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Gatekeepers' experiences of hiring a sport psychologist: a phenomenological study

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Abstract

Within applied sport psychology, the process of gaining entry, specifically the employment interview, has received little attention relative to other stages of practice. This study, guided by an interpretative phenomenological approach, aimed to understand the experiences of gatekeepers to practice within United Kingdom elite sport who have been directly involved in the hiring of sport psychologists. Semi-structured interviews with seven participants were transcribed verbatim and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four essences emerged: consultant affability, consultant confidence versus arrogance, consultant collaboration, and presentation of consultant competency. These findings highlight the importance of developing interpersonal skills, interview technique, and self-promotion skills in sport psychology practitioners. In addition, a number of features specific to the sport psychology employment interview are discussed.

Keywords: gatekeepers; gaining entry; applied practice; interpretative phenomenological analysis

Sport can have a profound impact on individuals, communities and wider society (Sport England, 2015) and in an environment driven by results, whether it be at a club, collegiate or professional level, the “bottom line” for most organizations is winning (Wrisberg, Withycombe, Simpson, Loberg, & Reed, 2012). With the financial consequences of winning and losing, those involved in sport have been faced with the question of how to improve their rates of success (Humara, 2000). Hence, it is not uncommon for an array of sport science support personnel to be recruited at all levels of competition to help manage the physical demands of practices and competition (Wrisberg et al., 2012). However, a hesitancy to seek the services of a sport psychology consultant (SPC) is still prevalent despite a shared acknowledgement of the importance of sport psychology for success in a wide-range of sporting environments from Olympic Games (Hodge, 2010), to Academy Soccer (Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, 2011).

Wrisberg and colleagues (2012) suggest that to propel and develop the field of applied sport psychology, lessons should be learned from the sudden change in perceptions of strength and conditioning in the 1970s. At that time, athletic directors were sceptical of the potential benefits of strength and conditioning, even presuming that its practice impaired performance (Lukacs, 2010). Within a decade practically every NCAA Division-I athletic director had hired strength and conditioning coaches, possibly due to a better awareness about the potential benefits and services that strength and conditioning provided (Wrisberg et al., 2012). In addition, both program evaluation and professional accountability require greater attention (Gould, Murphy, Tammien, & May, 1991). In addressing this concern, Sharp and Hodge (2014) stated that “substantial progress has been made in identifying the characteristics and qualities necessary for effective sport psychology consulting” (p. 92). This field of research has found many characteristics to be important for consultant effectiveness that include (but are not limited to) being; knowledgeable about sport psychology, honest,

trustworthy (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004), and able to build a connection and professional consulting relationship with the athlete (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). However, Andersen (2000) suggested that before we ask what happens when athlete meets sport psychologist, “we need to look at the situations, environments, and processes that help bring a client and a sport psychologist together for the first time” (p. 3).

To ensure the maximum uptake of the services that consultants provide, it is critical to understand the factors that influence a consultant “gaining entry” to an organisation/team. Gaining entry is the stage of consultancy that begins with initial contact between two parties through to the formal agreement/and or the signing of formal documents between the sport psychologist and the future working party (Coumbe-Lilley, 2011). Without successful negotiation through this stage, practitioners may risk falling at the first consultancy hurdle.

The specifics of gaining entry, as the first stage of consultation process models (e.g., Sport Psychology Service Delivery Heuristic; Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004) are often under-discussed due to the generic nature of exploring the consultation process. However, contrasting lines of research (e.g., consultant characteristics, barriers to entry) in the field of professional practice often converge when studying the process of gaining entry to practice. The literature on consultants' characteristics, originally stemming from research in allied professions such as counsellors, physicians, and therapists, has received the most research interest and attention (Dorn, 1984; Hash, Munna, Vogel, & Bason, 2003; Lewis & Walsh, 1978; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). This field of study explores the influence of the practitioners' traits, appearance, and background on potential consumers' perceptions of effectiveness and preferences for future consultation. When reviewing this literature, the most preferred sport psychologist was of the same age and race to potential consumers, and possessed a high athletic background, interpersonal skills, and sport specific knowledge (see Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). They were female,

athletically built, physically active, had experience working with diverse populations, and possessed either an advanced degree or certification (cf. Lubker, Visek, Watson, & Sungpurwalla, 2012).

Barriers to entry, those factors that may act as blocking agents to the successful entry of a practitioner, have also garnered an increasing amount of interest within a variety of settings. Both internal (e.g., finance and time) and external (e.g., SPC integration and the negative perceptions of coaches) barriers have been found to hold a significant influence over individuals' likelihood to seek the services of an SPC (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Despite these areas of study being important to the understanding of gaining entry, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth discussion and critique of these fields (see Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, 2011; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). However, one aspect of the gaining entry process that appears to have been overlooked by sport psychology professional practice literature is that of the entry/employment interview. This encounter with an organisation's 'gatekeeper to sport psychology' is an interpersonal interaction that may influence the success or failure of consultancy before it has begun.

The employment interview is an assessment tool that can be manipulated to assess a range of constructs from declarative knowledge to individual experience (Huffcutt, 2011). As an interdisciplinary field, sport psychology should look beyond its boundaries to other fields (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998). Within this area, the most closely allied research fields are occupational psychology and literature examining the selection of personnel. A focus of such psychological inquiry regarding the employment interview has been the many constructs that influence interviewer ratings of candidates (Higgins & Judge, 2004). For example, within personnel selection, Huffcutt (2011) found that, job-related interview content (information pertaining directly to the requirements of the position), interviewee performance (the performance of the candidate), and personal/demographic

characteristics (grouping features that may affect ratings) are major sources of employment interview ratings. Interviewee performance constructs (e.g., impression management techniques) correlated more strongly with interview ratings than the two other constructs. Additionally, within selection and assessment research, Peeters and Lievens (2006) found that individuals can choose the impression management tactics that will have the greatest impact on interviewer ratings. These findings, particularly those regarding impression management and interviewee performance highlight the importance of the individuals' interpersonal skills in determining the outcome of an employment interview. This finding may be particularly important to the SPC whose success depends on building a rapport and relationship with the client. Drawing upon research from differing professions can aid in our understanding of this phenomenon, however a considerable amount of studies utilise a laboratory design (Huffcutt, 2011). This limitation highlights the need to extend research into the sport psychology domain, using methodology that examines the actual phenomenon of an employment interview.

Guest (1998) argued that a comprehensive and valid understanding of the employment relationship is unlikely to develop until researchers begin to consider the perceptions and reactions of both parties in the relationship, the organisation and the individual. The employment interview requires interaction between the sport psychologist and the organisation's representing agent. In the microcosm of elite sport, it is the athletic directors (Wilson, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sailor, 2009), administrators, coaches, team captains (Sands, 2002), and organisational presidents (Wrisberg et al., 2012) that are at the helm due to their control of budgets and key decisions. These 'gatekeepers' are those that control access to other group members, group activities, and sources of information (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Understanding how these individuals' perceptions, preferences and beliefs affect the provision of sport psychology consulting within athletic departments can provide

useful information to organisations and individuals promoting applied sport psychology (Wilson et al., 2009). Past research has examined gatekeepers' and potential consumers likelihood to seek the services of a sport psychologist, as an aspect of the gaining entry process (Wilson et al., 2009; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). Recent research suggested that understanding the hiring experiences and decisions of individuals with direct organizational responsibility for employing SPCs would provide clarity to previous findings from prospective consumers (Thelwell, Wood, Harwood, Woolway, & van Raalte, 2018). The employment interview is an interpersonal phenomenon that has received little attention within the applied sport psychology domain, which when examined can provide the insights of those gatekeepers with direct responsibility for hiring SPCs.

The current research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have employed SPCs previously; specifically, those hired through employment interviews. Additionally, it endeavoured to explore how these lived experiences have shaped their current perceptions and future hiring beliefs. When conducting research into a novel topic, rich detailed information is important to develop our understanding of the field. Since little is known about the phenomenon of the SPC employment interview, and the current study sought to explore the experiential data of participants, phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate approach for collecting and interpreting descriptions of participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) strives to understand individuals' lived experiences to describe what a phenomenon is like for them (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006) placing social interaction and the cultural context at the heart of the research endeavour (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). In addition, IPA "offers psychologists the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts" (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). Subsequently, this research aims to explore how gatekeeper experiences are shaped by the sport psychologist

within the context of entry to practice interviews. Additionally, it endeavours to explore how these lived experiences have shaped their current perceptions and future hiring beliefs.

Methods

Methodology

An interpretative phenomenological research design was utilised in this study; a branch of phenomenology which draws upon Husserl (1973) and involves detailed examination of the participant's personal experience (Smith & Osborn, 2004). In addition, IPA emphasizes the active role of the researcher as their own conceptions are required to make sense of the other participants' personal worlds through a process of interpretative activity. Smith and Osborn (2004) propose that a two-stage interpretation process takes place, where participants are trying to make sense of their world whilst the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's interpretations. IPA is particularly useful when investigating an area that is new or under-researched. Despite studies often mapping individuals' experiences of a variety of conditions and interventions (Hamill, Carson, & Dorahy, 2010, Rhodes & Smith, 2010), there is a growing body of work that moves beyond describing episodic accounts of experience and further addresses the meanings held by professionals in their own lines of work (Arvinen-Barrow, Penny, Hemmings, & Corr, 2010, Vachon, Fillion, Achille, Duval, & Leung, 2011). It is important to note that IPA has received criticism for lacking agreement with any particular phenomenological school (Giorgi, 2011) and may be best described as phenomenologically inspired and interpretatively-focused (Miller, Cronin, & Baker, 2015). Importantly, Brocki and Wearden (2006) state that IPA researchers with different interests may adopt different levels of interpretation in varying topics. Thus the role of the researcher's own position in the interpretation process and concerns regarding research credibility are addressed below.

Participants

IPA aims to gain a detailed and personalised understanding of each case resulting in many research studies having sample sizes of 10 or fewer (Caron, Bloom, Johnston, & Sabiston, 2013; Smith, 2016). In line with these IPA guidelines (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), seven gatekeepers of sport psychology were sampled utilising purposive homogenous sampling through contacts made for the current study, contacts previously held by the second author, and peer recommendations. Participants were gatekeepers to sport psychology within United Kingdom elite sport organisations who had professional experience in gatekeeping roles ranging between 3 and 27 years. All participants had been directly responsible for hiring at least two SPCs, however some of the participants could not accurately account for how many SPCs they had historically hired on service-based contracts. Participant experiences of the employment interview process ranged from one interaction with the SPC to four separate interactions before the employment decision.

Six male and one female gatekeepers aged between 34 and 57 ($M=41.2$) participated in the current study. The participants' roles in their organisations were: Head of Performance Support, Head of Sport Science & Medicine, Performance Director, Paralympic Lead, Head of Sport Science, Senior Psychologist, and Academy Director. Four sports (Martial arts, rugby, cricket, and tennis) were represented along with a UK based sport science services organisation.

In accordance with ethical requirements, participants are identified by culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Following institutional ethical board approval, potential participants were contacted based upon their current roles within professional organizations. Selection was guided by an individuals' extensive involvement in the recruitment and hiring of sport psychologists. Male and female participants from both private and public-sector organisations, representing four

different sports were recruited. This allowed for both experiences that are common to the sample, and those that are unique to individuals to be presented (Clarke & Harwood, 2014).

Data were collected using semi-structured phenomenological interviews between the lead investigator and individual participants. The interview guide was created using guidelines to conducting IPA studies (Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Questions were designed to gather information on what the participants experienced and how this influenced their experience. The interview schedule was designed with a focus on open questions, to allow the participants to express their experiences as wholly as possible. As such it served merely as a stimulus to aid discussion rather than being rigidly used (Smith, 2016). A summarised schedule of questions was sent to the participants at least three days prior to the interview to aid them in providing detail that might not have been revealed with the use of unseen questions, and to facilitate their own reflection on pertinent experiences (Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007). The schedule itself was guided by questions such as:

1. When I talk about hiring an SPC, what does that mean to you?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences when hiring sport psychologists?

Probes were used to elicit as thorough a description of experience as possible, and participants were only returned to the interview schedule when the interviewer deemed that a recount of experience had ended. Additional questions were designed to establish how the gatekeeper experiences affected their current perceptions and views of sport psychology, and their future hiring beliefs, such as:

1. Based on your past experiences would you hire an SPC again?
2. Do you think your past experiences have changed the way you would hire a sport psychologist in the future?

In the closing section of the interview, participants were asked questions to ensure that they had enough opportunity to share and discuss their experiences:

222 1. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't covered?

223 2. Do you feel that you had a chance to share everything you wanted to?

224 A pilot interview was held to trial the questions and interview technique. Following
225 the pilot interview, several additional questions were formulated to provide a deeper
226 understanding of gatekeepers' perceptions and experiences. A question regarding
227 participants' perceptions of sport psychology prior to their first encounter was added to aid in
228 developing an understanding of potential influences on interactions with SPCs. In addition,
229 further validation was added to increase the participants' chance to share their experiences.
230 Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The mean interview duration
231 was 45 minutes (Range = 36 to 57 minutes, SD = 7.16). To ensure confidentiality for
232 participants, data were anonymised at transcription and participants were assigned
233 pseudonyms.

234 **Data Analysis**

235 IPA is a flexible perspective used in the analysis of qualitative data that involves a
236 close examination of each case (Caron et al., 2013; Smith, 2016). Despite Smith (2016)
237 suggesting that "there is not a single right way to do IPA analysis" (p. 222) the general
238 guidelines proposed by Smith and colleagues (2009) were adopted for this study. During this
239 process, the first author engaged with the concepts of bracketing and a search for essences.
240 The process of bracketing requires the researcher to explicitly identify their own
241 preconceptions relating to the topic (Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013). However, it has been
242 suggested an impossibility to completely bracket one's predisposed biases (Allen-Collinson,
243 2009). In the current study, the first author identified their assumptions informed by prior
244 research by listing any preconceptions about the influences on perceptions and preferences
245 for sport psychologists. The first author had no experience of hiring SPCs, therefore the
246 author's understanding and preconceptions of experiences may have been limited. However,

it should be acknowledged that to some extent, prior understanding may still have informed analysis. This setting aside of preconceptions attempts to avoid imposing these biases formed through personal experiences (Sanders & Winter, 2016).

Consistent with IPA guidelines, each transcript was analysed as a case in its own right (Smith, 2016). Hence the first four stages of analysis were conducted on one transcript before attending to the next. Transcripts were read and re-read to achieve a sense of familiarity with each participant's experience (Stage 1). The data was next attended to with the aim of identifying themes by making comments in the margin of the page that was descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual in nature (Stage 2). A return to the beginning of the transcript was made to identify and label essences in the opposing margin to the one used earlier, before connections between the themes were sought (Stage 3). A table of 'essences' was then produced (Stage 4). This method of analysis was then repeated for each transcript. This repeated process followed by a comparison of individual data to others, allowed the researchers to discover the universals underlying the inter-subjectively experienced phenomenon (Crotty, 1998; Stage 5). Analysis was initially conducted by the first author, followed by both authors engaging in discussions to review the analytic approach (Sanders & Winter, 2016). The final step of IPA was writing; translating essences into a coherent account (Smith et al., 2009; Stage 6).

A relativist approach was applied to guide the judging of quality in the current research (Smith & McGannon, 2017). This approach does not utilise a set of universal criteria that "are fixed, rigid, or predetermined before the study" (Smith & McGannon, 2017; p. 16), but uses a list of criteria that can be added to, subtracted from and modified. This study provides a *substantive contribution* to this field as the first qualitative study to offer an insight into the experiences of those directly responsible for the hiring of SPCs. In addition, the *impact* of the study is evident in the generation of further questions regarding the SPC

influence on this phenomenon, and how this can be altered. The *width* of data is evident through the numerous quotations provided to illustrate each interpretation, and the different manifestations of each essence experienced by participants. Furthermore, the study displays *coherence* in the presentation of those essences which were analogous to participants in order to provide a meaningful picture of the employment interview phenomenon.

Smith and McGannon (2017) additionally suggested that the notion of critical friends, to encourage reflection and provide alternative interpretations and perspectives should be utilised. In line with this, the second author acted as a critical friend in reviewing the codes and respective quotes interpreted by the first author.

Findings

The gatekeepers discussed various experiences of hiring SPCs that shared common characteristics, which we have labelled consultant affability, consultant confidence versus arrogance, consultant collaboration, and consultant competency. Despite all seven participants' descriptions informing the findings, and detailed examples are provided for each essence of their shared experiences, manifestations of these superordinate constructs were aligned to different lower-order themes through the participants' experiences. These emergent themes are therefore described in relation to these gatekeepers' experiences.

Consultant Affability: 'I needed an affability, an ability to relate'

We interpreted participants' descriptions of *a sense of closeness, developing a connection, and fitting in* as being related to the consultant's affable nature. Despite the level of affability varying across gatekeeper experiences, it was highlighted as a key factor in their decision either to hire or not to hire. Andrew and Brian felt they experienced a sense of closeness or a close relationship developing, however they initially could not offer an explanation for this feeling:

When he left we all felt like he was the right person; he left us with such a good impression about himself. He instantly struck up a relationship with the two coaches in the room and the interview ended up just being a conversation about [the sport] for large parts, but he just left us feeling that sense of 'we want this guy in our club' – Andrew

I got on with him, which helps, he listened to what I wanted, um and I felt comfortable that he would be, he would be able to connect with the players I had in the academy - Brian

For Brian, it appeared to be particularly difficult to “put [his] finger on” what created this feeling of potential connection and getting on with the SPC. Despite discussing that he “just felt a sense”, Andrew suggested that being able to instantly develop a relationship, and leading the interview into a more informal conversation resulted in positive reflections on this SPC. Although not explicitly stated, Andrew and Brian seem to suggest that this initial connection was guided by the SPCs interpersonal skills. Hence, it was not surprising that some features commonly associated with interpersonal skills were explicitly detailed by two participants:

Their ability to immediately build rapport with our coaches and athletes was important too, so we would have some of them either in the interview or around the environment and how they handled that sort of situation – Matt

It was that ability to instantly gain that sort of trust and respect that made us want to talk to him and in the end, it is probably what contributed to us hiring him the most – Robert

For Robert and Matt, this building of rapport, trust, and respect positively influenced their perceptions of a SPC and whilst established during early interactions, appeared to influence communication for the duration of the interview process. While reflecting on one

321 encounter with a SPC, James' tone of voice suggested an enduring positive memory that "he
322 had a personality [we] could get on with, they were positive and boosting to the whole
323 environment".

324 For one of the participants, discussions turned to interactions with consultants who
325 did not appear to possess the necessary interpersonal skills:

326 They've come in one by one and it's been obvious within five minutes that they are
327 not suitable for the role and those days are long days because you're interviewing
328 eight or nine people and if we'd of had an opportunity to converse with them
329 previously they wouldn't have been shortlisted...um it's a cutthroat world and [we]
330 will know immediately as to whether that person has the personality and the social
331 skills to be able to operate in that environment – Sarah

332 For Sarah, this lack of "personality and social skills" led to a withdrawal from the
333 interview process "within five minutes", showcasing the importance of early evaluations of
334 consultant affability, and the enduring effects of these perceptions on hiring decisions.

335 This desire for an interpersonal connection between the gatekeepers and SPC
336 highlights the need for practitioners to possess the necessary skills to develop rapport, trust,
337 respect, and a relationship with individuals at all levels and stages of consultation. Without
338 this characteristic, it is apparent that the gatekeeper is likely to withdraw from interactions
339 before the consultant can progress through other stages of the interview process. The
340 importance of consultant affability is perhaps best summarised by Stephen:

341 Especially in sport psychology where you don't come with a gym, or you don't come
342 with an ultrasound machine, you come with you, and your personality, and your
343 rapport building skills are your gym essentially - Stephen

344 **Consultant Confidence versus Arrogance: 'they were too much into their ology'**

In addition to reflecting upon the consultant's affable nature, six of the participants felt that their experiences of hiring were characterised by the consultants' attitude towards sport psychology. This attitude manifested itself as the consultant's beliefs of sport psychology's *effectiveness and place within a multi-disciplinary team*.

For Matt and Robert, the consultants exaggerated belief in the effectiveness of sport psychology appeared to lead to the gatekeepers' withdrawal from further interaction with both the individual practitioner and, in the extreme, from the field as a whole:

[he] promised us the world, he promised us he could get our players to their absolute best, and that their absolute best would be gold, that he wouldn't rest until that happened, that psychology would make the impact and change that we needed – Matt
I despised it, it is a privileged position that we put this guy in and he screwed us, I never wanted to use 'psychs' again if this is what they were like – Robert

During this reflection, Robert's tone of voice highlighted that this encounter with the SPC still impacted his perceptions of the individual practitioner. This in turn may have potentially lead to negative perceptions of the field to this day, identifying the durable nature of perceptions of SPCs and the wider profession. For Matt, the affect displayed towards the SPC, led to dissipating interest in hiring the consultant. The differing extent of these responses may be explained by the gatekeepers' prior experiences with SPCs. Robert was reflecting upon his first experience of hiring an SPC, likely making his knowledge of both the field and such claims by the SPC less than that of Matt, who had previous experience of this phenomenon. This experience may be the cause for Matt's withdrawal from the individual practitioner rather than a response of "despising the field" as a whole.

In contrast, two participants discussed that a belief in sport psychology portrayed in a truthful and open manner led to an endearing perception of the SPC:

Honesty. I think that's the biggest thing, we don't need to hear how you're going to save the world, we want to know honestly if you can do the job, and how you're going to do it – Andrew

Belief in what you do is obviously important, and we want someone to come in with a sense of they know what they're doing, and they will do the job, but sometimes that is taken to a different level, and it sounds like they are bragging about themselves and I guess the profession as a whole – Stephen

This highlights the need for SPCs to focus on providing consumers a truthful account of the effectiveness and efficacy of their profession, without exaggerating potential benefits and time frames for these benefits.

Further to beliefs regarding the effectiveness of sport psychology, two participants discussed how SPCs portrayed perceptions of their position within multi-disciplinary sport science service provision:

[they] had their sense of importance way too high, when it works well we work a total interdisciplinary approach, which is a family feel, it's a corny word but it's actually the best sport teams are like families so nobody is more important than the others, everybody's helping other people whereas this particular sport psychologist was 'I want more psychology, psychology is the thing the [athletes] need', so there were a lot of friction points there – James

When he said that psychology was key, that psychology was what was missing, if you're looking for a psych then you feel it's needed and that's what will make a difference, I mean he gave that impression of I want specified times for psych, and nothing else should infringe on that, no real flexibility there - Matt

For Matt, the suggestion that sport psychology will induce a change in performance and a lack of flexibility of time and service provision, over complimentary services,

interacted to develop a sense that sport psychology was the most important sport science service. James had wanted a SPC that fitted in with the “family feel” of the organisation and a belief that “psychology is the thing that is needed” did not match this want. Andrew shared an anecdote relating to his early experiences of a pre-existing SPC when entering a new organisation:

well you need more psychologists you know this is literally what happened the guy said to me “I know you told me that we've not got any budget, but I went to see the CEO yesterday and asked him for more budget for psychology” – Andrew

Andrew's account, whilst discussing an already contracted SPC who he line managed, provides a warning to practitioners regarding their vision of sport psychology's position relative to the entire organisation and respect for their manager. Collectively, interpreted with the recounted experiences of other gatekeepers this feature of experience highlights the need for SPCs to describe an honest and balanced belief in the field:

I mean don't get me wrong, I think everyone should believe in their own field, if you don't you shouldn't be doing it, but there is believing in it and there is thinking that you are God's gift to the club because of it, and that's not the impression we want to be given - Andrew

The experiences of the gatekeepers in relation to SPCs attitude were interpreted as being influenced by a consultant being either *arrogant or confident* in sport psychology.

When consultants were appropriately confident in sport psychology, the participants' used more language during their descriptions of experiences and ultimately lead to a more positive perception of the consultant.

Consultant Collaboration: ‘I would go down a route where we find a common ground’

The third feature characterising the shared experience of the participants was the need to reach an agreement on the consultant's method of practice. All seven participants

discussed this need, however they diverged on what this agreement involved. We interpreted that gatekeepers' experiences were characterised by the consultant's ability to find both a *common philosophy and a common plan*.

For some of the participants, connecting with a SPC required agreement on a common philosophy of practice. However, the meaning of philosophy appeared to differ between participants. Andrew discussed his experience of a consultant whose service focused on a humanistic approach, rather than solely on performance:

They came in and talked about how they wanted to work on the aspects of the guys [sport], which is obviously important, but then they went into other things, and how this could help them as people outside of it, that really struck me because it's not just about the sport for me, it's about producing more rounded people, and if they've got a greater understanding of psychology behind behaviour then they can take that into the work place and future life as well – Andrew

This section of the discussion highlighted how Andrew's experience was shaped by the practitioner's consultancy focus on both the psychological well-being and performance of the athletes. In contrast, Robert appeared to reflect upon an instance of agreement on who the SPC was to work with:

So we wanted someone that could work with our elite players, and their coaches, and then the younger academy style guys, their coaches as well as their parents, so we wanted someone to cover all the bases, and there were a couple of people we interviewed that met those sorts of criteria - Robert

This divergence in perceptions of philosophy indicates that both focus of service and intended recipients are critical discussion points with gatekeepers. These features of the consultant's philosophy proposed throughout the interview process appeared to be a major

443 impact upon the participants' decision to hire or not to hire a SPC. However, it may not be
444 this simple for the consultant:

445 So yeah, we hired somebody who naturally, who believes that um the right, the most
446 effective way to do it is with the coaches...but when it's the national governing body
447 hiring then it's the responsibility of the psychologist to fit into the right way for that
448 context – James

449 James indicates the potential need for SPCs to be malleable concerning their
450 philosophy of practice when attempting to gain entry with an elite organisation or National
451 Governing Body. It was apparent from the discussion with James that this warning to
452 practitioners was especially pertinent in relation to both the gatekeeper's experience with
453 sport psychology and the practitioners experience. When the gatekeeper possesses
454 experiences of employing SPCs, they appear more likely to have a developed perception of
455 their desired philosophy:

456 So I, you know, I had the background in, in skill acquisition and sport psych which
457 was useful for me to know what a program should look like and help with identifying
458 the right type of person to lead the program – Brian

459 For Brian, his pre-existing knowledge of sport psychology influenced experiences of
460 hiring a SPC. However, for Robert it was apparent that the SPCs experience was a crucial
461 factor in determining agreement on consultant philosophy:

462 When they come in and have no experience and are saying, this is how we want to do
463 it, you know, we look at it and say "what is this based on", but with the guy we hired
464 he had worked in [sport] and we discussed his time there and it gave them more
465 credibility really - Robert

466 Robert suggests that neophyte sport psychologists, who have less experience and
467 reputation than their experienced counterparts, must be prepared to sacrifice their philosophy

468 in order to gain entry. When asked for advice for SPCs attempting to gain entry to practice,
469 Stephen suggested:

470 Come with principles and you come with knowledge and experiences and you adapt
471 your skills to solve the solution in the first place – Stephen

472 In addition to consulting philosophy, participants indicated that candidates were
473 required to propose a plan of work they would conduct once entry had been gained.

474 Participants experience was characterised by the way in which consultants responded to
475 questions relating to their program of work:

476 You had those that came in and said this is what I've done previously in x, y, and z
477 sports, and this is what I'm going to do here based on my previous experiences. They
478 had no lee-way in their approach and knew exactly how they wanted to do things
479 before they had even spoken to us about the role. On the other hand, we had people
480 that would come in and say well you tell me what to do and I'll do it. They had no
481 impetus, it seemed to me like they didn't really know what they were doing, and that
482 may not have been the case, but that distinct lack of direction and independence made
483 me lose a bit of confidence in their ability to work with my players. Both styles made
484 me and my team feel uneasy – Matt

485 In the end we had to go for somebody that had their plan, but say woah you know
486 let's slow down a bit and let's get on a level playing field, settle you in and then we
487 can discuss the finer points of the role. In the end that worked well, but the actual
488 experience, it made it difficult for us to actually choose someone, there was a point
489 where we were thinking we were just going to leave it – Robert

490 Robert and Matt described approaches that led to negative affect, with

Matt feeling unease and Robert contemplating withdrawing from the entire process of employing a practitioner. However, Brian proposed that SPCs should attempt to display autonomy whilst indicating that flexibility is essential:

I want to know how they would influence the program within the parameters of what we have as an academy, I would want to know where they want to take it, if they had a little bit of autonomy, a little bit of being able to do that, and whether they could stretch me and my thought process - Brian

Consultant Competency: 'Those were the things I went tick, tick, tick'

Through extended discussions regarding the factors that led to a gatekeeper's historic decision to hire a SPC or not, participants highlighted that candidates varied in their ability to *present their competencies*:

It was essential that the psychologist had a good knowledge of the sport so that he could actually talk to the coaches in a way that they would listen because if you're not from a sport and you try to speak to people from the sport it's difficult you know. He's a [sport] player himself so he could talk the language you know he knew what it was like, what the anxiety was like [playing the sport] he knew what the whole thing was about and um that was very telling for us – James

During discussions with James, it became apparent that sport-specific knowledge was necessary for a positive experience, however, a deeper understanding of the sport, above and beyond that of talking the talk was telling. This deeper understanding may develop from the consultant's athletic background within the same or similar sport, however an understanding is not necessarily predicated on experience within the sport.

A further competency that SPCs presented and discussed was their consulting experience. Participants diverged in the type and level of experience that they suggested to be preferential:

516 Their experience, that was a big part, not really their overall experience as a psych,
517 but had they worked within a similar sport to ours, to what level, with what demands
518 and had they had any success, because if they didn't understand our sport, it would
519 have been a struggle - Matt

520 Our sport psychologists are working with [elite level] athletes, it's very very rare for
521 somebody at that level to have [elite level] experience and that's the problem we have
522 so usually and not in every case but usually the experience that people are gaining
523 through stage two is with university level athletes or local athletes or a local club and
524 they just do not have the exposure to this context – Sarah

525 For Sarah the consultant's experience was characterised by the level of sport in which
526 an individual gained experience, and whether this translated into adequate preparation for the
527 current role. In contrast, Matt's discussion centred on the type of sport that the consultant had
528 gained experience in.

529 Participants highlighted their preference for a consultant who possessed desirable
530 characteristics such as sport-specific knowledge and particular experiences within sport
531 psychology. However, it became apparent through further discussion concerning these
532 characteristics that for the participants, it was the consultant's ability to present these
533 characteristics in relation to the current role that influenced perceptions of the SPC. Stephen
534 suggested that being able to effectively present competencies could increase gatekeepers'
535 confidence in the candidate:

536 I think there's also people that are actually quite bad at answering questions, in
537 interviews people that answer interview questions well, when you're digging into their
538 experiences um will quickly go to a real-life example, that tells me two things, one
539 um that they've prepped and they've thought about the kind of things that will come
540 up at interview and they've thought about their careers and some of the things they've

were highlighted as influential in participants' experiences. The four essences interacted to influence participants' experiences in several ways.

All gatekeepers in this study felt that a consultant's affability played an influential part on their experiences. The ability to build rapport has been reported as one of the most important characteristics of an effective service provider, aiding in successful service provision during the consultancy stage (Campbell, 2009; Sharpley, Jeffrey, & McMahan, 2006; Orlick & Partington, 1987). In addition, past research (Lubker et al., 2012; Woolway & Harwood, 2015) has indicated that interpersonal skills, defined as the broad "ability of the consultant/practitioner to use his or her personality (e.g., approachable, respectful, caring) to build a positive working relationship with athletes and coaches" (Woolway & Harwood, 2015; p.173) are important to potential consumers. However, this previous definition has disregarded both the gatekeeper (i.e., employer), and specific interpersonal qualities. Through detailed discussions a deeper understanding emerged of the specific interpersonal qualities (e.g. trust and respect) that characterised the gatekeepers' lived experiences. The descriptions given by Matt, Robert, Brian, and Andrew here echo those of other potential consumers; that there is a high importance placed on the ability to build rapport, trust, and respect. However, it was apparent from the detailed descriptions of the gatekeepers that a further set of interpersonal skills are required during the interview stage. Drawing upon the gatekeepers experiences it is proposed that interpersonal skills required to interact with potential employers may be different to those needed to successfully navigate a consulting relationship with coaches, athletes, and parents. This may be predicated on developing a level of rapport between colleagues rather than a consultant-client relationship that has been the focus of previous research. This set of interpersonal skills on behalf of the SPC led participants to feel a sense of wanting to hire the individual on their connection and rapport building alone.

The findings relating to interpersonal skills are prominent for the applied practitioner seeking to enter elite sport, as they are derived from the experiences of individuals that influence this gaining entry process. It is advised that practitioners place significant importance on learning how to establish rapport during interactions with potential gatekeepers to consultancy. Additionally, echoing recent research, it would be remiss of practitioner training programs if an emphasis on education and practice around rapport building skills was not integrated into program content (Thelwell et al., 2018). Thelwell and colleagues (2018) suggested that a rigid appraisal of interpersonal skills would be appropriate for both neophyte SPCs entering qualification pathways and more experienced SPCs as a feature of their continual professional development.

Recent research has identified the efficacy of simulation training to aid in the development of interpersonal and communication skills (DeBenedectis, Gauguet, Makris, Brown, & Rosen, 2016; Rivera-Gutierrez, Lok, Kleinsmith, Childs, & Pileggi, 2016). Simulation training entails the participant encountering simulated scenarios that require the skills under study, and receive feedback either in-action (Rivera-Gutierrez et al., 2016) or between simulations (DeBenedectis et al., 2016). Continued practice with simulated experiences can aid in the development of skills for future interactions (Rivera-Gutierrez et al., 2016). Both studies found that simulation combined with informative external feedback resulted in an increased performance in communication skills (DeBenedectis et al., 2016) and interpersonal skills (Rivera-Gutierrez et al., 2016).

For some of the participants, a perception of affability was constructed early during the interview process. Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2007) suggest that individuals differentiate others by warmth and competence dimensions in spontaneous (first) impressions. The warmth dimension relates constructs including friendliness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and morality. This suggests that participants perception of the SPCs affability was determined by

judgements pertaining to warmth and the competence dimension related to the characteristics (i.e. sport-specific knowledge and experience) the SPCs presented. Thus, the interpretations of gatekeepers' experiences may be explained by their judgements of SPC warmth and competence. However, a number of additional factors (i.e. philosophy, interdisciplinarity, and discipline-specific beliefs) that are idiosyncratic to the practice of applied sport psychology were described by participants.

A further essence derived from the gatekeepers' accounts is that of the collaborative nature of the consultant. The participants discussed the negative influence of consultants who failed to both develop an autonomous plan and ignore the specificity of the sport and new environment when designing a consultancy program. This finding was particularly pertinent to the gatekeepers that had more experience of employing sport psychologists and implementing their programs, as these individuals had gained an understanding and sense of what they desired. This implies that a larger range of flexibility may be required when preparing to consult with these gatekeepers. However, consultants should remember that engaging with either extreme of such behaviour risks not gaining entry, as neither approach leads to either a positive gatekeeper experience or perception of the consultant. For the applied SPC, this suggests that using their own experiences to develop a programme of work that can be altered slightly to the needs and wants of the organisation is crucial. This need for flexibility may be particularly pertinent for the neophyte sport psychologist who intuitively will have lower levels of professional experiences to build a programme around, in addition to a lack of reputation and respect that may precede a more experienced consultant.

Participants described how a consultant possessing sport-specific knowledge, athletic background, and experience was important, yet the extent to which gatekeepers reported a positive interaction was determined by the consultants' ability to present these in an "effective way and how they will help in the current role". Hence, it is important for the

consultant to possess the ability to promote oneself without sounding over-confident (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). Self-promotion can sometimes be uncomfortable (Fifer et al., 2008), but practitioners should use examples of past relevant work to present expertise in the field, whilst utilising terminology of the current sport, to demonstrate an honest representation of them and the field. Ravizza (1988) suggested that this sport specific knowledge can “be developed through reading, taking physical education courses, talking with people who play the sport” (p.247), viewing the game, and playing the sport itself. Similarly, Brown, Gould, and Foster (2005) suggested that “learning the language” (p.55) of the sport is a key factor of contextual intelligence. Contextual intelligence refers to an understanding of the culture and context which is being operated in and is required in addition to knowledge of techniques and strategies to build legitimacy, trust and respect (Winter & Collins, 2015). A practitioner can learn the language by “visiting and immersing oneself in the culture...attend practices and travel with the team. One may want to shadow the team trainer” (Brown et al., 2005, p.56)

Participants' perceptions of consultants were further characterised by a consultant's confident or arrogant attitude regarding sport psychology. When describing a consultant who was perceived to be arrogant, participants highlighted that exaggerating the potential impact that sport psychology could have led to negative perceptions, affect, and withdrawal from the interaction. The ability to self-promote without this hyperbole is deemed to have a positive impact on participants' perceptions of the consultant and the sport psychologist's likelihood to gain entry. The over-selling of sport psychology has been a concern echoed in several applied practitioner's recounts of experience within previous research studies (Fifer et al., 2008; Ravizza, 1988). Hemmings and Holder (2009) suggest that it is commonplace for consumers to believe sport psychology to be a 'quick fix' solution in competitive sport, and the resulting pressure can lead to a long-term perspective being sacrificed (Ravizza, 1988).

This pressure can lead sport psychology practitioners to agree with gatekeepers regarding time frames; however, the results of quick fix programs are often suspended before being able to make a significant impact (Ravizza, 1988). This early suspension of services can make it harder for other practitioners to gain entry in the future, and can discredit the profession. Sport psychology practitioners should be honest with the gatekeeper about any limitations and the need for long-term commitment (Ravizza, 1988), and should adopt a subtle low-key approach using examples to present expertise within the field (Fifer et al., 2008).

The gatekeepers' discussions reinforced previous suggestions that consultants should recognise that they are part of an interdisciplinary team contending with a number of performance issues and should complement their colleagues (Fifer et al., 2008; Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 2003). As Fifer and colleagues (2008) suggest, sport psychologists may sometimes forget that other professionals have performed successfully without their expertise. Thus, practitioners should understand and appreciate the place of sport psychology in relation to other professions, and demonstrate their ability to work as part of an interdisciplinary team with appropriately illustrative examples of previous work in such contexts.

The findings of the current study support research from wider psychological literature regarding the employment interview. The skills highlighted by gatekeepers align with the social effectiveness skills suggested to be a major source construct of interviewer ratings (Huffcutt, 2011). These social effectiveness skills, described as "the notion that candidates really put on a performance" (Huffcutt, 2011; p. 74) include social influence behaviors and interpersonal presentation that directly influence interview ratings. In addition, impression management tactics utilised can be altered and manipulated to best suit the situation in which they are required (Peeters & Lievens, 2006). The current findings extend this understanding

of impression management and interpersonal skills to the sport psychology domain. Practitioners may need to develop a new set of social effectiveness skills to effectively interact with potential employing agents. In addition to supporting Huffcutt's (2011) model of major sources of interview ratings, the current findings extend this collection of constructs to include items specific to the field of applied sport psychology. These are the SPC's philosophy, their attitude toward interdisciplinarity, and their discipline specific beliefs.

Within the United Kingdom, both the British Psychological Society (BPS) candidate handbook for the Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (Stage2) (BPS, 2018) and the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) Supervised Experience Competency Profile (BASES, 2016) highlight the need to establish, mediate, develop, and maintain working relationships. Cotterill (2016) argued that these programs are often lacking the practical business skills that are necessary to succeed as a SPC. This is supported by neither of the BPS or BASES document referring to interviewing skills and the techniques to communicate one's philosophy, or the training of these abilities. The findings of this study highlight this apparent gap within training programmes of SPCs which may result in neophyte practitioners lacking the basic professional skills they require to succeed.

Professional competencies is an issue that sport psychology is still facing as a relatively new, developing profession, with training documentation often providing insufficient preparation for trainees (Fletcher & Maher, 2013; Portenga, Aoyagi, & Cohen, 2017). Developing these competencies to produce an adequate pool of appropriately trained professionals is required for the health and development of the profession (Portenga et al., 2017; Winter & Collins, 2016). Hence, these findings should act as valuable considerations for both the trainee SPC and the governing bodies that are responsible for educating and regulating the profession.

The current study enhanced understanding of the sport psychologist's employment interview. However, we acknowledge some limitations when interpreting these findings.

First, the sample were solely from the United Kingdom, and gatekeeper experience may differ depending on the nationality of the individual and the country in which they are working. This difference may occur due to the differing structure of organisations and perceptions towards sport psychology that may exist. Similarly, the sample all held roles in elite sport organisations; an environment where an employment interview may be more likely than lower competitive levels of sports organisations.

Future Directions

The findings of this study provide a rich and detailed phenomenological support for an often quantitatively focused area of study, that has relied on questionnaires and surveys (e.g. Lubker et al., 2008; Woolway & Harwood, 2015), additionally seeking the experiences of a novel sample. These high-performance gatekeepers have informed the processes that are important for SPCs working in elite settings to consider where there are distinct opportunities for employment. In light of this future research should aim to develop and assess the efficacy of a training program for enhancing the entry interview skills of SPCs. It is important to take note of recent research within allied professions (DeBenedictis et al., 2016; Rivera-Gutierrez et al., 2016) that have demonstrated the effectiveness of simulated training coupled with either in-action or between scenario feedback on communication and interpersonal skills. Sport psychology research should endeavour to assess similar forms of training to aid in the development of current and future SPCs.

An additional future direction for this line of research relates to the suggestions of the gatekeepers in the current study. They emphasized that neophyte sport psychologists may need to make sacrifices regarding their philosophy and may find it harder to present their limited experiences. Hence, it is important for the development of future sport psychologists that we assess whether trainee and neophyte sport psychology consultants: a) are aware of these essences, b) possess these skills, and c) receive appropriate training in these areas.

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