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

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Abstract

Despite the welcome contributions of the reflective practice literature, understanding of the complexities, nuances and dilemmas of applied sport psychology practice is in need of further development. For example, there remains a paucity of inquiry addressing how practitioners make sense of, and subsequently write themselves into, the (micro)political landscape of a sporting organization. Utilizing a reflective, ethnographic approach, this paper examined the first author's engagement with the socio-political dynamics of everyday life within a professional rugby league academy. Key themes identified were that; a) players simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another; b) tensions exist between the coaches; and c) most players end up being released. The micro-political workings of Ball (1987), and Kelchtermans (1996,

2009a, 2009b, 2011) were used as the primary heuristic frameworks, thus promoting the utility of these theories to inform critical appreciation of the day-to-day realities of applied sport psychology practice. The paper concludes by highlighting the potential benefits of researchers, educators, and practitioners better engaging with the contested, ambiguous, and professionally challenging demands of practice than that which has been achieved to date.

Keywords: reflective practice, ethnography, vulnerability, stakeholders

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Despite the progress outlined above, there remains little understanding as to how sport psychologists experience and grapple with the day-to-day demands of practice. Indeed, there remains a lack of published literature that directly explores how practitioners build, maintain, and advance working relationships with various stakeholders, thereby recognizing how stakeholders (and their interests) are connected with, and relate to, each other (Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014). It is here that sport psychology research may benefit from adopting a similar focus on the dynamic and frequently contested nature of inter-personal relations to

that which has been adopted in the sports coaching literature (e.g. Jones & Wallace, 2005; Magill, Nelson, Jones, & Potrac, 2017; Potrac, Mallett, Greenough, & Nelson, 2017).

Specifically, researchers within sports coaching have increasingly challenged the dominant, sanitized and functionalistic representations of practice within their domain (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2016; Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2013). For example, Potrac and Jones (2009a) highlighted how a coach was required to work with a diverse range of individuals, who not only brought different traditions, values, and goals to the workplace, but who actively sought to pursue them where opportunity permitted them to do so. Other related work within high-performance sport contexts (e.g., Booroff, Nelson, & Potrac, 2016; Huggan, Nelson, & Potrac, 2015; Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015), has similarly highlighted how organizational life is characterized by the ‘dynamic and fluid process of forging and re-forging alliances and working relationships’ (Cassidy et al., 2016, p.60); a challenge that requires practitioners to read, initiate, and respond to the inescapably political demands of the sporting workplace. Within such studies, (micro)politics is conceptualized as pervasive feature of all shared endeavors, including all acts of collaboration, negotiation, and conflict (Leftwich, 2005; Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b). Leftwich (2005) states that (micro) politics consists of three key ingredients these are; a) people (who often have different beliefs, ideas, and interests); b) resources (which may be material or non-material in nature, and often limited in terms of availability); and c) power (the ability of a group or individual to achieve desired outcomes).

Given that sport psychologists practice within these same high-performance contexts, it is perhaps naïve to believe that they are somehow immune from the challenges and dilemmas that accompany shared endeavors with others (Leftwich, 2005). Indeed, McCalla and Fitzpatrick (2016) have, for example, illustrated how other stakeholders, and the micro-political nature of such contexts, may potentially impact upon a sport psychology

practitioner's attempts to integrate him or herself within a multi-disciplinary professional support team. To date, however, there remains a paucity of inquiry addressing how sport psychologists experience and respond to working with various stakeholders, who may hold, and actively pursue opposing beliefs, motivations and goals (Cassidy et al., 2016; Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b). The current paper seeks to address this disparity, by offering an analysis of the political context in which I (the first author) had previously practiced (cf. Rowley et al., 2012); one which delves beyond the veneer of unproblematic subscription to shared organizational goals and unified ways of working together (Jones & Wallace, 2005). However, rather than just offering descriptive insights, this paper purposively seeks to aid conceptual development within this topic area through the provision of a theoretically robust scrutiny of contextual reflections. Here, the respective theorizing of Ball (1987) and Kelchtermans (1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) are not only employed as heuristic devices for interpreting personal meaning-making, but also as tools for enriching conceptual understandings of the everyday 'grit' of organizational life in which applied sport psychologists are embedded.

The significance of this paper therefore lies, therefore, in its response to calls for a micro-political analysis of high-performance sporting contexts (Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b). By scrutinizing my experiences, observations and reflections in this way, this study contributes to an evolving body of knowledge, and related educational provision, addressing how applied practice frequently occurs in settings that are characterized by varying degrees of ideological agreement, co-ordination, and actual, or potential for, conflict (Cassidy et al., 2016). Furthermore, this paper responds to ongoing calls for further ethnographic research within sport psychology (Krane & Baird, 2005; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012), promoting the utility of such inquiry as a vehicle for critical reflection (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). Rather than seeking to unproblematically generalize the first author's field-

based experiences and interpretations to other practitioners however, the reader is, instead, invited to critically reflect upon the material, issues, and ideas presented in this paper. In particular, practitioners working in various amateur, professional, and elite contexts are asked to consider how, why, and to what ends they practically read, understand, and ultimately respond to the political dimensions of practice (Jones, 2009; Potrac et al., 2013).

Accordingly, we encourage others to consider the merits of this piece in terms of both its naturalistic and analytical generalizability (Smith, 2018).

Method

Ethnographic Inquiry and Knowledge

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

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

Within the context of sport psychology, ethnographic inquiry provides a valuable tool for developing empathetic accounts of organizational life, reflecting the experiences of athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders, and permitting practitioners to try and hear the voices of those with whom they work (Krane & Baird, 2005). Such explorations may not only help deepen our understandings of organizational life in sport, but they can also provide an

important avenue for enhancing the interconnections between theory and practice within the applied domain.

The ethnography presented within this study was conducted from an interpretivist perspective (Krane & Baird, 2005; Whaley & Krane, 2011), with its central focus being to develop empathetic understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, this research was informed by a 'relativist ontology' which assumes the existence of multiple, subjective realities, and 'epistemological subjectivism', where knowledge is seen to be constructed through interactions with others and the social and cultural environment (Smith & Sparkes, 2016a). The current ethnography also provided a framework through which my critical reflections on practice could be examined in juxtaposition with wider contextual factors. Micro-political theorizing had subsequently allowed for a critical introspection of my own applied practices throughout the data analysis process, but my time in the field had initially sought to further enhance my contextual understanding as both a researcher and neophyte sport psychology practitioner. Indeed, the combination of personal reflection-in-and on-action (Schön, 1983, 1987) and ethnographic inquiry, permitted a prolonged, critical engagement of my professional self, and my connection to the relational complexities of club life (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010).

Contextual Underpinning: The Academy and the Corresponding Participants

A prior publication (cf. Rowley et al., 2012), provided a reflective account of practice from the academy of this same Super League rugby league club. In keeping with the approach adopted previously, the current paper offers a reflective account of applied practice; one where the author's 'voice' is utilized as a tool to convey lived experience (Rowley et al., 2012). As is documented within the preceding publication, my initial responsibilities at the club had been to provide weekly workshop sessions for the academy players to assist their

respective development towards a potential first-team future. Over time, I had increasingly sought to adapt my practice in accordance with my increased understanding of the day-to-day organizational functioning, and as a result, I had come to spend an increased amount of time with the players and coaches outside of the scheduled workshop sessions. Following the completion of my formal sport psychology support contract with the club, and the corresponding cessation of any formal applied workshops, I obtained permission to undertake the ethnographic work reported in this study. Here, my already established effective working relationships with specific ‘gatekeepers’ at the club, greatly facilitated my access. When combined, my applied work and my subsequent research within the organization spanned a period of three years. Specifically, this comprised of eighteen months of applied practice, ten months of observational data collection, and four months of interview data collection. A timeline portraying the changing nature of my association with the club can be seen in Figure 1 below.

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

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Following ethical approval granted from an institutional Ethics Committee, players, coaches, and other stakeholders (e.g., administrators and support staff) were informed of the purpose and processes associated with this research study. Opportunity sampling (Patton, 2015) was utilized, whereby I engaged in dialogue with individuals with whom I had already established a rapport, and the data reported here is largely comprised of my observational data, and interviews conducted with; a) four academy players (aged 16 to 18, three of whom were in the E.D.S.); b) the Head of Youth Development (HoYD) whose role was manage the academy and scholarship system as a whole; and c) the Player Performance Manager (PPM) who was tasked with youth player recruitment and development across the academy system.

Data Collection

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

Participant Observation and Field Notes. Considered to be the 'backbone' of ethnographic research (Krane & Baird, 2005, p.94), observation aims to provide 'thick description' of the events and interactions that occur in a social setting, as well as the meanings attributed to them by participants (Thorpe & Olive, 2016, p.125). In keeping with

the subjective epistemology of this study, observational data collection focused toward social interactions and conversations, capturing the ‘seemingly mundane’ (Krane & Baird, 2005, p.95) day-to-day functioning of the organization. Field notes usually took the form of brief text typed up on my mobile phone, with these notes serving as the basis for my research log, which provided a detailed account of context, and the interactions between stakeholders. I also kept a separate reflective journal (comprised of 300 to 500 word extracts), which sought to advance my critical analysis, and support my ongoing process of staged reflection (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). This journal also encompassed my researcher-orientated reflexive notes, as suggested by Krane and Baird (2005). In total, 11 observational visits were recorded over a 10 month period, including attendance at training sessions and occasional competitive fixtures when the coaches had granted me permission to travel with the team to collect data. My prior role within the field had allowed for participant observation (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) to occur, whereby a ‘typical’ day of data collection involved me arriving in the morning to speak with the coaches and/or support staff, observing first-team training from the touchline, and interacting with any players who were injured or not involved in the specific drills. I would then remain at the club until late in the evening when academy training took place. Here, I would spend time with the coaches, and talking with individual academy players.

Ethnographic- and Semi- structured Interviews. The informal conversations which took place during the observational period of this study are akin to what Gobo and Molle (2017) termed as ‘ethnographic interviews’. Such discussions were often recorded, with verbal consent being provided by the participant, and sought to clarify the meanings that key stakeholders attributed to any events and incidents that I had observed. These interactions informed a series of more formal, semi-structured interviews, each of which were recorded

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

Data Analysis

The various data that comprised the ethnographic record were subjected to an iterative process of analysis (Tracy, 2013), focusing on the identification of critical incidents, phases and persons amongst both participant and researcher sourced data. Specifically, Tracy's (2013) process model for the etic and emic reading of data was utilized. The first stage entailed the organization and preparation of the data, which was all stored electronically. During the following data immersion and primary-cycle coding phase, my supervisory team were often used as critical friends (Patton, 2015) to aid the rigor and quality of the analytical

interpretations developed (Smith & McGannon, 2017). In this instance a manual coding approach was adopted, whereby inductive, in-vivo coding (Patton, 2015) was utilized to help ensure that the vocabulary of the participants remained apparent. During secondary-cycle coding, hierarchical codes were then generated to help organize, synthesize, and categorize data. Finally, prior to commencing the writing process, analytical memos were utilized to ensure that the emerging higher order themes provided a logical, conceptual and theoretically-robust account of the ethnographic record (Tracy, 2013). Indeed, the utilization of analytic memos represented a key intermediary step between coding and analysis, serving to define the codes and explicate their properties, provide examples of raw data that illustrate the codes, and examine the relationship between the generated codes.

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

(i.e. disputes or differences in opinion between organizational members), control (i.e. the way in which individuals aim to influence policy decisions) and goal diversification (i.e. the pursuit of alternative objectives by individuals within the organization), are inherent and dynamic features of life within organizations.

Ensuring Quality

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

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

Results

Following the completion of data analysis, three key hierarchical themes were generated to illustrate the contextually-bound experiences and realities of players and coaches at the club, as well as my own critical reflections regarding the potential implications of these occurrences for applied practice. These themes were; a) ‘players simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another’; b) ‘tensions exist between the coaches’; and c) ‘most players end up being released’. Each of these themes are discussed below.

Players simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(P3, I2)

In contrast, those players outside of the scheme were left to reflect on their seemingly bleak prospects of further progression, and accordingly, ruptures gradually emerged within the academy. This was heightened by the fact that the players outside of the E.D.S. were left to train separately on an evening. These individuals would often complain that they 'weren't getting any progression' and were 'doing drills that we'd done when we first joined which are shit.' (**Participant 4, Interview 2 of 2**). Having observed such training sessions from the side-lines, I had witnessed this discontent amongst the players, and was left to consider how I might try to support the players within these different sub-groups.

To my mind, the introduction of the E.D.S. had inadvertently created a chasm between the different groups of academy players. Whilst I was not running scheduled workshops during this ethnographic study, I still found myself talking to players about their

training and match-day performances, as well as their own perceived prospects of progression towards a potential first-team contract. Such conversations with those players outside of the E.D.S. had gradually become more focused around their lives and aspirations outside of the club itself. In contrast, my conversations with the E.D.S. players had a different focus. The time they had spent training with the first-team squad had left them feeling confident about their prospects, but my discussions with the coaches also meant that I was aware of how they rated each of the E.D.S. players, and the apparent likelihood of them receiving a professional playing contract. The dilemma that arose from these interactions was concerned with how a practitioner might balance performance-orientated objectives and wider welfare needs with players, who may have little understanding of, or may misread, their own standing within the organization. My personal objectives though, were to support the players throughout their athletic development, attempting to adopt a holistic perspective which accounted for any aspects of their sporting, or non-sporting lives which seemed important to them at a given time. As such, my dialogue with them shifted over time in accordance with what *I felt* might be most beneficial for them.

Tensions exist between the Coaches

As I spent time moving between the first-team and academy training sessions, it had also become apparent that the coaches did not always share the same views or beliefs in relation to their goals and objectives within the club setting. The academy coaches aspired to see the first-team populated with academy graduates, and there was an apparent belief amongst them that some of the players were talented enough to make that transition. This view did not seem to be mirrored by the newly appointed Head Coach however, as was highlighted in a reflective journal entry:

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

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

Myself and [HoYD] tried dealing with it [the incident]...I tried to sit down with a few of them who took it quite personally...It kind of, it popped the bubble so to speak, we had this team ethos and it kind of felt like the fella who sits at the top of that totem pole, who pulls all the strings and can say yes or no to your future has turned around and said ‘you’re all shit’. Some of them was on that E.D.S. and just fell even further behind because they were thinking, ‘he don’t rate me anyway’ and where do you go from there? **(Player Performance Manager, Interview 1 of 2)**

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

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

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

This particular incident suggested that tensions between the coaches extended beyond the athletic potential of a given player, incorporating the holistic well-being of academy players also. Interestingly, my discussions with the academy coaches allowed me to gain an insight into their own sporting backgrounds, with both of them acknowledging that they had been left without an education when they were released as former youth-level players from their respective clubs. In that regard, I could understand why they contested the wishes of the Head

Coach in some instances, attempting to ensure that the players' non-sporting development was taken into account.

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

Most Players end up Being Released

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

I talked with the coaches for a while about their thoughts on the 'you're all shit' incident, as well as which players will be in the squad for the next match. [C7] suggested that two particular players were 'pissheads' and were not trying hard enough to get into the starting line-up. The coaches also spoke about all the players being 'out on their arses next year', with the term 'shirt-fillers' being assigned to those players whose futures have seemingly already been determined. For some players, the writing has been on the wall for a while now, and regardless of whether they have admitted it openly, I would assume that the 'shirt-fillers' have already accepted that their futures lie outside of the club. For others, it would be fair to say that they have received positive indications from various key figures at the club regarding their chances of progressing to the first-team level. As such, I am increasingly concerned about what the lasting impact may be if their contracts are then not renewed for next season. **Field note: 27th June**

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

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

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

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

(Participant 4, Interview 2 of 2)

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

We've kind of committed a part of our lives which we'll never get back you know? Being 16, 17, 18 are probably the best years of your life aren't they?...and we've dedicated it to rugby and given up loads for it, and at the end of it we get kicked out because it's out of our control, it just doesn't seem fair **(Participant 2,**

Ethnographic Interview 1 of 3)

That player did indeed end up being released, and he subsequently highlighted how he had been told by the Assistant Coach three weeks previously, that he would 'definitely be there next season' **(P2, Interview 1 of 2)**. He had voluntarily chosen to study a University degree

alongside his rugby commitments, expressing his thankfulness that he had left himself with an alternative career path when he had been released by the club. Worryingly though, I was aware of other players who had turned down programs of education or trade apprenticeships in an attempt to focus solely on their rugby, and unfortunately, they too were left to share the same fate of not having their contracts renewed.

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

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

Accordingly, the academy coaches were also left in an uncertain position, as the contract negotiations they were engaged in with players were ultimately dictated by decisions made at a first-team level. As a result, they were required to withhold information and prolong the periods of uncertainty for a number of players, based upon the needs and requirements of the first-team squad. My discussions with the coaches helped me to understand their role within these negotiations in a more empathic manner, but ultimately the fact remained that the vast majority of the players who I was working with would end up being released once the season had concluded.

My increased understanding of the coaches' perspectives, and the way the club functioned in general, meant that I was becoming more aware of issues behind-the-scenes that had implications for the academy players. Within this complex and inherently political

context, I had become increasingly convinced of the significant role which applied sport psychology practitioners might play by offering unconditional support to these players as and when they seek it. I appreciated that my role in helping them to actually progress to the first-team was always likely to be limited, and so instead, I increasingly believed that I needed to simply be there for them; assisting them in their efforts to cope with the highly scrutinizing, unforgiving and ever-changing sporting environment that they found themselves in. As such, I think it is important for practitioners to spend time standing on the side-lines during training, or waiting around after matches have finished, so that players and/or coaches can approach them if they wish to do so. Somewhat frustratingly however, I also realized that no matter how closely I might work with a player, there was always a distinct probability that they would not be at the club for the following season. The label of an 'elite level athlete' was likely to only be temporarily applicable for the vast majority of those who I was affiliated with. Indeed, in this instance, the reality was that the majority of the academy 'players' I had worked with were young men who played professional youth rugby on an always-temporary basis.

Discussion

The results presented reflect how my time-in-context within this particular 'arena of struggle', was typified by ideological diversity, poor coordination, and conflict between key stakeholders (Ball, 1987, p.19). The players all held a shared goal to progress into the first-team, but this effectively required them to compete amongst themselves, whilst simultaneously trying to harbor a cohesive team dynamic. Furthermore, the continued uncertainty regarding their future prospects meant that they were often left to seek assurances from the appraisals offered to them by their coaches. However, while the academy and first-team coaches seemed to share an apparent desire to promote youth players into the first-team,

they had disagreements about how best to nurture a player's overall development, and simultaneously manage the needs and expectations of a results driven industry. Furthermore, the lack of influence perceived by the academy coaches during important periods of organizational change had seemingly led to further rifts developing between them and their first-team counterparts. Such reflections depict everyday organizational life as a negotiated and contested activity for these key stakeholders, the roots of which can be traced back to their respective ideological standpoints (Ball, 1987). As Ball (1987) suggests, life within the club was found to be far from 'mundane', with a degree of power, conflict, control and goal diversification typifying some of the day-to-day interactions.

Here, Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b, 2011) workings around professional vulnerability can also be used to exemplify the passivity and uncertainty which both the academy players and coaches experienced. Kelchtermans (1996) acknowledged how the narrative biographies of teachers highlighted the impact of critical incidents as sources of professional vulnerability, with such incidents serving to question the normal daily routines of teachers, provoking emotions of distress, unease, doubt and uncertainty (Kelchtermans, 1996). Given that 'critical incidents' such as the introduction of the E.D.S. and the 'you're all shit' episode had generally typified my time-in-context, I was left to reflect on the apparent vulnerability of the players and coaches with whom I worked. Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b, 2011) depicted vulnerability as a structural condition, as opposed to a purely emotional experience, with a perceived lack of control, uncertainty regarding the efficacy of one's actions, and the thoughts and opinions of significant others, all serving as apparent antecedents. Furthermore, Kelchtermans (1996) stated that the social recognition of technical skills, competences, and moral integrity, was a crucial element of one's professional self (self-esteem and task perception), with appreciation from other key stakeholders constituting as a highly valued, non-material, social workplace condition. As such, the vulnerability

experienced by the players stemmed from the continued requirement for them to try and impress the academy and first-team coaches with a view to ensuring a first-team future at the club. This structural vulnerability also extended to the professional lives of the academy coaches however, in that their own professional competencies and moral integrity were, at times, challenged in their interactions with their first team counterparts. My prolonged engagement with this micro-political context, and my continued dialogue with key stakeholders had led me to reject any previously held conceptions of assumed authority, goal coherence, consent and consensus within the club (Ball, 1987). Instead, I was left to reflect on the critical implications that this may hold for applied practice, and whether or not other practitioners found themselves battling with similar issues of practice.

Applied Implications

Whilst I was no longer delivering scheduled sport psychology sessions during the ethnographic study presented here, my time spent with key stakeholders throughout the data collection process had left me wanting to understand them more as *people*, as opposed to just *coaches*, or *athletes* (Gilbourne & Priestly, 2011). Such a sentiment echoes the acknowledgement made by Gilbourne and Priestly (2011) that;

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

Within this context, the vulnerability that typified the professional lives of the players and coaches, often extended beyond their role-related performances. In a similar manner, my own emerging understanding of their perceived complexities, had led me to recognize how my own professional vulnerability was always likely to be moderated by my ability to

successfully maintain effective relationships with any number of key stakeholders; a finding increasingly highlighted within recent research (e.g., Eubank et al., 2014; McDougall et al., 2015). Upon recognition of vulnerability as a structural condition (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), the realization that practitioners are not immune to the day-to-day functioning of their applied contexts, highlights how social recognition from key stakeholders can be seen to be a key antecedent of a practitioner's own professional self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b, 2011) work addressing professional vulnerability and professional self-understanding has much to offer the discipline, both in terms of analyzing the thoughts, emotions and behaviors of athletes and coaches, and also in stimulating critical reflection on the work and careers of applied sport psychologists.

During my initial period of professional practice at the club, my interactions had always been restricted to the players and coaches within the academy. As such, I had always judged my own accountability in relation to how my practice aligned with the interests, hopes and needs of these individuals alone. My subsequent ethnographic study, and my corresponding reading of the (micro)politics literature however, had provided me with a more rounded insight into how the club's primary need to win matches regularly at the first-team level, permeated all facets of organizational life. Accordingly, I can now understand why some colleagues continuously challenged me to consider the following questions; how would I seek to demonstrate the effectiveness of my practices to key stakeholders at the club?; how would I justify my evolving approach to practice to a prospective new employer?; how flexible might I need to be in terms of my applied practices to ensure that I can achieve the necessary 'buy-in' from numerous key stakeholders?; how would I try and initially seek a better contextual understanding when starting work within a new organizational setting?

Whilst my extensive time-in-context has permitted me to reflect upon some of the factors which impacted upon my applied work there, comprehensive answers to the aforementioned questions of identity and practice have remained elusive. As such, the research team have purposefully refrained from offering any definitive recommendations for practice. As a research team however, we would encourage readers of this paper to also consider their responses to the questions above with respect to the critical reflections offered within this paper, as well as their own encounters and their approaches to applied work. Furthermore, we would encourage readers to reflect upon the fundamental suggestion made through the paper that applied practice within sport psychology may be facilitated by a degree of *micro-political understanding* and activity on the practitioner's part. Such emergent messages highlight the need for practitioners to develop and utilize their micropolitical literacy when attempting to develop, maintain and advance their working relationships with various organizational stakeholders (Kelchtermans & Ballett, 2002a, 2002b). From our perspective, such an approach to research and practice is essential if we are to bring into sharper focus the vulnerable and often ideologically contested nature of sports work, as well as its connection with, and to, applied sport psychology practice. In light of this, the current paper seeks to encourage further academic debate within the domain, as to what a social analysis of applied contexts might mean for the enactment of sport psychology practice.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research Directions

Notwithstanding the potential implications of the multidisciplinary approach to understanding applied contexts adopted here, the current study represents reflections from a single setting, and as such, the experiences accounted are not necessarily representative of the experiences of other practitioners. However, the key strength of this paper is in the adoption of a novel theoretical lens to illuminate and examine applied practice issues within sport psychology, in

a manner that disturbs the rationalistic and descriptive accounts that have typified the literature base to date. Consequently, we call for practitioners to not only reflect on whether the issues highlighted here resonate with their own experiences and training, but to also consider how they would address some of the everyday challenges and dilemmas which are documented within this paper. Furthermore, we hope that this paper acts as a stimulus for the development of critical and rich, reflective accounts of sport psychology practice, that allow the profession to better consider issues of power, interaction, agency, ambiguity and vulnerability, in a more contextually-informed manner than has been achieved to date.

Further research, which seeks to recognize the inherently (micro)political nature of the high-performance contexts and, relatedly, the sport psychologist's role within such social milieus, offers the potential to significantly advance our collective understanding of some of the more tacit and understated challenges that practitioners are likely to encounter. More specifically, scholarship which offers a critical insight into the relationships that practitioners seek to forge and re-forge, and the strategies that they adopt in order to survive, thrive and learn within these settings, holds significant implications for the discipline. Furthermore, by considering the utility of organizational analyses and theorizing from outside of the sport psychology domain (cf. Ball, 1987; Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), future research might also seek to examine how a practitioner's self-understanding is impacted upon by the social recognition and engagement that they (may or may not) receive from key contextual stakeholders within a given applied setting. Such multi- and inter-disciplinary inquiry may provide a fruitful avenue for enhancing our knowledge of applied practice and the preparation and development programs put in place to support it.

Conclusion

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

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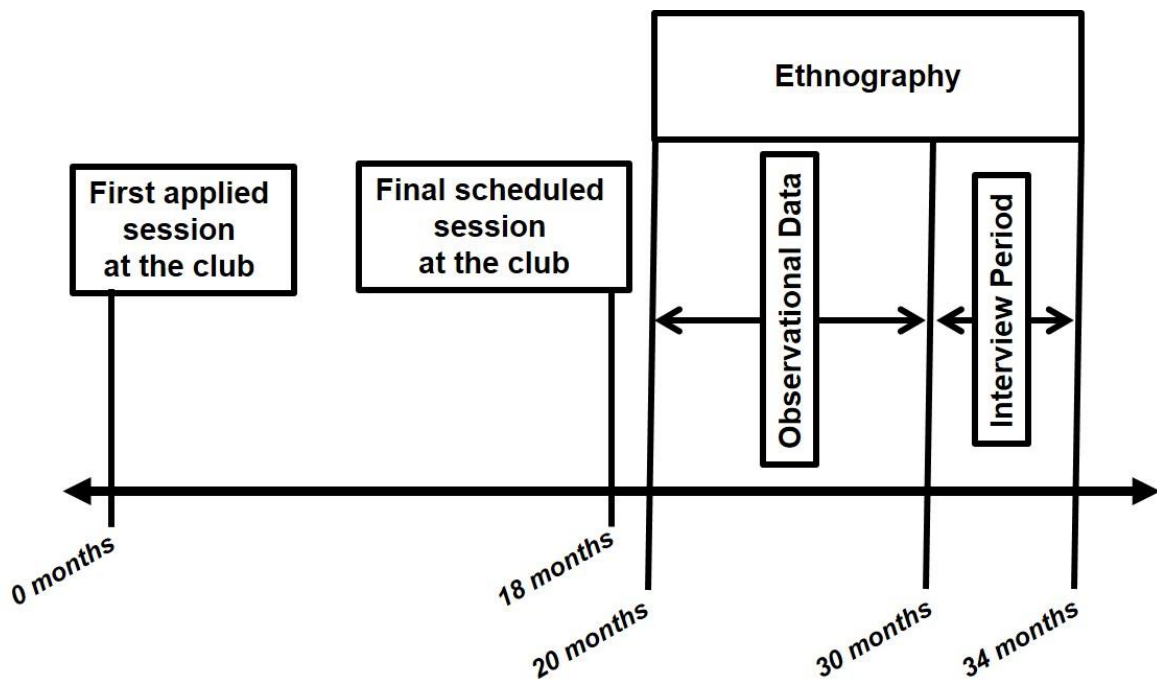


Figure 1: A timeline portraying the first author's changing association with the rugby league club in question over time