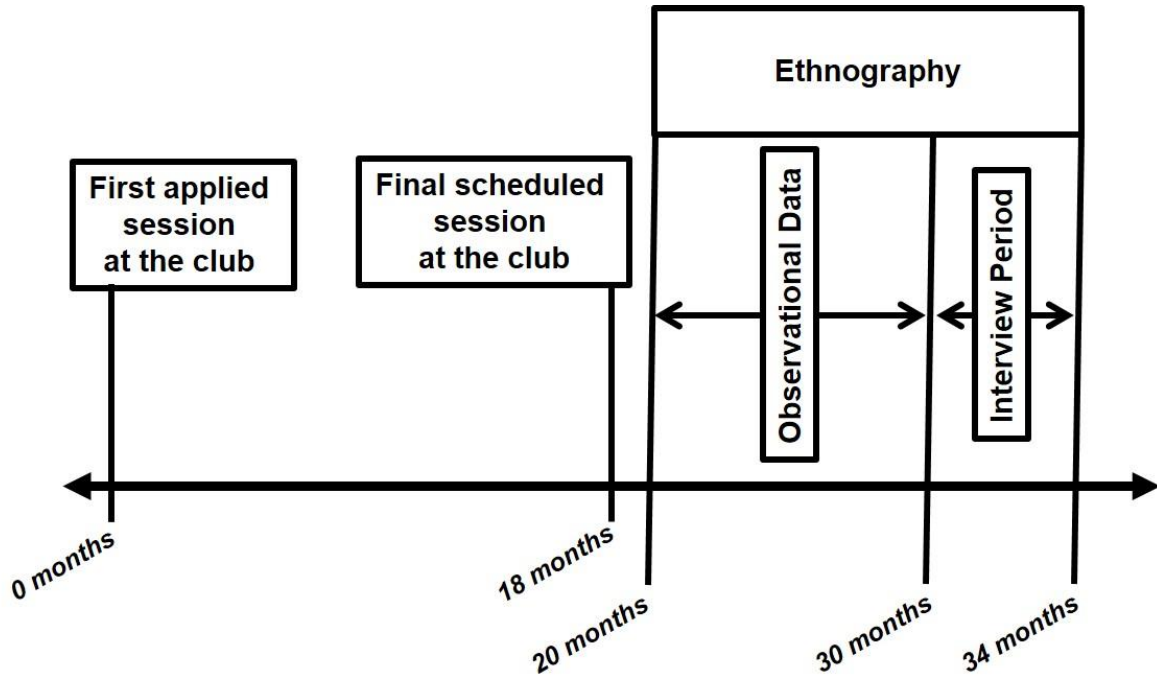
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878 Figure 1: A timeline portraying the first author's changing association with the rugby league

879 club in question over time