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Personal Qualities of Effective Sport Psychologists: Coping with Organisational Demands in
High Performance Sport

Charlotte Chandler¹, Martin Eubank², Mark Nesti², David Tod², and Tim Cable²
University of Derby¹, Liverpool John Moores University²

Author note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Charlotte Chandler, Sport,
Outdoor and Exercise Science, College of Life and Natural Sciences, University of Derby,
Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB. Email: c.chandler@derby.ac.uk

The authors would like to thanks Dr Jamie Barker from Staffordshire University for his
guidance whilst preparing the manuscript.

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to explore colleagues' perspectives of the personal qualities of effective sport psychologists and how these qualities enable practitioners to address the organisational demands they face within their work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sport physicians ($N = 6$) and coaches ($N = 7$). Data analysis identified three main themes: understanding high performance sport environments and cultures, the wider organisational role in high performance sport, and working with support staff in high performance sport. This study provides insight into the wider organisational role of sport psychology in high performance sport and the personal qualities that are fundamental to effective service delivery in this environment. Suggestions are offered regarding how education and training could better prepare practitioners for addressing organisational demands within their role, by developing trainees' awareness of their personal qualities and providing them with the opportunity to critically explore these qualities in the context of applied sport psychology practice.

Keywords: personal qualities; professional practice; sport psychology

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

42 Personal Qualities of Effective Sport Psychologists: Coping with Organisational Demands in
43 High Performance Sport

44 Literature posits that elite athletes do not live in a vacuum, but moreover function
45 within a highly complex social and organisational environment which exerts major influence
46 on their performance(s) (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996). Similarly, practicing sport
47 psychologists must also negotiate these complex environments and their associated
48 challenges, which according to McDougall, Nesti, and Richardson (2015) include building
49 relationships and establishing credibility, handling sensitive information, understanding elite
50 sport cultures, dealing with interpersonal disagreements and conflict, and maintaining
51 effectiveness when working within volatile and unpredictable environments. Therefore, a
52 sport psychologist needs to appreciate, and operate effectively in accordance with, the
53 organisational demands of the sport environment they are working within (Katz &
54 Hemmings, 2009). Maintaining effectiveness in light of these organisational demands can
55 be particularly challenging given the nature of high performance sport; success is difficult to
56 sustain and creates a number of challenges for an organisation and its members. However,
57 there is a lack of literature regarding the organisational demands that are placed on sport
58 psychology practitioners in high performance sport environments and therefore the personal
59 qualities required to address such demands. In applied practice, a personal quality represents
60 a tangible embodiment of a practitioner's core self, which relates to a person's morals,
61 values, virtues and beliefs (Chandler, Eubank, Nesti & Cable, 2014).

62 Early research by Partington and Orlick (1987a) and Orlick and Partington (1987)
63 identified characteristics of effective sport psychologists working in sport to include being
64 flexible, open, creative, likeable, and accessible enough to establish rapport with athletes.
65 Ineffective sport psychologists were found to be those who were overbearing or arrogant and
66 imposed their ideas on others, had poor interpersonal skills, and were unable to appropriately

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

67 apply their skills in context. Gould, Tammen, Murphy and May (1989) identified the services
68 provided by sport psychologists to include helping colleagues cope with the politics of the
69 sport organisation and addressing problems with staff communication. Furthermore, Gould,
70 Murphy, Tammen and May (1991) used the Consultant Evaluation Form (Partington &
71 Orlick, 1987b) to explore the characteristics of effective sport psychologists from the point of
72 view of coaches, athletes, administrators and practitioners themselves. Data indicated that the
73 ability of the sport psychologist to fit in with the team was especially important, yet this was
74 one aspect in which practitioners scored lowest (Gould et al., 1991). More recent work by
75 Sharp and Hodge (2011; 2014) has outlined effective consultants to be those who are open,
76 trustworthy and able to develop strong relationships with athletes, whilst research by Lubker,
77 Visek, Geer and Watson (2008) has highlighted the importance of a sport psychologist
78 ‘fitting in’ with the sport culture. Such research has identified the characteristics of effective
79 practitioners working as consultants on a one-to-one basis, often centring on their skills rather
80 than on the qualities they bring as a person, to their work as a practitioner. The
81 aforementioned studies have also acknowledged that sport psychologists may experience and
82 be required to address organisational demands as part of their role, yet the part the
83 practitioner’s personal qualities play in how they are able to address these demands remains
84 unclear.

85 Nesti (2010) has described high performance sport environments as socially and
86 organisationally complex cultures, and sport psychologists in the 21st century need to better
87 understand the resulting organisational impact of rapid and ongoing advancement in these
88 contexts (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Researchers have highlighted organisational demands
89 within sport that result from ineffective interpersonal communication and sport relationships,
90 a lack of common goals and therefore overall direction, a lack of role definition and structure,
91 and issues with the organisational structure and climate of the sport (Fletcher, Hanton,

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

92 Mellalieu & Neil, 2012; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Furthermore, Eubank, Nesti &
93 Cruickshank (2014) highlighted interdepartmental communication problems, coach athlete
94 conflict, interference from owners, negative reporting in the media and financial pressures to
95 be challenges for high performance sport organisations and specifically for sport
96 psychologists working within them. The growth of sport science as a discipline has also
97 brought about the development of multidisciplinary sport science support teams, and it
98 follows that increased numbers of practitioners may bring about a similar increase in
99 personnel-related organisational demands (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010).

100 As a member of the multidisciplinary group, the sport psychologist can play a key
101 part in the creation and facilitation of an effective and functional organisational team and
102 structure (Reid, Stewart & Thorne, 2004) and will often be identified as the most appropriate
103 person to perform this role (Nesti, 2010). Sport psychologists possess a comprehensive
104 understanding of group dynamics based on both their theoretical and experiential knowledge,
105 and should therefore be appropriately placed to identify markers against which optimal
106 performance can be developed (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). To meet these organisational
107 demands, the sport psychologist may therefore spend a considerable amount of time
108 providing services that are acknowledged by Nesti (2010) to be akin to that offered by an
109 organisational psychologist. Nesti's work as a highly experienced sport psychologist has
110 involved delivering an organisational psychology role within elite professional soccer in the
111 English Premier League. He is therefore well-placed to describe the need for and realities of
112 such a role; alongside their 'traditional' role, sport psychologists must be able to provide a
113 range of services including staff development (Dorfman, 1990), and peer support and
114 management (Males, 2006) within the volatile, unpredictable and insecure milieu of high
115 performance sport (Eubank et al., 2014).

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

116 The nature of the high performance sport environment can make it a volatile and
117 arduous one to work within and therefore a very personally demanding and uncomfortable
118 place for a sport psychologist. It has been argued that to survive and indeed thrive, sport
119 psychologists need to possess personal qualities such as resilience, commitment, presence,
120 authenticity, and empathy to survive (Nesti, 2004; 2010). For example, Kyndt and Rowell
121 (2012) stated that the difference between practitioners who are able to deliver excellent
122 support services under the ‘intense pressure’ of high performance sport, and those who are
123 not, is less-so related to their ‘technical prowess’. The implication, therefore, is that it is a
124 practitioner’s personal qualities, in addition to their technical expertise, that allows them to
125 operate effectively within highly pressurised sport environments. Although organisational
126 and cultural aspects of elite and professional sports have been afforded increased attention in
127 recent years, the demands and challenges faced by sport psychologists continue to be
128 overlooked within the literature (Nesti, 2010). Therefore, there remains the need for a
129 detailed exploration of the organisational demands that a sport psychologist may experience
130 within their work, and the personal qualities that can influence a practitioner’s ability to
131 address these demands effectively. Understanding the latter is particularly important for sport
132 psychologists who themselves can be considered the ‘tool’ (Tod & Andersen, 2005); they are
133 the means by which their work is carried out and against which their effectiveness is
134 therefore ‘measured’. Chandler et al. (2014) observed that drawing on the perspective of
135 colleagues who possess a close working alliance with sport psychologists facilitates an
136 authentic insight into the personal qualities impacting practitioner effectiveness in their
137 workplace. Thus the purpose of this research was to explore colleagues’ perspectives of the
138 personal qualities of effective sport psychologists and how these qualities enable practitioners
139 to address the organisational demands they face within their work.

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Method

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

141 **Participants**

142 A sample of 13 participants (six sport physicians [5 males and 1 female] including a
143 Head of Medical Services, and seven coaches [all male]), were identified and contacted
144 through colleagues of the first author. All participants had worked or were currently working
145 with sport psychologists and had been employed within a range of high performance sports
146 (e.g., Premier League football, rugby, tennis, gymnastics, boxing, and several other Olympic
147 sports). All physicians had worked as General Practitioners prior to their involvement in
148 sport. At the time of interview, three out of the five physicians were working full-time in
149 sports medicine, with one approximated to be working 60% of their time within sports
150 medicine and the remaining 40% in General Practice and lecturing. The remaining participant
151 had recently left their job as a sport physician to return to General Practice full-time, and the
152 Head of Medical Services was employed full-time within a team. Three of the coaches were
153 employed within universities; one no longer coached in any capacity having ceased coaching
154 3 years prior to the time of interview, but was still involved in high performance sport as a
155 consultant in football. One acted as a coach mentor and one worked in a coaching capacity
156 within the university, having ceased coaching 6 and 7 years respectively prior to the time of
157 interview. The four remaining coaches were all employed in senior coaching-related roles.
158 Four of the seven coaches came from an ex-participation background within the same sport as
159 they were currently employed. Participants' experience of working with sport psychologists
160 ranged between eighteen months on a near-daily basis and twenty years more sporadically.
161 Participants worked with or alongside sport psychologists in a variety of ways, including
162 coach education and support as part of a team when away at training camps and on tour. The
163 coaches and physicians were specialists in their own right and were chosen as they often had
164 a high level of daily contact with sport psychologists because of shared philosophies of

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

165 practice as scientist-practitioners, or because of their high levels of engagement with athletes
166 (Nesti, 2004).

167 **Instrument**

168 Data for the study was collected via a semi-structured one-to-one interview with each
169 participant. A pilot interview was conducted with a personal acquaintance of the first author.
170 This acquaintance had a background in coaching and who was therefore deemed to possess
171 sufficient understanding of sport environments and the discipline of sport psychology to be
172 interviewed. The appropriateness of the questions was therefore confirmed (Berg, 2009). The
173 authors reviewed relevant literature that had utilised similar methodologies to explore the
174 characteristics of effective sport psychologists (e.g., Orlick & Partington, 1987; Anderson,
175 Miles, Robinson & Mahoney, 2004), and subsequently developed the interview guide to
176 address the research question for the specific participant group. The interview began with a
177 section of non-threatening, demographic questions (Berg, 2009), which were designed to
178 establish the professional and applied background of each participant. Questions were asked
179 to determine their current employment and role, the extent of their experience within their
180 field, and the sports in which they currently or had previously worked. The remaining
181 interview guide was created to explore the participants' experience of working with sport
182 psychologists, and their perceptions of the practitioners' roles and personal qualities.
183 Participants were questioned about the relationship they had with the psychologist as well as
184 that between the psychologist and athlete, and the extent to which the psychologist was
185 perceived to understand the environment within which they were operating. When necessary,
186 the participants' responses were further explored through the use of probing questions (Berg,
187 2009), which encouraged them to elaborate on information key to the research question. The
188 interview schedule is available from the first author upon request.

189 **Procedure**

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

190 Following university ethical approval, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) allowed a
191 strategic and purposeful selection of information-rich cases that contributed an in-depth
192 understanding to the aims of the study. The participants were selected because of their close
193 working relationships with sport psychologists and their extensive experience of working
194 alongside them in high performance sport environments, which enabled participants to offer
195 detailed information in relation to the aims of the study. Participants gave their informed
196 consent to take part in the research, and were interviewed in person at a location suitable to
197 and chosen by them, with interviews typically lasting 60-90 minutes. Sport psychologists
198 were not contacted to identify physicians and coaches with whom they had worked, so as to
199 avoid any bias in participant selection. The interview guide and an information sheet were
200 provided for each participant in advance. This detailed the interview questions and informed
201 the participant of the procedure, that the data would be kept confidential, and of their right to
202 withdraw. The participants were experts in their field and according to Morse (2015) were
203 therefore *appropriate* for the research. Thus theoretical saturation, described by Sparkes and
204 Smith (2013) as “the selection of cases that are most likely to produce the relevant data that
205 will discriminate or test emerging theories” (p. 42) was achieved from the 13 interviews.
206 Furthermore, interviewing 13 participants was deemed *adequate*, given that this allowed
207 replication of data to occur (Morse, 2015) and themes to emerge that enabled the research
208 question to be answered.

209 **Data analysis**

210 Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, reviewed for grammatical
211 accuracy, and re-read for familiarity by the first author. Transcripts yielded 328 pages of 1.5
212 spaced interview data. Each relevant quotation was tagged to identify the interviewee from
213 whom it originated, allowing the researchers to identify the contributors for ease of reference
214 between and within interviews. The researcher was guided in their analysis by Côté, Salmela,

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

215 Baria and Russell's (1993) description of interpretational qualitative analysis, whereby
216 "elements, categories, patterns, and relations between properties emerge from the analysis of
217 the data and are not predetermined" (p. 129), and the researcher creates a structure for the
218 data to make the studied phenomenon easier for the reader to understand. Firstly the data was
219 'tagged', with the aim being to "produce a set of concepts which adequately represent the
220 information included in the interview transcripts" (p. 130), and which enabled the researcher
221 to identify the key roles of a sport psychologist operating within high performance sport
222 environments. Following this process of tagging, the researcher created categories, whereby
223 tags with similar meanings were gathered together and labelled to capture a given topic.
224 These were then further re-categorized to represent participants' perceptions of the sport
225 psychologist's understanding of high performance sport environments, the wider role of sport
226 psychology within these environments, and the sport psychologist's role within
227 multidisciplinary teams.

228 **Researcher trustworthiness**

229 Research credibility principles were used to ensure accurate representation of the data
230 and allow the reader to judge the quality of the research (Shenton, 2004; Sparkes & Smith,
231 2013). The lead author had previously completed and contributed to qualitative research
232 projects that had used interviews as the method of data collection, and they were therefore
233 experienced in preparing interview schedules and carrying out research interviews. The focus
234 of this prior research was similar to that of the current study, which provided the primary
235 researcher with a good knowledge of the relevant literature base. The above information was
236 shared with participants, given that the lead author was the primary instrument in data
237 collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). In addition, reflecting on this prior experience and any
238 potential biases allowed the researcher to consider how such biases may impact upon their
239 research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Although participants were recruited to the study

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

240 through purposive sampling, the authors ensured that data was collected from varied and
241 multiple sources. In doing so, and by providing background information about the
242 participants, the reader is able to judge the generalisability of the findings to other situations
243 and experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Analyst triangulation was achieved through regular
244 meetings between the authors to discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis
245 process, thereby offering a wider perspective from which to develop interpretations of the
246 data (Shenton, 2004). All authors reviewed the interview transcripts to identify the main
247 messages to be taken from the data. The first author led the analysis and development of
248 common themes, and the subsequent discussions between the first three authors allowed their
249 interpretations to be debated and common themes to be agreed.

250

Results

251

The purpose of this research was to explore the personal qualities of sport
252 psychologists and how these enabled them to deal effectively with the organisational
253 demands of operating within high performance sport. The results support and extend existing
254 knowledge of high performance sport environments (Reid et al., 2004; Kyndt & Rowell,
255 2012), and highlight the importance of a sport psychologist's understanding of the
256 organisational demands these environments create, as well as how their personal qualities
257 (such as humility, integrity and authenticity) are integral to their effectiveness. To protect
258 anonymity, participants are referred to by the category they fall within with regards to their
259 profession (coach or physician) and a number.

260

Understanding high performance sport environments and cultures

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Coaches and physicians offered insight into how a sport psychologist can operate
262 effectively in elite professional sport environments, and believed that this is dictated by their
263 ability to understand the organisational processes and cultures of such environments. Coach 2

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

264 stated that “each sport has its own language, and if you don't know that language, you ain't
265 going to last in that sport”, with Physician 5 stating that the sport psychologist must be “the
266 right person for that environment” which they gauged based on their ‘sense’ of whether the
267 person would ‘fit in’. Coach 5 also commented that “you've got to know where you're
268 allowed and where you're not allowed, you've got to know what's acceptable and what
269 isn't...the political landscape”. The coaches and physicians commented on sport
270 psychologists’ understanding of organisational hierarchy and their ability to appropriately
271 position and represent themselves within it to be able to do their job effectively. Coach 7
272 stated that “different situations require different qualities at different times, with different
273 contexts, with different people, depending where you sit in the hierarchy of staff, how long
274 you've been in the organisation, how well you know the philosophy, your status”. Participants
275 elaborated by describing how a sport psychologist’s personal qualities can contribute to their
276 understanding of the elite sport environment in greater detail. For example, Coach 4
277 highlighted that sport psychologists require “[qualities] such as respect of the way that they
278 fit into a wider picture”. Coach 5 stated that a sport psychologist needs “to understand the
279 sporting world and what it takes or what's going on in a sports person’s mind... [and have]
280 some idea of how you might approach things and give you some empathy with the
281 environment”. Coach 5’s comment represents an evolution in the conceptualisation of
282 empathy, describing it in the context of the sport psychologist’s relationship with their
283 working environment. Coach 5 appeared to suggest that the empathic capacity to comprehend
284 and appreciate an environment is an important quality for sports psychologists in seeking to
285 understand an individual’s experiences within that context.

286 The current study therefore highlights the importance of a sport psychologist being
287 able to understand the environment they work within and appreciate its politics and culture.
288 Politics in this context, especially in elite and professional sport, should be understood as

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

289 referring to the often more informal and less transparent mechanisms of power and influence
290 in the organisation. Coaches and physicians believe sport psychologists can gain this
291 appreciation and understanding by patiently developing an overall picture of the sport
292 organisation they are working within, before implementing any interventions. According to
293 the coaches, this can be achieved by the sport psychologists subtly “mooching, observing
294 around the environment and lots of informal conversations that...develop into more formal
295 stuff” (Coach 5) and “just collecting [information] and talking to people” (Coach 4). This
296 approach was considered especially important for the sport psychologist to be able to
297 accurately identify the requirements of their role, which was further emphasised by one
298 physician:

299 Psychology’s a waiting game, you’ve got to just bide your time and understand
300 the team dynamics and the way the different individuals work, and then start to
301 decide on what strategies to take on board, so it's a bit of a slow-burn sometimes
302 really, but absolutely vital, especially at the elite end (Physician 2).

303 In relation to this subtle (yet deliberate) approach, coaches and physicians discussed the sport
304 psychologist as a humble individual who benefits from and indeed embraces being on the
305 periphery, yet who is still able to understand central ‘goings on’:

306 You've got to be prepared to take a back seat on stuff...be kind of the grey man if
307 you like, the psych, ‘cause they need to be behind everything but picking up the
308 vibe on what's going on, and it might just be some little bit that they’re picking
309 up but it could be really valuable just that little bit of advice that they’re giving
310 (Coach 6).

311 In relation to personal qualities, what the participants appear to be describing here is the
312 humility of the sport psychologist in patiently developing an understanding of the unique

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

313 culture of a sport organisation, whilst being happy to remain in the background and maintain
314 a degree of both physical and metaphorical distance. Coach 6 described this quality as being
315 “modest, because they wouldn't be singing and dancing type people...I think they'd be quite
316 in the background but because of the work they do they'll understand the effect that they've
317 had”. Coach 3 also alluded to the importance of humility, noting that “when people feel the
318 need to bowl you over with what they're allegedly coming from, it generally falls apart
319 anyway”, suggesting that a lack of humility may be a ‘smokescreen’ for, and predictive of,
320 ineffective practice.

321 An effective sport psychologist, who truly understands the culture in which they
322 operate, will not feel the need to ‘advertise’ their work, or ‘shout about its benefits from the
323 rooftops’. Coach 6 emphasised the importance of this:

324 Be prepared not to get the recognition...they'd have to be a person that's really
325 quite happy for other people to take all the plaudits, just so they can fit in the
326 background of the team, but then they need to be a person who's got enough
327 character too. If they really have got a belief that something needs driving
328 through, they're going to have to stick to their guns.

329 This coach recognised the need for the sport psychologist to possess the aforementioned
330 qualities of humility and modesty in relation to their work, but suggested that these must be
331 coupled with the integrity to intervene if it is considered the ‘right thing to do’ and to be
332 direct in initiating change when required. This suggests that the sport psychologist who is
333 internally secure about the impact they have, without requiring external recognition and
334 reassurance for their work, is better able to maintain the withdrawn, low key and ‘one step
335 removed’ role described whilst staying true to their beliefs and being prepared to ‘stick to
336 their guns’. Also implicated, therefore, is the quality of authenticity in a sport psychologist

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

337 acting in congruence with their own beliefs about ‘doing the right thing’. This was alluded to
338 by Physician 6, who stated:

339 [A sport psychologist] needs to be authentic and be who they are, and that's
340 unique...to be able to tell the truth is very important as well, and that kind of
341 goes in line with authenticity, sometimes it's not easy to tell somebody the truth
342 and you need to be strong to do that.

343 Operating authentically in this context is about more than being consistent; it requires the
344 sport psychologist to be aware of and therefore able to remain true to their deepest core
345 values and beliefs, and to live this out in their work.

346 The wider organisational role in high performance sport

347 Coaches and physicians discussed the importance of sport psychologists being willing
348 and able to undertake organisational psychology-type work within their role, and why this
349 work is required. Coach 1 generalised by commenting that “current sport psychologists [have
350 moved] away from teaching discrete elements of things like focus, concentration... [they are]
351 focussed now on the environment in terms of trying to get the environment right”. Physician
352 4 discussed their experience of a sport psychologist who “took on a much bigger role than
353 just being a psychologist” and they observed that this “is what quite a lot of sport
354 psychologists end up doing isn't it, go into management”. Physician 3 commented that “the
355 sport psychologist was given a wider remit than just being sport psychologist...almost a
356 human resources type of role there as well”. The same physician discussed what this role
357 might entail:

358 [The sport psychologist] did make themselves readily available to all...they
359 were doing other things in terms of away days...to try and help with the

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

360 development of [the] whole sport science department...so the human resource
361 side of things, making sure the whole department was ticking along.

362 A sport psychologist may therefore be of significant value to an organisation when in a
363 position to encourage the development of a functional and successful working environment.
364 Conversely, coaches and physicians identified less effective sport psychologists as those who
365 neglected to consider the organisational context when working with an athlete, or failed to
366 address wider issues within a sport organisation. Coach 4 commented: "I've got no doubt [the
367 sport psychologist] was helping the athlete, but they weren't as effective because they were
368 focussing on just the athlete as opposed to focussing on the athlete but in the environment".
369 The importance of this wider focus was further emphasised:

370 It's the relationship between the coach, the athlete and the training, or the coach,
371 the athlete and any event which needs working out...the idea that coaches and
372 athletes work in isolation is just so naive...you're not just dealing with the
373 athlete, you're dealing with the squad, the wider picture (Coach 4).

374 In addition, Coach 4 highlighted that sport psychologists "don't deal with wider structural
375 issues, well the good ones do, but...quite often we come across the people who don't get that
376 kind of wider multi-support picture". These perspectives suggest that a sport psychologist's
377 capacity to help an athlete or member of the staff team will be limited by an inability or
378 unwillingness to adopt an 'organisational perspective', specifically the environmental and
379 organisational constraints that will impact upon an athlete's performance, development and
380 well-being.

381 With regards to the personal qualities that can assist sport psychologists operating
382 within an organisational psychology-type role, Physician 3 described a practitioner they had
383 worked with as 'rigorous' when highlighting the difficulties the practitioner faced because of

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

384 the working environment; “I think you’ve got to be fairly rigorous...the [sport psychologist] I
385 worked with was very rigorous in terms of knowing what they wanted to do and finding out
386 where they could help and try and mould things”. However:-

387 The rug was pulled out from under their feet when the management decided to
388 change their mind on whether they liked their presence there or not and that was
389 things that are beyond football, that was personality clashes, but again it wasn't
390 the sport psychologist’s fault (Physician 3).

391 These quotes highlight that the sport psychologist operating in an organisational psychology
392 type role felt this was essential because of ‘difficult circumstances’ within the organisation,
393 yet in trying to ‘mould’ the environment to help develop the whole support team, the
394 organisation became un-nerved by their presence at this level. Despite the rigorous work that
395 this sport psychologist did to try and create a functional environment, the often volatile and
396 ‘political’ nature of high performance sport meant their impact was ultimately determined by
397 the lack of support from the organisation. The same physician highlighted that “both myself
398 and the sport psychologist were of the opinion when we joined [the organisation], that as long
399 as they were said in private, conflicting and contrary views would be respected, and I’m not
400 sure that was the case eventually”. Physician 3’s insights also suggest that the sport
401 psychologist must possess a degree of resilience to be able to remain comfortable and
402 confident in a role that has the potential to be terminated at any point, and in which freedom
403 to express one’s views is limited. This is particularly difficult for a sport psychologist
404 working across an organisation in the wider role described and therefore exposing themselves
405 to the ‘politics’ of that organisation, more so than if they maintained a sport psychology role
406 alone.

407 **Working with support staff in high performance sport**

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

408 A key determinant of a sport psychologist's effective practice within an organisational
409 role is their ability to manage people. This was considered particularly important for a sport
410 psychologist working to support their colleagues as well as athletes, including the head coach
411 or manager. Physician 3 summarised this need, stating that "to be honest the person who
412 needed the sport psychologist more than the players was the manager". Physician 6 also
413 discussed how the sport psychologist "ended up working more with the manager", and further
414 elaborated on why such work was required:

415 The manager's job is very lonely, and he gets isolated, so the biggest function I
416 think [the sport psychologist] had, which is very valuable, is just to give him
417 somebody to speak to and trust... it's quite a unique thing isn't it?

418 The coaches and physicians suggested that 'good' sport psychologists must be able to assess
419 the needs of the whole team and ensure it operates effectively. Coach 2 highlighted the
420 benefits of a sport psychologist working to support their colleagues; "I think that sport
421 psychology is very, very successful and probably the most successful way, is for the sport
422 psych to work with the coaching team". Coach 2 also stated that "when you're working with a
423 team of coaches, I think it's very important to have a sport psychologist who can actually
424 work with the team and help the process that the team have to go through". In addition,
425 Physician 2 highlighted that "psychologists often work with the whole team rather than just
426 the athletes...making sure the team works as well...good psychologists, they don't just do the
427 athlete stuff they look at the team as a whole, the team dynamics". Two physicians elaborated
428 on what working with the whole team involved, and discussed a sport psychologist's work
429 with regards to how they can aid communication within the wider support team:

430 Looking after the whole team is really quite key, I say looking after, I don't
431 mean looking after in a sort of health sense, I mean being involved in the whole

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

432 team...the good psychologists became sort of tools of communication between
433 different factions of teams (Physician 2).

434 Having a psychologist coming in and pointing out to other members of the
435 management team that there are different ways to communicate and you have to
436 sympathise with what drives some person may not drive [others]...that's a really
437 useful role for a psychologist (Physician 4).

438 It appears that a quality of an effective sport psychologist working within a high performance
439 sport organisation is their ability to enhance and optimise communication between its
440 members by encouraging each individual to recognise and be sympathetic towards how their
441 colleagues operate. The coaches in particular recognised the importance of a sport
442 psychologist helping them to develop an awareness of how they communicate with athletes:

443 [The sport psychologist] flagged it up for us...I would never have been able to
444 reflect on that myself and needed a nudge, just in terms of are you aware of how
445 you speak to all the players, do you speak to them the same, and for me as an
446 individual...that's going to stick with me.

447 Here Coach 6 is discussing their appreciation of a sport psychologist's ability to draw
448 attention to aspects of their communication as a coach that they may otherwise have been
449 unable to identify for themselves. The effective sport psychologist will therefore be one who
450 encourages and supports colleagues' ability to think critically and to develop their awareness
451 and understanding of self.

452 Coaches and physicians described the personal qualities of sport psychologists who
453 were able to help the support team to function effectively, and explained the value of having
454 a sport psychologist who was courageous enough to challenge other members of staff about
455 their work. Humility was again highlighted as an essential quality in this regard, enabling a

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

456 sport psychologist to subtly direct staff within the environment in a positive way and
457 highlighting aspects of their practice that may otherwise go unnoticed:

458 [The sport psychologist] will come out with something a little bit ‘have you
459 thought about this, have you thought about that’...they will challenge you in a
460 positive way of how you deal with a stressful situation or your comments about
461 an athlete or whatever so there are sometimes two aspects to a sport psych
462 (Physician 1).

463 [The sport psychologist must] build the trust with the individuals where they
464 respect others’ opinions but again when you’re putting your opinion across, it
465 has to be put across in a certain way that is not confrontational or where it’s
466 downgrading what other people are saying, it’s more suggested have you thought
467 about this because these might be the benefits, so it’s more selling your idea
468 rather than criticising other ideas (Coach 7).

469 The onus is therefore on the sport psychologist’s ability to challenge other staff in a
470 constructive way that avoids devaluing their ideas and input. This suggests that in this
471 support team context, a sport psychologist’s humility can help to ensure that any thoughts and
472 advice they offer are provided in a helpful and collaborative way, and not one that suggests
473 their knowledge is of greater importance than a colleague’s. Having the humility to accept a
474 ‘cog in the wheel’ status and acknowledging others’ input as being equally as important as
475 their own was considered crucial for the sport psychologist’s successful integration and
476 acceptance into the support team.

477 Discussion

478 The purpose of this research was to provide insight into the organisational demands
479 that sport psychologists face within their work and the personal qualities that aid them in

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

480 meeting these demands, from the perspective of colleagues with whom they have worked in
481 sport. By interviewing coaches and sport physicians, three themes emerged to represent such
482 organisational demands and the sport psychologist's role in addressing these; a)
483 understanding high performance sport environments and cultures, b) the wider organisational
484 role in high performance sport, and c) working with support staff in high performance sport.
485 The personal qualities of the sport psychologists discussed both explicitly and implicitly by
486 coaches and sports physicians were also highlighted to help articulate how a sport
487 psychologist can operate effectively within high performance sport organisations, such as
488 humility, integrity and authenticity.

489 Coaches and physicians considered effective sport psychologists to be those who were
490 able to understand, appreciate, and operate in accordance with an organisation's culture.
491 Organisational culture has been defined as "the visible and less visible norms, values and
492 behaviour that are shared by a group of employees which shape the group's sense of what is
493 acceptable and valid" (Wilson, 2001, p. 356). The culture of an organisation is therefore
494 evolutionary in nature and represents a core template of working practices, ideas, values and
495 philosophies, brought together by key stakeholders to determine the organisation's aims
496 (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012; Wilson, 2001). The coaches
497 and physicians in the current study described the importance of sport psychologists being
498 able to recognise what is 'acceptable' practice, being able to speak the 'language' of the
499 organisation, and understanding how they fit into the 'wider picture' of that organisation. A
500 key aspect of this understanding related to the politics of an organisation and the mechanisms
501 of power and influence that exist within the specific organisational culture. Ravizza, when
502 interviewed about his applied practice (Fifer et al., 2008), recognised the importance of
503 this:

504 I have to assess...the subculture of the sport, the politics of the organization,

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

505 the team and staff dynamics, and the amount of support that I will have. The
506 subculture of the sport and the politics overlap, I must learn who the decision
507 makers are, who the leaders are, and who the 'gatekeepers' are (Fifer et
508 al., 2008, p. 365).
509

510 Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) commented that "consultants attempting to implement
511 organizational service delivery should remain cognizant of Ravizza's (1988) recommendation
512 that they pay careful attention to the constantly unfolding 'organizational politics' within elite
513 sport" (p. 432). These mechanisms of power and influence, are often difficult to
514 recognise; very often they sit invisibly alongside formal structures and systems, and are
515 sometimes based on personal loyalty and previous professional relationships (Lussier &
516 Achua, 2009). The current research therefore operationalises the concept of organisational
517 culture and its associated mechanisms, and how a sport psychologist can demonstrate their
518 understanding of this in their work.

519 Coaches and physicians believed sport psychologists who understand organisational
520 culture are therefore those who can also recognise the benefits of remaining 'in the
521 background' and who are accepting of a withdrawn role given that this may result in them
522 receiving little recognition for their work. Nesti (2010) highlights how sport psychologists'
523 interactions with athletes and colleagues are often carried out in an informal and low key
524 manner, which may often result in 'good work' going unnoticed. This can be a challenge
525 when operating in high performance sport environments where staff are normally expected to
526 identify their achievements and for these to be subject to evaluation by others (Nesti, 2010).
527 Likewise, Dorfman (1990) suggests that "by using a self-effacing approach you enhance your
528 image by not enhancing your image" (p.344). The coaches and physicians in the current study
529 perceived subtlety and humility to be positive qualities of the sport psychologists they
530 worked with, which benefitted their integration into the organisation. Sport psychologists

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

531 must therefore be able to recognise when a subtle approach is required and understand how
532 this withdrawn position can actually enhance their effectiveness as a practitioner.

533 Based on the views of the coaches and physicians within the current study, the
534 effectiveness of a sport psychologist is determined, at least in part, by their ability to support
535 the work of the large multidisciplinary teams that exist in elite and professional level sport
536 teams. Coaches and physicians in the current study described sport psychologists who adopted
537 an organisational psychology-type role as dictated by the demands of the organisation, yet it
538 was the challenging and disruptive nature of these demands which ultimately prevented the
539 sport psychologist from being effective within this role. The current study suggests that sport
540 psychologists must possess the personal qualities necessary to allow them to effectively carry
541 out the tasks associated with an organisational psychology role. This resonates with Nesti
542 (2004), who stated that “to survive and indeed thrive in such an arduous climate [as elite
543 professional sport], sport psychologists will need to possess resilience, commitment
544 and...presence, authenticity and empathy” (p. 91), and the current study provides some
545 evidence of how and why these qualities can aid a practitioner. Empathy is a term typically
546 associated with a relationship that exists between two individuals and has been defined by the
547 British Association of Counselling Psychology (BACP) as “the ability to communicate
548 understanding of another person’s experience from that person’s perspective” (2010, p. 3). One
549 coach, however, described empathy in the context of the sport psychologist’s relationship with
550 their working environment, and suggests that the empathic capacity to understand and interpret
551 the specifics of the environment is an important quality of sports psychologists when operating
552 effectively inside high level sport organisations. Weinberg and McDermott (2002) interviewed
553 sport and business leaders regarding the factors essential for organisational success, with a key
554 finding being the ability to flexibly adopt a variety of leadership styles, requiring ‘interpersonal
555 competencies’ of listening, empathy and trust. Such qualities have long been associated with

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

556 effective sport psychologists (Nesti, 2004), so it is unsurprising that these practitioners are often
557 called upon to adopt a leadership role in terms of ‘directing’ organisational change, at the very
558 least on an informal, ad-hoc basis.

559 It was also suggested that resilience is an important personal quality in aiding a sport
560 psychologist to manage the day-to-day challenges associated with high level sport
561 organisations. The BACP (2010) describes resilience as “the capacity to work with the client’s
562 concerns without being personally diminished” (p. 4), a definition which suggests a resilient
563 individual will be one who focuses on the needs of others without negatively impacting on
564 themselves. This is particularly significant within the context of high performance sport given
565 that the sport psychologist will work to support those around them, despite concurrently
566 addressing organisational demands in a role that may lack clarity and security. A significant
567 part of the organisational psychology-type role that sport psychologists may adopt includes
568 working to support other staff within a multidisciplinary support team, and findings from the
569 current study suggest that sport psychologists must be able to both react to and address staff
570 issues as well as proactively developing the team overall. Communication skills have long been
571 documented as essential for effective sport psychologists (Gould et al., 1989; Partington &
572 Orlick, 1991), however the current study provides an understanding of how practitioners can
573 use these skills with regards to the personal qualities underpinning their work to enhance team
574 processes. Results suggests that sport psychologists benefit from being happy and able to take
575 a step back and objectively view team processes such as communication between support staff,
576 and be personally humble enough to accept this withdrawn position. However, they must also
577 have sufficient knowledge of the environment and the people operating within it to be able to
578 recognise when to step in and provide suggestions where appropriate, and coaches and
579 physicians appreciated sport psychologists who could offer them support and guidance in a
580 collaborative and helpful way. Nesti (2010) describes how some staff can often feel

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

581 uncomfortable and become suspicious of sport psychologists with academic knowledge and
582 ideas that challenge their own. However, coaches and physicians in the current study welcomed
583 being challenged by a sport psychologist, particularly if it allowed them to reflect upon and
584 thus improve their own practice. The onus is therefore on the sport psychologist's ability to
585 have the personal courage to challenge other staff in a constructive way that avoids
586 confrontation or devaluing others' input. This is especially important in an environment
587 described by one of the coaches in the current study as 'survival of the fittest', where the
588 temptation of self-promotion for personal gain must be avoided (Nesti, 2010).

589 The lack of previous research exploring the sport psychologist in an organisational role
590 means they are unlikely to have received sufficient training in preparation for it (Fletcher &
591 Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010), and have likely gained their organisational role-related
592 knowledge through experiential 'on the job' encounters. The current research emphasises the
593 likelihood that sport psychologists will operate within these roles, and therefore individuals
594 responsible for educating and training future practitioners should take this into account, and at
595 least prepare trainees to go in with their 'eyes open' and encourage them to consider how they
596 might best react and respond to the inevitable challenges they will encounter. In addition,
597 previous research has highlighted specific aspects of an environment that require resolution,
598 for example role conflict and organisational stressors (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) which have
599 been seen to fall within the sport psychologist's remit. However, the reality, based upon the
600 findings of the current research, is that the need for organisation psychology type work within
601 high level sport can stem from, for example, political and communication based issues between
602 staff. This suggests there is additional merit in developing education and training programmes
603 that provide sport psychology students with (at the very least) exposure to organisational
604 psychology theory and it's synthesis to the elite sport environment. Sport psychology education
605 and training programmes should promote greater self-awareness in trainees that allows them

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

606 to explore the specific requirements of the practitioner working in an organisational role.
607 Trainee sport psychologists should also have the opportunity to critically develop an
608 understanding of where and when they need to draw on their personal qualities to help them
609 survive and remain effective when addressing the organisational demands of high performance
610 sport. This implicates the supervisory process, and the importance of Socratic dialogue to
611 stimulate rigorous self-examination of one's philosophy (Corlett, 1996a) and develop a
612 trainee's understanding of self and self-in-practice. Developing greater self-awareness of one's
613 personal qualities in practice could also aid future practitioners in their ethical decision making.
614 Jones (2007) emphasises humility and integrity, as well as courage and good judgement,
615 as essential personal qualities in maintaining professionalism and practising ethically and
616 within one's area of competence, and the current study has extended this to provide a
617 conceptualisation of *how* these qualities can impact on competent and ethical practice.

618 Future research should explore the first-hand experiences of sport psychologists who
619 operate in such a role and the personal qualities they draw on, which could subsequently
620 provide valuable information for consideration within sport psychology education and
621 training programmes. The coaches and physicians who work alongside sport psychologists
622 provided a rich perspective of 'outsider' perceptions, yet it is also important to develop
623 idiographic accounts of sport psychologists who are working within these evolving and
624 challenging environments and acknowledge the individuality of the person behind the
625 practitioner. It would be important to obtain individual first-hand accounts to facilitate an
626 in-depth exploration of a sport psychologist's personal qualities, their awareness of self with
627 regards to these qualities, and their own perceptions of how these interact with the
628 particular sport environment they operate within.

629

Conclusion

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS

630 The aim of this study was to explore the organisational demands that a sport
631 psychologist may face within their work and the personal qualities that can aid them in
632 addressing these demands. The results from this study represent detailed discussions around
633 the personal qualities of effective sport psychologists, and support the growing emphasis on
634 the organisational roles they may be required to fill. Several aspects of high performance
635 sport environments were discussed by coaches and physicians in relation to the sport
636 psychologist's understanding of the environment, what their role as an organisational
637 psychologist may involve, and their ability to translate their academic knowledge into
638 effective practice and support for the multidisciplinary team around them. The coaches and
639 physicians also highlighted several personal qualities of the sport psychologist, which
640 included integrity, empathy and humility, as making key contributions to effective practice in
641 an organisational role. Colleagues of sport psychologists have not been used as a
642 participant group to any great extent, and physicians specifically appear to have been
643 overlooked entirely. This study therefore offers some novel methodological contributions
644 with regards to the theoretical focus and the insight into sport psychology practice that
645 physicians can provide. The perspective gained from working with colleagues of sport
646 psychologists is important in emphasising that practitioners do not work in isolation. The
647 findings support and extend the previously limited literature that focuses on the realities of
648 working in elite sport, and highlight several areas of interest for further consideration and
649 study.

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