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A Tale of Three Seasons: A Cultural Sport Psychology and Gender Performativity Approach to Practitioner Identity and Development in Professional Football

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Abstract

The present study explored how the organisational and cultural experiences of a trainee Sport Psychology Consultant (SPC) working in professional football shaped her identity and professional development. Drawing on Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) and gender performativity as guiding frameworks, we explored the first author's identity development as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher within one professional football club over a 3-year duration. Traditional ethnographic data collection methods were employed, including, field notes and a reflective journal. Through creative non-fiction vignettes, we show that the traditional masculine discourse in professional football shaped the first author's sense of self and subsequent behaviours. From the results of this study, we suggest that SPCs identity development is not smooth or linear, rather it can be described as a 'rocky road to individuation' defined by a series of culturally specific 'critical moments'. We strongly believe that contextual intelligence and cultural proficiency are essential for a trainee SPCs survival during early and later career stages of working within elite and professional sport environments.

Keywords: Gender performativity, Cultural Sport Psychology, Identity, Professional Development, Longitudinal

Introduction

Historically, sport has been classified as a male sector where the female voice is both under-represented and marginalised (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004; Roper, 2005; Roper, 2008). This is evident in sport psychology, where many of the influential figures of the discipline are either 'founding fathers' or 'grandfathers' as opposed to 'mothers' or 'grandmothers' (Yambor & Connelly, 1991). However, in recent decades, feminist researchers have started to examine the ways in which gender roles (and ideologies) are expressed and embedded in organisational practices (Kezar & Lester, 2008). Butler (2004) re-framed gender identity, and believed that such deeply personalised categories can only be understood as emerging from the lived experience of an individual. In this sense, masculinity can be defined as a social construct that "does not exclusively belong to male bodies, rather it can inhibit and repress both men and women" (Plester, 2015, p. 541). Subsequently, it is attested that men can also perform femininity in the same way that females can demonstrate masculinity. Despite this, Meyerhoff (2014) suggested that deterministic generalisations as to how men and women conduct themselves still dominate many organisations with men being grouped together and prescribed masculine discourses and behaviours (e.g. those of strength, power, and toughness), and females being prescribed with a discourse of sensitivity, gentleness, and emotionality. Consequently, it is argued that gender identities are not only formed from our own performances but are also placed upon us from other people.

The gender identities that individuals both perform and are prescribed will likely shape their applied sport psychology delivery and professional development experiences. In line with this acknowledgement, there is a growing interest in, and recognition of, sport *psychologists* as the 'person' and 'practitioner', and scholars have started to explore how their more personal qualities/characteristics and actions as individuals shape the effectiveness of service delivery (Chandler *et al.,* 2016; Tod et al., 2017; Smith *et al.,* 2019; Tod et al., 2019). As Ryba (2009)

attested, sport psychology practitioners are multidimensional individuals shaped by their life histories, identities and identifications (inclusive of gender, age, race and religion etc), and their practice is not only influenced by their abilities, but also the politics of the sport and cultural-narrative discourses surrounding what constitutes good service delivery in a particular sociocultural context. More specifically, professional Sport Psychology Consultants (SPCs) are likely to be embedded within a sports club/organisation with particular organisational cultural values that impose certain boundaries on their practice (McDougall et al., 2019). Furthermore, SPCs will be responsible for working with a diverse group of athletes and/or support staff who have each constructed their own unique narrative within the social context in which they exist. Therefore, a 'one size fits all' method of service delivery that is informed by top-down theory and overlooks important concepts such as gender would not be appropriate (Anonymous et al., 2019; Mellalieu, 2017). Rather, designing, implementing and delivering psychological support that is informed by a bottom-up cultural understanding will likely result in better outcomes for both the SPC and sports organisation.

Sport researchers have explored the consultancy experiences of both experienced and trainee SPCs (e.g. Tod et al., 2009). However, many of these accounts are developed from one-off interventions or season-long engagements, and have focused on trainee SPCs experiences of developing a congruent practice philosophy (e.g. Collins et al., 2013), or the changing role of the supervisor (e.g. Tod et al., 2017). Although these studies have made important strides to advance understandings of practitioner development, the studies have often focused on individual SPC qualities and limited attention has been given to organisational cultural and gender factors that shape practitioners' development. Feminist sport psychology researchers (e.g. Yambor & Connelly, 1991; Roper, 2005, 2008) have identified the importance of shedding light on the career experiences of early career and accomplished female SPCs when working with same-sex and cross-sex athletes. More specifically, Roper (2008) suggested that

female SPCs might be faced with a unique set of challenges when entering and working within the applied domain (such as attaining roles, perceived status, gender discrimination, family and balance), and that these challenges are likely to be exaggerated in highly masculine environments. Furthermore, Roper identified that females should be prepared to face discrimination particularly from male coaches due to the "locker room mentality". Despite a growing interest in women's experiences, Roper's work was limited to collegiate sport settings in North America, arguably a very different environment to professional sport in the UK and Europe. For example, Nesti (2010) argued that in some contexts, the female SPC might actually have an advantage, in that she could be delivering a caring service that is traditionally viewed as feminine.

Cultural sport psychology (CSP) (see Ryba, 2017; Schinke et al., 2019) emerged as a critical discourse to challenge culture-blind and 'a-contextual' research in sport psychology and to argue for rethinking practitioner identity in sport as a complex cultural construction. In this paper, we define identity as a sociocultural construction occurring within a particular social context (Anonymous et al., 2019). More specifically, the "identity of a woman emerges from her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history and future, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access" (Alcoff, 1988, p, 434). Subsequently, we believe that the first authors' professional identity and development was storied and re-storied as she negotiated individual, social and cultural narratives within the professional football club in which she worked (McGannon et al., 2012).

CSP has gained increasing attention in recent years (e.g. Hacker & Mann, 2017; McGannon & Smith, 2015) as it allows us to move away from over simplified, monolithic approaches to studying sport, and towards those that better reveal and centralise marginalised cultural identities such as those pertaining to gender (Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016; Schinke et al., 2019; Schinke & McGannon, 2015). As an umbrella term, CSP embraces

perspectives that come after positivism (e.g., social constructionism, critical realism, feminist praxis), brings culture to the forefront of the study, and believes that our identity is simultaneously personal, cultural and social. Blodgett et al. (2015) and others (Anonymous et al., 2018; Hacker & Mann, 2017; Smith & McGannon 2017) have identified the potential of CSP to advance our understanding of, and facilitate social change in sport. In this paper, we will explore the identity formation and professional development of a young female SPC in men's football, with the focus on gender- and age-related identities that were powerful in shaping her experience and relations to others in the club.

Generally, sport psychology has not always been well received as traditionally conceptualised and delivered in elite sport settings (Anonymous et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014). More specifically, it has been viewed as primarily a feminine discipline, conflicting with the traditional narrative surrounding the professional sport culture (McDougall et al., 2019). Historically, sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture (Connell, 1995, p.54), and is often viewed as a method of nurturing in boys the qualities necessary for manhood, including competitiveness, toughness and superiority (Holt, 1989; Benyon, 2002). Beyond this, several scholars have argued that professional sport is founded upon sacrifice and brutality (Mellalieu, 2017) where abuse is often overlooked and/or accepted (Feddersen et al., 2019), and athletes can be commodified in a win-at-all-costs mentality. Subsequently, sports clubs and organisations might possess the opinion that sport psychology is only of value to those athletes who have a 'problem', or are too 'weak' to cope with the demands of professional sport (Anonymous et al. 2018; Pain & Harwood, 2004). We argue that these perceptions of sport psychology might be further exaggerated in professional football due to the hegemonic constructions of masculinity that dominate the professional football culture (Anonymous et al. 2018). For example, players and staff behave in the 'most honoured way of being a man' (Connell & Messserschmidt, 2005, p.832). Often, this determined by who can

withstand the most physical and emotional pain, and who best keeps their personal feelings to themselves (Anonymous et al., 2018, p.4). Furthermore, the reluctance of many clubs to engage with organisational outsiders poses an additional barrier (see Anonymous et al., 2018; Nesti, 2012).

Despite these potential obstacles, opportunities for sport psychology practitioners to work in various sports are increasing (McEwan *et al.,* 2019). For example, in 2012 the Premier League (PL) introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which formalised sports science and sport psychology support methods in professional youth academies. In addition to this, in May 2019 the National Basketball Association (NBA) launched a new Mental Health and Wellness Program that has seen all NBA clubs employ a psychologist/sport psychologist to support their athletes' psychological wellbeing. These examples suggest that the cultural discourse (i.e. verbal and non-verbal cultural communications) surrounding sport psychology are changing to include a broader recognition of the value of the discipline structurally at the higher levels of performance (e.g., national governing bodies), but the question remains whether subcultural insiders (e.g. performance and support personnel) in various sport organisations are actually embracing it.

The in-depth analysis of this extensive fieldwork as a practitioner-researcher allows for a deeper understanding of how the professional football culture and shaped one female SPC's identity and development. This is an important contribution to existing literature, as we examine the reciprocal relationship between a practitioners experiences and her environment as part of the individuation process (see McEwan, Tod, & Eubank, 2019). Our aim is to address the following research objectives:

1. To examine the organisational, cultural and gender-related experiences of a female trainee SPC over a longitudinal time frame (3 full footballing seasons).

2. To examine how the organisational, cultural and gender-related experiences of a female trainee SPC shaped practitioner identity and professional development.

Methodology

This confessional tale stands alongside and extends our recently published realist tale; which explored how the organisational cultural experiences of elite youth footballers shaped their identity development and behaviour (see Anonymous et al., 2018). The confessional tale is an increasingly popular genre in sport studies (see Dart, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2010; Cavallerio et al., 2020), and is most commonly used as a method for researchers to discuss the trials and tribulations they experience whilst embedded in applied settings (Sparkes, 2002; Van Maanen, 2011). Consequently, we view this article as the opportunity for the first author (I) to position herself at the forefront of the piece, "announcing here I am. This is what happened to me, and this is how I felt, reacted and coped. Walk in my shoes for a while" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 59). The research team (we) hope that this article will illuminate the deeply complex and fluctuating relationship between the first author and the professional football club.

We approached the confessional tale from the viewpoint of a relativist ontology (belief that there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knowledge is created through social and cultural interactions) and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (data collection occurs in the world of the participants) (Cornbleth, 1990). In keeping with a CSP approach, confessional tales share the view that there is no neat separation between subject and context, and that experiences are messy/open to multiple interpretations (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, in line with the ambition of CSP to generate knowledge that can help make a positive difference, we aspire that the research can inform education and supervision of students and early career (especially female) practitioners to help them navigate career challenges and build working relationships in the challenging world of elite sport.

Biographical positioning

As a social constructionist researcher, I believed that I was in a constant state of 'becoming', shaped by social, personal, cultural and political experiences (McGannon et al., 2012). At the point of entry into the professional football club, I was a trainee SPC, a doctoral student, a self who was a young female, an ex-footballer, and a passionate football fan. The impact of each of these intersecting identities is centralised in the 'Results and Discussion' as they influenced how I experienced the organisation, and what is reported on in this study.

Context

For the purposes of the study, we have chosen to represent the participating organisation using the title 'Fulgrove United Football Club (FC)'. Fulgrove United FC is a medium-sized professional football club currently in the English Football League. However, it is primarily acknowledged within the footballing world for the quality and productivity of its youth academy. Currently, Fulgrove United FC houses over 150 players (academy and 1st team), and around 50 support staff at its training complex. This is unique in comparison with other professional football clubs that create a clear separation between the academy and the 1st team through the use of different training facilities. Therefore, my experiences within the social context were not isolated to those individuals positioned within the academy, rather my organisational cultural experiences were shaped by both 1st team and academy members.

Developing the confessional tale

Immersive methods offer researchers the opportunity to acquire detailed understandings of social contexts where research is sparse (Cavallerio et al., 2020). This confessional tale arose as part of a broader ethnographic doctoral research project that explored sport psychology practice in professional youth football. Adding the authorial presence allowed us to portray a more balanced and inclusive picture (Van Maanen, 1988; 2011; Plummer, 2001;

Douglas & Carless, 2010). Across the 3-year duration of the study, I occupied a dual role as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher.

More specifically, in my role as a SPC, I was embedded within Fulgrove United FC for 3-4 days per week dependent on the training and match schedule within the academy and held sole responsibility for the delivery of psychological support to academy footballers, and support staff. Methods of support included; psychological profiling, individual support sessions, group workshops, pitch based delivery, and stakeholder education. Although my applied practice philosophy was rooted within a holistic, humanistic consulting approach, the EPPP psychology requirements meant that I was also required to deliver elements of Mental Skills Training in group settings (e.g. self-talk, imagery). Many stakeholders within Fulgrove United FC (e.g. players, staff, parents) had no prior experience of sport psychology, and I was the first female member of sports science staff employed by the club. Subsequently, I also viewed myself as an educator within the organisation on the discipline of sport psychology.

Being embedded within the organisation across the full duration of my BASES professional training, and for the year that followed was a key feature of the research. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to truly capture my journey to individuation as a SPC.

Data collection

Field notes were completed on every occasion I was present within the organisation and included brief sentences or phrases to identify events and their key details (see Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). While the field notes documented all events in chronological order, I also completed a reflective journal which was emotive, helped me to make sense of my experiences, and considered both the short-term and long-term impact of the events on my identity and professional development (Anonymous et al., 2019; Smith, 2010). In this study, I engaged in

'reflection' which indicates stepping back from a situation to make logical sense of events in the outside world (Atkins & Murphy, 1993), and 'reflexivity' which is "a process of looking outwards to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices, and inwards to challenge the processes by which we make sense of the world" (D'Cruz et al., 2006, p. 78). More specifically, I reflected on meaningful interactions with players and staff and attempted to make sense of my experiences through reflexive discussions with the research team and critical friends. Subsequently, I re-visited many of the events documented in the reflective journal on more than one occasion. It was through this longitudinal and continued reflection that I began to empathise with other staff members, and treat them with the same level of sensitivity that I was gifting to myself. Taking the time to write in-depth reflections further engrained them into my memory and provided an initial outlet for recording impressions and ideas before more formal analysis.

Data analysis and representation

The first step of the data analysis was to revert to the field notes and reflective journal and re-read my journey across time. Raw data was then used to populate a 3-year timeline that was split into the 12 different months of the year. This timeline noted all interpersonal events that had a significant impact on my journey to individuation, and was used to create meaning/make sense of my experiences temporally (Braun & Clarke, 2019). From the timeline, I engaged in reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (see Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018), and approached the reflexive TA through a social constructionist lens. The 'central organising concept' was SPC identity and professional development, and the overriding themes of 'gender' and 'organisational culture' developed as patterns of shared meaning across time (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It was understood that these interpretations were contextually bound, positioned and situated (Braun et al., 2018), and the aim was to understand and create meaning from my experiences as opposed to finding a singular truth. At this stage, I then engaged in

collaborative and reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The purpose of critically discussing themes with research team members was to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Schinke et al., 2016; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

The final step was to represent the data. In keeping with the characteristics of the confessional genre, we have chosen to use creative non-fiction vignettes. Creative analytical practices are complex, and cannot be constrained by a set of rigid guidelines on how they should be constructed or structured (Douglas & Carless, 2010). Rather, the writing "needs to be framed within the stylistic preferences of the writer and the context of the particular project" (Douglas & Carless, 2010, p.4). CSP researchers (e.g. Blodgett *et al.,* 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke *et al.,* 2016) advocate the use of vignettes in enhancing our cultural understanding in elite sport environments and delivering culturally informed sport psychology support. The purpose of the vignettes was to enhance the reader's understanding from more than just a cognitive perspective, rather, to connect with the reader on an emotional, behavioural and embodied level, allowing an empathetic understanding to emerge.

Research Quality and Methodological Rigor

Our approach to research quality was guided by CSP researchers. More specifically, Smith and McGannon (2018) identified critical dialogue, reflexivity and contribution to knowledge as central considerations in producing high quality qualitative research. I engaged in a dialogue with critical friends to further explore my interpretations of the data. These critical friends included members of the research team, other trainee SPCs and individuals working in a similar capacity at other professional football clubs. We also judge the credibility of this research on the contribution it makes to applied sport psychology delivery methods, and practitioner training and development. We understand that these checks like any other validity procedures do not provide access to objective reality, however, they do add dimensionality, and reflexivity

to the interpretive world, and help sort out more plausible explanations from less plausible ones (Anonymous et al., 2019).

Ethical considerations

For this study, ethical approval was sought from the relevant University ethics board. Confidentiality is assured for individuals within the organisation as no real names or information that might lead to the identification of any individual was included (Silverman, 2016). In line with Reeves (2010), I attained gatekeeper consent for access to the organisation and the individuals within it. In addition to this, parental consent, and informed assent was attained for players under the age of 16. However, occupying a dual role as a practitioner-researcher within the organisation raised ambiguity regarding the organisation's anonymity, as it may be possible for readers to identify the organisation of study via other means. It was decided that all information would be anonymized as far as possible. Finally, in line with relational ethics principles (see Ellis, 2007), I based my actions and behaviours on my relations and commitments to players, staff and parents within Fulgrove United FC. More specifically, I aimed to ensure that I engaged in open dialogue and active listening with the participants, considered a diversity of perspectives, and connected with others based on mutual respect (Ellis, 2007).

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present three separate but interrelated vignettes that each aim to illuminate how the dominant cultural practices within Fulgrove United FC and my experiences of them challenged my ways of thinking about and engaging with participants as an SPC, and ultimately my practitioner identity and professional development.

The first Sucker Punch

The following vignette centralises my first experience of working with the parents at Fulgrove United FC. The workshop was titled *'An introduction to Sports Psychology'*, and was delivered two weeks into my first season working at the club. The primary objectives of the workshop were, to introduce sports psychology as a discipline, outline the psychological development program that I had designed, and explain how it would be implemented across the upcoming season.

Upon entering the education suite, my mind immediately reverted back to my first school nativity; a grand gathering of judging parents in an overcrowded and humid room that smelt of stale sweat. I started the presentation a smiley, chatty and friendly figure, hopeful for a productive session. The support program had been designed specifically to support those players who were contracted to Fulgrove United FC (U9-U23). I believed that the parents would be impressed. During a period of time where the development of meaningful and trusting relationships was paramount, I made clear reference to my affiliation with a top UK Sports Science institution, and considerable playing experience in the Women's game. However, a few minutes into my presentation some of the parent's behaviour changed. They slumped back into their chairs, pulled their phone out of their pockets and scrolled down their screens, I felt the energy sap from my body. Eye contact became even more important, I placed a focus on those who were still engaged. As my presentation finished the parents collectively applauded, overall, I was pleased with how it went; I felt that I had sold the program well. Then came the sucker punch!

There was still 10 minutes before the start of training, so I asked if anyone had any questions- at this point the parents took control. I had prepared beforehand for a short Q&A at the end of the session, as expected, the first couple of questions related to the availability of content for parents, and how a child could catch up if they missed a session. I felt comfortable in answering these as the questions demonstrated that the parents had actually been taking note

of what I was saying, and were genuinely interested in the logistics of the process. In the meantime, there was a deep, dark, rumbling noise coming from the back of the room. I looked to the back and a couple of the dads smirked, my hands felt clammy. As I made eye contact with one, he loudly shouted, "How old are ya then? You look too young to be working with our lads, shouldn't ya still be at school". His 'pals' laughed, and so did some of the other parents scattered across the room. Taking a second to observe the audience's response, I adjusted my posture attempting to cut a more authoritative figure. Some of the parent's eyes were on me, others on him. It felt like a standoff with the school bully, I didn't want to back down and cave in; I wasn't there to be the butt of his humour. I commented, "At least I will be thankful when I get to your age". My stomach was churning, hands a little shaky, and head a muddle of contrasting thoughts. I had worked so hard on the content of my presentation, believing that this would be the foundations of their judgement. Yet, one remark on something that I couldn't control undid everything that I believed my presentation had achieved. It was about to get worse. His mate then chirped up, he looked bigger, stronger, even more threatening. It felt like the previous question had opened the door for anything… "You must be brave, you know, being a girl and all that. I wonder how that'll go down". This time I had no comeback, deflated and defeated, I drew a fake smile and told them they had better get a move on if they wanted to be outside ready for the start of training. My heart racing, head pounding, I removed my memory stick from my laptop and picked up my coat, I left the room paranoid about aspects of myself I couldn't control; my appearance. A little part of me felt like giving up. If the parents went home thinking this then what would they tell their child? And more importantly, what are the implications for my future work. I had been rocked and was now questioning my readiness for the cannibals that lurked in the real world.

Initially, I was looking forward to an opportunity to attain the respect and support of parents at Fulgrove United FC. Talent development researchers (e.g. Martindale et al., 2011;

Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) have highlighted the significant role that parents have in shaping how their child constructs themselves and their world-view, and their youth athletes well-being (Aunola et al., 2018). Therefore, I hoped that educating and working with these stakeholders would encourage them to convey positive messages to their son/s regarding the importance of sport psychology practice, and how to interact with a relatively marginalised other (a young female). Although on the whole, the event was a success, this vignette demonstrates that only a couple of instances was all that it took for me to feel undermined, isolated and insecure about being a female within a historically male dominated club. Lester (2008) identified that organisational cultures "shape and reinforce socially appropriate roles for men and women" (p. 277), and that females might have a tough time in negotiating their own identity when they first enter male-dominated cultures. Our findings support this notion, we believe that when trainee SPCs first enter professional sports environments they are at a particularly vulnerable stage of development due to an emotional labour gap (see Hings et al., 2018). More specifically, trainees might be unable to manage emotions and emotional expressions as part of the work role (Grandey & Melloy, 2017).

Many scholars have written about ageist attitudes in Western Societies, where older people are viewed as vulnerable or weak in comparison with the younger and fitter members of society (Nelson, 2004). Sports in particular are exemplars of sub-cultural contexts that generally valorise youth and discriminate against older athletes. In this sense, I could have been considered in a privileged position compared to others, being a young female might have made it easier for me to connect with players, and given me some familiarity with common cultural activities and expressions. However, as the vignette shows, when it comes to working in a supporting role in a sports organisation, and specifically when interacting with parents, youth can become a marginalised identity. In this case, older age was associated with a greater level of knowledge and/or expertise. Consequently, the parents would have positioned someone who

looked older as being more capable of working with their child. Further, the father's comments about me being a female reinforced the traditional domination of masculine narratives, and limited opportunities for females to be successful in professional sport (Anonymous et al., 2019; Nesti, 2012).

I attempted to respond to the parents by engaging in a common cultural feature of professional football, 'banter' (Anonymous et al., 2018; Kelly & Waddington, 2006). This is often utilised by players and staff as a form of deflection to hide their true feelings about an event (see Anonymous et al., 2018), and was my attempt at demonstrating a narrative that aligned with the personal qualities (e.g. hardiness, sense of humour, ruthlessness) that these individuals believed were important to be successful within professional football. By behaving in this manner I was supressing my feminine qualities in an attempt to remove stereotypical gender markings (e.g. sensitive, emotional) (Roper, 2008). In addition to this, I learned an immediate lesson about which identities are desirable and which ones should be downplayed to survive in sport (Ryba et al., 2017). For example, I was now driven by continuing to construct a more masculine self that was better aligned with the other organisational insiders (e.g. I tied my hair up every time I was present at the club, wore a loose-fitting tracksuit, and took part in some aspects of training).

In summary, this vignette demonstrates the complex and gender fuelled negotiations that young developing professional women might face when they first enter and operate within masculine cultures (e.g. questions surrounding capability and survival), and illuminates that in the short-term constructing desirable identities might offset some of these challenges.

Power, Dominance and Control

The following encounter occurred prior to an afternoon weights session for the U18s, U23s, and 1st team, meaning that all players within these age groups and respective sports science staff were in the gym at the time.

I'm stood in the gym, although somewhat intimidating I feel a sense of comfort and security. It is here where each male boasts his rugged, red-blooded dominance, testosterone levels are high and the stronger players were mocking the 'weaker' members of the group. For example, the U23 captain was stood in the centre of the room imitating one of the younger boys by pretending that he couldn't bicep curl the lightest weights on the weight rack. It is the afternoon, the busiest part of the day. U23 players, 1st team players, and sports science staff congregate in preparation for the start of the gym session. Matt (1st team fitness coach) enters the gym; his eyes fixate on myself and the player I was talking to (like a lion looking at his prey). Matt spoke, "OI anonymous… I need to speak to you about your progress", the clanging metal came to a halt, and silence filled the air. All eyes were on me, my face beating as the blood rushed to my burning red cheeks. I somehow plucked up the courage to confidently respond, "Yeah of course, when are you free?" … Matt's bellowing voice delivered the next embarrassing blow "Il find you when I've got time". He then turned around, and without looking back left the gym. I spent the next hour pacing back and forth, unable to think of anything other than my interaction with Matt. Matt finally approached me and suggested we talk in his office (shared with 1st team manager and assistant manager). I felt isolated, alone, and lacking any control over the situation I found myself in. However, what came next would serve to enhance these feelings further. In a cold, harsh tone, Matt demanded that I remove my email address and contact number from any document that could be seen by the academy or 1st team players. I was stunned… the gym boasted an overly large notice board, pinned to this was a personal profile of all staff working at the club (each one gave a contact number and email address). I mumbled, hoping for a positive response "my role at the club means that

occasionally contact with the players outside of club hours is vital". Matt responded, "You're a female, you don't need to be contacting anyone outside your allocated hours". Head down I shrank into my seat, hoping that somehow it would swallow me up and this encounter would end.

Just as I perceived myself to be at breaking point, the door barged open, no knock… nothing. James (1st team manager) entered. With a welcoming smile on his face, he spoke "Hi anonymous, how are you finding things so far? You seem to be settling in well, we're all happy with how you're doing", I put on a brave face and lied. I said that things were going really well, and I was starting to feel a part of the club. I glanced quickly back to Matt, worried what he may say next. However, it was now Matt who looked nervous, and even embarrassed. I took lead in the conversation and explained my plan of action for the following month. The tension had diminished; it was as though the opening of the office door brought with it a presence that had a holding effect on Matt. Not only was he smiling, but he also agreed with what I was suggesting, and spoke in a soft, quiet tone of voice. The conversation came to a natural end. I left the office, a mix of emotions running wildly through my head… I took my details off the notice board and decided it would be best to take some time alone to try and make sense of what had just happened.

This was one of the most challenging events that occurred within my first season at Fulgrove United FC. Subsequently, I encountered a range of deep-rooted emotions that resulted in me questioning every aspect of my identity. In this situation, I felt totally disconnected. My background was very different to many of the staff and players at the club, in that I had not constructed my identity within the dominant narratives surrounding professional sport (see Anonymous et al., 2018; Carless & Douglas, 2012; Ronkainen et al., 2016). In contrast, I had been exposed to a range of environments (e.g. university, full-time work, female sport) that had each contributed in some way to how I viewed myself (Schinke et al., 2012). Therefore,

my intersecting identities did not align with the culturally dominant and desirable identity positions (e.g. power, masculinity, toughness, leadership) at Fulgrove United FC. I believe that this might have further exaggerated the negative impact of such experiences (Blodgett et al., 2015; Anonymous et al., 2018). Mitchell et al. (2014) support this viewpoint and suggested that when individuals fail to align their experiences within desirable identity positions they are likely to experience isolation, reduced self-worth, and existential anxiety.

Matt questioned my professional conduct at a time when I was trying to attain the respect of key stakeholders, and develop strong working relationships within the organization. Professional sports environments by their very nature are highly demanding workplaces where expectations are high, both of the athletes as performers, but also of coaching and support staff (Mellalieu, 2017; Anonymous et al., 2018). I was acutely aware of this and questioned whether the actions of Matt served as an indication that other staff were not buying into my role, or perhaps more concerning, me, and whether I possessed the resources to survive. Immediately, I became explicitly aware of every interaction that I had with players and/or staff, where they took place, and how I handled myself (e.g. I would ensure that I only delivered a one-to-one session with a player in a room that had a window).

Despite my interactions with Matt posing a significant threat to my identity and professional development as a SPC, over time and through engaging in reflexive discussions, I started to see how people struggle in their own individual ways. More specifically, this event occurred at a particularly challenging time for the professional football club due to a number of poor results at first-team level. Consequently, the pressure that Matt might have been feeling to perform could have evoked his more masculine traits, suggesting that the professional football culture is not only tough for females, but it is also tough for males (particularly those who are less expressively masculine). As this only came as an afterthought, we suggest that trainee SPCs might enter settings with a set of predetermined ideas about both the culture and

those who exist within it. For example, I might have considered this initially just 'typical' male behavior without reflecting on how men in sport organisations are also subjected to dominant discourses and might perform masculine behaviours to fit in, to survive, or hide their own anxieties and insecurities. This observation and subsequent reflection demonstrates significant personal development, including reduced narcissism and an enhanced capacity to adopt an empathetic attitude. In summary, we believe that developing the ability to be empathetic when working with many different kinds of people (despite its challenges) is an important part of personal and professional development for SPC's and other stakeholders in sport.

Left feeling like a naughty child

The following vignette details an event that occurred in the final six months of my time at Fulgrove United FC. The club had recently appointed a new U18 manager (Tony), he had transitioned to the squad following a short period of time working with the U16 age group. Unfortunately, his transition to the U18s manager coincided with a series of poor results. Having entered the Christmas period second in the table with a game in hand, the U18s did not win a single of their next 10 games. This was proving to be a difficult time for both the staff and players involved with Fulgrove United FC.

A number of the scholars (U18s) had approached me since the start of the Christmas period regarding the challenges associated with a change in manager and run of poor form. I decided to sit down with each player individually and attain their perception of what was going wrong, with the aim of better understanding of how I could support them through this transitional period. One of the second year scholars, Tom, commented, "I'm desperate to speak to Tony to see where he thinks I'm at and what I'm doing wrong, but it never seems the right time. There's always something that gets in the way, and then he isn't available". Tom was one of only two players who had not started one U18 game since Tony took charge, but had played a couple of

games down with the U16 age group. This was surprising especially as he was one of the taller, more physical boys. Despite his physical presence, Tom only spoke up if he felt he had no alternative, and when he did so it was done in a timid and shy manner.

I scribbled down some notes from the discussion, hoping that some guidance on my next action would emerge more clearly. I gulped at the thought of approaching Tom, I guessed that Tony would take it badly, but at least I would be the brunt of his aggressive rant as opposed to Tom, who was already feeling bad enough about himself. I sat spinning my pen, bouncing my legs up and down whilst I considered how to approach him. Tony is best described as a tall, well-built, masculine, ex-professional player with clear and overpowering old school views on how things should be done. Hesitantly, I gently knocked on Tony's door and asked for a quick word, I leant against the door, I felt as though the door offered me some protection. He didn't look up; he remained engrossed in his phone. "I've spent the last half an hour or so with Tom, I've been reviewing the season so far with all of the players, but I was concerned about a couple of Tom's responses. He seems confused with his progress, and feels that he has taken a step backwards by playing U16s football. The aim of this isn't for him to get a starting position, but for him to know what he needs to do to give himself a better chance, whether that's in training or away from the club…". I could see Tony going red in the face, in an aggressive tone, he stated "Right ok. I'll pull him in now! He can't be questioning that if he's not happy he can go, and I'll tell him that. I will tell him that straight upt, no messing!... They get given a scholar and then they think the club owes them everything. You tell him, and the rest of em that if they want to moan about not playing then they can go, we don't want them here!" I calmly waited for him to finish, I half expected this response, and so I responded "no, I don't think you understand what I said, Tom is confused about why he isn't starting and wants to understand what he can do to give him a better chance of attaining a starting place". Tony sat back into his chair, huffed, puffed, and put his hands on the back of his head, "he isn't good enough, he

will never play for the first team, so does he expect me to start him now when he's got no chance? The lad should never have been given a scholar, he will be going in a couple of months anyway". He shook his head, paused again, and then added "and if any of the others come to you and say they're not happy with anything, and I mean anything, you tell me and I'll sort them out, I'll fine them". I tried again to say that he had the wrong end of the stick, but he swiveled his chair and grunted into his phone. Conversation over.

Despite significant organizational change across the three-year time-frame (e.g. 1st team manager and his assistant, U23/U18/U16 managers, all sports science and medicine staff) stakeholders' displays of particular forms of masculinity prevailed, demonstrating that organizational cultures often endure beyond the involvement of particular members (see also McDougall et al., 2019). For example, coaches would defend their own prestige at the cost of others, dish out banter and expect the target to 'take it like a man', and use intimidation tactics (e.g. shouting and swearing) towards the players/staff whom they perceived to be weak. (Plester, 2015). Given Tony's tie with Fulgrove United FC as an ex-player and now coach, the club had a significant role in shaping how he constructed both his sense of self and his world view. It is suggested that over a large proportion of his life, Tony had been socialized into behaving in a particular way. For example, Tony expected to be listened to as opposed to being questioned, adopted an authoritarian management style administering chores as a punishment for those players who failed to comply to his instructions and used humor as a method of saying his unsayable thoughts. Gearing (1999) argued that behaviours such as Tony's are not uncommon within professional football clubs, where intimidating communication methods are used to display leadership and authority. Those players who are 'brave' enough to question a coach's judgement might be viewed as a 'bad influence'. In accordance with a social constructionist approach to identity, which centralizes the influence of language, the communication style and discourse displayed by Tony towards myself might have been his

attempt at further reinforcing the power hierarchy within Fulgrove United FC (i.e. coaches are experts), and buying himself some respect.

The potential impact of this for SPC is concerning; the experiences of being excluded or marginalized due to a hierarchical culture might have a significant negative influence on a person's self-value and/or self-perception (Anonymous et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2015) and could in some cases even lead to leaving the profession (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013). At the start of my journey as a trainee SPC, I attempted to align myself with the dominant and desirable identity positions within Fulgrove United FC which involved playing down feminine characteristics and qualities, even if this meant that my behaviours were at odds with my pre-existing values and beliefs. However, as my time at the professional football club came to an end, I was more confident in making decisions and having challenging conversations if they aligned with my core personal values and beliefs (e.g. importance of youth player welfare). My confidence as a SPC was higher than it had been before, I had completed professional training and received excellent feedback from external reviewers. Beyond this, my professional identity as a SPC now encompassed much more than just my role at Fulgrove United FC, I had attained professional accreditation, secured a job in academia and was coming to the end of my PhD. Finally, reading about identities, privilege and marginalization helped me to develop an alternative interpretation of my own experiences. We believe that these alternative opportunities for SPC identity exploration demonstrated individuation (making choices that reflected me as an integrated person), and facilitated both my professional development (shifts in attentional focus and emotional functioning) and psychological wellbeing (sense of satisfaction, sense of purpose, level of control).

General Discussion

We explored one sport psychology consultant practitioner's identity development as an on-going socio-cultural construction (McGannon et al., 2012), and used creative non-fiction vignettes to illuminate how the traditional masculine discourse within professional sport shaped the first author's applied experiences and sense of self. This study extends literature on SPC professional development by using CSP as a novel lens in this context to gain new understandings of how cultural identities shape SPC identity and development. We argue that the training of effective SPCs requires an emphasis on both competence and context (see Tod et al., 2017). Furthermore, the three-year duration of this study, and the subsequent number of hours amassed within the organization allowed for a more detailed understanding of how SPCs experiences are internalized during professional training years and beyond.

From the findings that emerged, we suggest that SPCs identity development is not smooth or linear as other models might suggest (e.g. Ronnestad and Skovholt's model of counsellor therapist development). In contrast, my experiences are better described as a rocky road to individuation defined by a series of 'critical moments' (McEwan et al., 2019). A 'critical moment' is an event which is '… large or small, intended or unintended, and might have a positive or negative effect on a person's sense of self' (Nesti et al., 2012). These moments were experienced when the first author encountered a clash between her identities and the organizational culture within Fulgrove United FC.

An important insight of CSP scholarship (e.g. McGannon et al., 2012) is that people do not only position themselves in relation to certain identities (e.g. coaches are the expert despite their qualifications/knowledge/understanding), but are also positioned by others in ways beyond their control (e.g. young females are not tough enough to cope with the ruthless, volatile and masculine nature of professional football, or males are intimidating, sexist and driven by moving up the hierarchical pyramid). These ascribed identities were demonstrated through the everyday behaviours and language used by key stakeholders (e.g. coaches, support staff,

parents). The attempted narrowing of my identity by stakeholders ultimately had an adverse effect on my development as a SPC, which manifested in a reliance on supervisory support and rigidity in intervention methods (see Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013). However, as a result of my own experiences and knowledge of what it is like to be misunderstood, I developed the ability to recognize that in other people, and was able to understand athletes and coaches/support staff in culturally embedded ways. Consequently, I developed more client-centered attributes, such as increased empathy, a more nuanced understanding of how we react and interact, the ability to make decisions about how I wanted to act, and an increased confidence (see Rogers, 1961; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013). These personal qualities combined with cultural proficiency and contextual intelligence, led to me becoming a more flexible SPC, and allowed me to better respond to the situations that I was exposed to.

In this paper, we define cultural proficiency as a way of being that allows individuals and organizations to interact effectively with people who differ from them (Cross, 1989). Subsequently, contextual intelligence is the ability to apply concepts, knowledge and theoretical material to the specific culture and context of the sport setting in which the individual operates in a language that makes sense to them (Brown et al., 2005; Mellalieu, 2017).We strongly believe that cultural proficiency and contextual intelligence are essential for a trainee SPCs survival during their first few months and beyond of working within professional sport (Mellalieu, 2017). Cultural proficiency and contextual intelligence can be developed in a number of ways; (1) *acknowledging the importance of culture* (familiarizing his or herself with appropriate readings and education, alternative life experiences with individuals from contrasting cultures), (2) *learning the culture* (through an individual's own playing experiences, (3) *understanding all aspects of the culture*, (4) *immersing oneself in the culture* (spending a prolonged period of time embedded within a specific sport setting), (5) *examining one's own cultural background* (explore your own stereotypes and biases), and (6) *working in*

the culture (deliver intervention strategies that fit within the cultural constraints and opportunities) (Brown et al., 2005; Mellalieu, 2017; McDougall et al., 2019). We believe that the process of individuation was facilitated by continued interactions both within and beyond my supervisory team e.g. becoming a member of a peer support group and network, and encouraged me to remain passionate about engaging in applied sport psychology consultancy.

The findings of this study support those of Collinson and Collinson (1996) and Wright (2015), and others who have explored the experiences of women in highly gender-imbalanced work settings. A hard lesson to learn was that individuals need to be adaptable to the culture if they don't want to be weeded out at an early stage (Eubank et al., 2014). Consequently, female SPCs must continually manage the tension between personal and professional identities that might be at odds with one another. Perhaps initially, the easiest method to do this is to (sub)consciously silence complaints about gender and surrender their (female) identity (Powell, Bagilhole & Dainty, 2009). However strides towards gender equality in societies more broadly, and the growth of science in sport (including football) means that there are a lot more academics working in clubs who are more sensitive to marginalization, subsequently, the possibility of culture change in professional sport is increasing.

Practical Implications

More specifically, professional training bodies (e.g. AASP, BPS, BASES) have primarily focused on skill development, therefore increasing the amount of training on understanding the sport culture would be important. This might be achieved through the delivery of expert-led workshops to educate trainees on how professional sport cultures might inform and influence the delivery of sport psychology consultancy. For example, in some elite sport cultures where the psychologist is employed on a short-term contract, their effectiveness might be judged on immediate changes in sports performance (Eubank et al., 2014). This would

pose a significant challenge for those approaching sport psychology consultancy from more humanistic counselling based philosophies. Furthermore, work-based placements in a range of sporting contexts, role-plays, and Virtual Reality (VR) technology would likely help prepare practitioners for challenging situations by developing self-awareness, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Smith et al., 2019). A stronger support network within the UK and beyond for SPCs to share their organizational and cultural experiences might act as an alternative form of guidance/support, and as a means of developing contextual intelligence and cultural proficiency. Shared reflection was imperative in facilitating the personal and professional development of the first author throughout her involvement with Fulgrove United FC, and allowed her to understand that making sense of critical development experiences should not be done alone. This is supported by Smith et al. (2019) who advocated peer mentoring for trainee sport psychology consultants.

Conclusion

The present study explored the identity and professional development of a trainee SPC working in a highly gendered professional sport organization. We highlight the importance of taking a CSP approach to practitioner identity and development, which allows for an understanding of being (who we are), knowing (our evidence base for practice), doing (how we deliver effectively), and the context (environment and culture) (Tod et al., 2017). Additional SPCs accounts of applied practice that advocate the diversity of identity in sport psychology consultancy and challenge monolithic approaches to applied practice would further extend the field (Schinke et al., 2019). Engaging with such projects longitudinally would deepen our understanding of how an applied SPCs intersecting identities shape applied practice and professional development over time. This additional knowledge would be beneficial for the training and education pathways offered by professional bodies, and subsequently the development and success of SPCs.

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Point by Point Response to Reviewers-

We would like to thank the reviewer for being so positive when commenting on the first round of revisions, this really motivated the research team. You have undoubtedly significantly improved the quality of our article with your suggestions and we thank you for the time/effort that you have spent on our work.

Reviewer Comment	Response	Page Number
One area to revise is smoothing out some of the writing, which I note in several places:		
Reviewer 1 Transition between the new feminist intro paragraph and the next which was the original intro paragraph, which begins" In recent years…". The integration of the feminist literature in the rest of the introduction is a better integration, which I enjoyed and valued. That first paragraph connected to the next, though, can be smoother and help set up that major connection between gender and professional development.	We have revisited the transition between the first and second paragraph to create a better flow and emphasise the important relationship between gender and professional development.	P.3, line 62-64
Final paragraph in the introduction: adjust the aim and central research questions with the gendered focus.	The overarching aim of the study and underlying research objectives have each been amended to reflect the gendered focus of the article.	P.7, line 165-168
The title of the article and your keywords might also be amended to include a gendered dimension.	We have amended the title and keywords.	See article title and keywords
Tightening: A fair amount has been added but the writing can be streamlined in a few places. For example, the ethics discussion, while I appreciated the additional detail, I thought could be condensed.	Thank you for picking up on this. We have revisited the paper and streamlined the writing throughout with a particular focus on the methods section. The ethics discussion is the best example of this.	For an example see p.13, lines 290-304

In a few places in the vignettes and analysis, I felt there could refinement. I have noted this in several areas but by no means all:		
Reviewer 1 *Vignette 1:* - "my feminine attributes" (16): Is the issue here your attributes, or is the issue you as a woman within an historically male dominated club culture? I would suggest the latter and revising that framing/wording.	We have revised the framing of this sentence in line with your suggestion.	p.16, line 366-368
- "young age" (17): should be youth	Amended in text.	p.16, line 383
- A concluding sentence or two in the section to reiterate your central point that you want to the reader to take away (e.g., your negotiations as a young developing professional woman in a masculine culture) would be useful**.**	We have added in a summary sentence to bring together the overall message from the vignette- females will likely have to navigate their way through a number of complex and gender fuelled challenges, in the short-term constructing and displaying desirable identities might help to offset some of these challenges.	p.17, line 403-406
Vignette 2: - "show don't tell": males boasting ruggedness, red-blooded dominance, high testosterone levels, or stronger players mocking weaker ones: You tell the reader this, but the reader doesn't "see" this. Including narrativized examples of these would have an impact on the reader, giving a sense of the experience of the environment. I know space is an issue so maybe a quick 1-2 sentence "scene" where these kinds of actions are on display?	We have added a sentence to demonstrate this. *For example, the U23 captain was stood in the centre of the room imitating one of the younger boys by pretending that he couldn't bicep curl the lightest weights on the weight rack.*	p.18, line 413-415

- “naturally more feminine”: words like “naturally” don’t sit well with the constructivist side of knowledge production. Comfortably or normally, perhaps? You might also consider “less expressively masculine” in addition to or in place of “more feminine”.	These terms have been replaced with more appropriate words.	P.20, line 481
- “observation” (21): last sentence in the section, change “observation” to “observation and subsequent reflection”	Amended in text.	P.21, line 486
- A concluding sentence or two at the end of this section could directly link empathy to the importance of personal/professional development in working with many different kinds of people (which is always a challenge!).	We have added a sentence at the end of the section to convey your comment. Thank you for this, it is a really important point to make and one that we hope is clear to the reader.	P.20, line 486-490
General discussion		
Reviewer 1 The revisions here are good. Only one item stuck out to me, and that is in the importance of having people with whom you can reflect (and thus develop). Emphasising the importance of support, peers, critical friends, etc. in developing would seem really valuable here. Reflection is important, yes, but having those around you with whom you can reflect has clearly been important for you… Others could really benefit from knowing you don’t have to (and probably shouldn’t) do this alone**.**	We have chosen to add additional information on the importance of shared reflection in the practical implications section. As a research team we believe that this supports our call for stronger support networks across the discipline of sport psychology. See below for addition; *Shared reflection was imperative in facilitating the personal and professional development of the first author throughout her involvement with Fulgrove United FC, and allowed her to understand that making sense of critical development experiences should not be done alone.*	P.28, line 661-664