Abstract

We examined trainee practitioners' initial experiences of applied sport psychology practice. Semi-structured interviews (4) were conducted over 6 months with 7 full-time MSc students before, during, and after the applied sport psychology module, when they were working with clients. Participants also kept reflective diaries over an 8-week period whilst working with clients. Findings included: (a) motivations and expectations of an ASP practice career, (b) perceptions of service delivery, (c) emotional demands, and (d) pivotal experiences. Findings extend previous literature on the initial stages of practitioner development, providing micro-level detail on aspects of the intense development process during this pivotal period.

"It's my dream to work with Olympic athletes": Neophyte sport psychologists' expectations

and initial experiences regarding service delivery

There is a growing body of literature into practitioner development and training with increasing numbers of students embarking on careers in applied sport psychology (ASP). Research on practitioner training and development has broadly included: trainees' auto-biographical accounts of service delivery experiences (e.g., Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008); experienced practitioners' reflections on their approaches to service delivery (e.g., Simons & Andersen, 1995); students' and professionals' views of training and supervision (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2000; Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Stambulova & Johnson, 2010); and athletes' and coaches' perceptions of practitioners and supervised placements (e.g., Gentner, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2004). Until recently, most previous research in the area of ASP professional training and development was not theory driven. Applied sport psychology tends to be focused on how psychological factor affect performance with a goal to optimise sports performance. However, a development in ASP has been literature that highlights the need to develop athletes holistically with sport psychology consultants holding values that include care, authenticity, and professionalism (Henschen, 2001). Friesen and Orlick (2011) have found that those with a holistic approach to sport psychology consultancy gravitate towards models around counseling. Tod (2007) suggested that one such counsellor development theory, specifically, Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) framework, would help synthesise ASP practitioner development knowledge.

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) divided their model into six phases from interviews with 100 American therapists with different levels of professional experience. This model addresses the entire career spectrum and illustrates how people mature as practitioners during and after their years of formal education. This model is divided into six phases: (i) lay

helper; (ii) beginning student; (iii) advanced student; (iv) novice practitioner; (v) experienced practitioner; (vi) senior practitioner. Initially, the lay helper phase covers the years before entering postgraduate education. The beginning and advanced student phases cover the time during postgraduate education. The novice, experienced, and senior practitioner phases occur after formal education. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) also identified themes that characterise development. For example, they described shifts from intense feelings of anxiety regarding initial client interactions towards a focus on the client where these feelings of anxiety subside; there is a shift away from a self-preoccupation. Also, trainees initially depend on their supervisors and teachers for guidance and have rigid approaches to service-delivery, whereas mature practitioners draw from their own internalised theories developed from experience and are flexible with intervention techniques, adjusting them to suit clients.

Grounded within Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) theory, recent research provides indications that neophyte ASP practitioners go through similar development experiences as trainee counsellors. For example, Tod, Andersen, and Marchant (2009, 2011) found that motives for pursuing a career in ASP paralleled research from counselling literature. Practitioners were tracked over 6 years collecting qualitative data through interviews before, during, and after formal postgraduate training. As trainees, motivations to enter into the field of applied sport psychology included the gratification of helping others and a desire to help athletes with issues they had experienced as sport participants. Tod et al. (2009) argued that some of these motives were socially acceptable transformations of self-serving desires to reduce intra- and inter-personal conflicts. Also trainees often adopted rigid "expert" problem-solving approaches to service delivery when initially interacting with clients. With experience and over time, some individuals started to focus on developing relationships with clients and adapting wider and more flexible interventions with a client focus. Tod et al.

(2009) also show how anxiety can be a powerful influence on, and can sometimes hinder ASP trainee development.

Tod and Bond (2010) extended this research by undertaking a longitudinal case study of a neophyte ASP practitioner, Anna, during her initial 2 years of training and service delivery, providing insights about the value of experiential learning through client contact, personal therapy, and supervision groups. Similar to Tod et al. (2009, 2011), parallels emerged between Anna's story and Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2003) model of professional development.

Whilst Tod and Bond's (2010) research was in a British context, Tod et al.'s (2009, 2011) research, was Australian based, where unlike most other countries, practitioner training is typically provided within psychology departments and governed by the national psychology professional organisation. Further research into other structures, cultures, and systems will broaden knowledge and indicate the robustness of previous findings. Another way to advance knowledge is to conduct more detailed, micro-level, research on the developmental process. For example, Tod et al.'s (2009, 2011) and Tod and Bond's (2010) research was retrospective with several months or years between interviews. Asking participants to keep diaries and reducing the time between interviews may help to reduce limitations associated with retrospective recall and shed a more fine-grained understanding of trainees' initial perceptions and experiences. Whilst previous research (Tod et al., 2009, 2011; Tod & Bond, 2010) provided practitioner's reflections on their training experiences, such a reduction in time between interviews will provide a more comprehensive understanding and will increase knowledge of an often uncertain and emotionally charged period of development. Additionally, previous research has focused on those who are practitioners or who wish to continue their career in sport psychology. Equally, finding out more about why some people do *not* continue to pursue a career in sport psychology after an

initial decision to pursue such a career may extend knowledge. These individuals have not been the focus on research, but longitudinal designs examining these people may generate findings complimenting and adding to existing knowledge. Knowing more about trainees' early experiences as they move from "lay helper" to "early student" will also allow further comparisons and contrasts to be drawn with counselling development theory. Potential implications from such comparisons may allow ASP trainee programs to be optimised when planning content for neophyte ASPs. For example, a greater understanding of the transition into training will assist educators prepare "early students" for normative developmental changes when training to become an ASP.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to follow ASP MSc students ('early students') through the first critical months of learning about and delivering ASP to athletes. Understanding these students' perceptions and initial experiences of ASP practice and their motivation to embark on a practice career will provide useful information to guide educators and supervisors. Such information, for example, could also be used to optimise ASP training courses to better prepare practitioners for their careers.

Method

Participants

Procedures involved the authorisation of the Ethical Review Application Form by a UK institution. Participants provided informed consent at three points during the research: before the first interview, after data collection, and after they had read the researchers' findings and interpretations. Participants were 7 full-time MSc students (5 females, 2 males; 21 to 45 years; mean = 28years) enrolled in an MSc in psychology of sport and exercise degree offered at a UK University (4 on British Psychological Society, BPS; 3 on non-BPS, footnote 1). The ASP module was delivered in semester 2 and provided opportunities to (a) engage in applied work, (b) learn about the process and elements of effective service delivery

practice, and (c) become aware of theory and research around the implementation of common interventions. This small sample size permitted sufficient in-depth data to be collected from each individual to allow the research question to be adequately answered.

Insider approach. I [first author] was a fellow student on the non-BPS accredited MSc and had built up relationships with my colleagues over the three months previous to the research. Similar to the "friendship as method" approach (Tillman-Healy, 2003), being a fellow student reduced the hierarchical separation between them and I inherent in most researcher-participant relationships and invited expressiveness, emotion, and empathy. Douglas and Carless (2012, p.50) argued that "despite the challenges they can create, the kinds of relationships 'insider' status offers lead to valuable and even unique insights." Some information would not have been accessible had we taken a more traditional "distanced" approach. Nevertheless, the "insider" approach (Moustakas, 1995; Sparkes, 1992) must be undertaken with caution. For example, it is unrealistic for the same mutual, close, and lasting friendship to develop between the researcher and every participant. Therefore, I made my position as researcher clear to participants so as not to unduly "mislead" participants. Additionally, researchers need to be aware that any "fear of offending" their participants, because of emerging loyalties to friends, may unduly influence the research process (Hoskins & Stolz, 2005). To help reduce 'bias', as Smith et al. (2009) outlines, the researcher needs to know when to strive for "inclusion" and "back off".

I approached respondents from a "stance of friendship", meaning that I treated them with respect and honoured their stories for humane and just purposes. Given the emotional labour involved in such a research approach, I engaged in the process of "bracketing" regularly, through various strategies (e.g., pilot interview, rigorous reflection in a reflexive diary, conversing with supervisor) to maintain fresh, "naïve" eyes (Allen-Collinson, 2011, p.305). [Author 2] was the module leader and for confidentiality reasons had no access to the

data until after the end of the module. Participants were fully aware of any involvement of teaching staff and were offered the right to withdraw without penalty four times over the course of the research. Because participants were aware of teaching staff involvement in the research, caution was taken to distance myself from teaching staff in an attempt to protect against social desirability given the delicate information that was being dealt with. To avoid influencing participants in any particular way, the personal experiences, values, and beliefs of ASP by [Author 1] were preserved as much as possible and much work was undertaken to maintain confidentiality. For example, participants involved in the project did not watch [Author 1]'s presentation for the module. An additional supervisor was available to assist with [Author 1]'s well-being to safeguard any risk to participants, and ensure their module performances and grades were not affected by their participation.

Procedures

We tracked participants from the start of the ASP module (midway through the MSc) until completion (a 16 week period). Interviews occurred (a) before start of module, (b) 2 months later (after learning about practice process and philosophy), (c) after a further 2 months (after practical experiences), and (d) after another month (after case accounts and module completion). Diaries were distributed at week 4 and completed twice weekly for 8 weeks. Diaries coincided with when students were involved in their early practice experiences with athletes.

Interview guide. An interview schedule was informed by the literature (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007) and the first guide included the following themes: (i) educational background; (ii) life experiences; (iii) perceptions of ASP; (iv) expectations of forthcoming ASP module; (v) ASP Practitioner qualities. These themes were assessed in a pilot interview and the following two themes were added: (i) ASP opportunities; (ii) career aspirations. The first round of interviews (approx. 26 hours) focused on

motivations for entry into ASP, module expectations, practice career, and job opportunities. The interview schedules for interviews 2, 3, and 4 were additionally informed by broad themes from previous interviews, particularly focusing on exploring changes in motivation and expectations, development of professional philosophy, experiences and emotions in early client engagement, and influential key events and individuals. Interview 4 was additionally informed by diary content (Corti, 1993); the diary was collected prior to the final interview. Any significant events written in the diary were raised in the interview with an opportunity to discuss in more detail with the participant.

Diaries. Diaries allowed for the opportunity to capture "lived" experiences with the capacity to generate additional and emotionally charged data (Corti, 1993). Participants completed the structured diary twice a week; once after module session and at another time of their choice. This schedule provided participants with a means to respond to occasional researcher-requested questions as well as to record other reflections (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Jones, 2000). The following open-ended questions were incorporated into the diary as prompts: (a) How do you feel about the session today? (b) How do you feel that you have changed? (c) How do you feel about working with the athlete? (d) How do you feel that you have changed after the session? (e) How do you feel that you have developed? These prompts were generated from the literature (e.g., Tod et al., 2009). The data collected from diaries and interviews were included in the final analysis.

Data Analysis

We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand the meaning of events and change throughout participants' daily lives to identify shared and individual experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Smith and Osborn's (2004) guidelines directed data analysis, which involved [Author 1] reading the interview transcripts and diary entries several times to become familiar with them. Data was then coded to allow themes to emerge.

Themes were then "weaved together" providing detailed descriptions of participants'

experiences (Creswell, 2009; Smith, 2008). Participants' reflections are conveyed in their

own words in the results section to connect data with theory. To examine research bias, the

first author's interpretation of the data and thematic analysis was reviewed, discussed, and

critiqued by the second and third authors (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Sparkes, 1992).

Member checking (by taking writings back to participants for examination, critique,

further discussions, and reflexive elaborations) was used to enhance trustworthiness and

credibility (Sparkes, 1992; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). This taking back of the findings to the

participants is not seen as a test of "truth," but as opportunities for reflexive elaborations

(Sparkes, 1992). Confidentiality was emphasised so that participants would be as honest as

possible and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' identities. Participants

were also told that their involvement had no bearing on their final grade in the module.

Results

Data clustered into the following four main themes: (a) motivations and expectations

of ASP (b) perceptions of service delivery (c) emotional journey, and (d) pivotal experiences.

Motivations and Expectations for an ASP Practice Career

Initial motivations. Most students were interested in becoming a sport psychologist

because they had a prior interest and ability in sport. For example, Louise says,

> I've always been […] good at sport. […] So then I took it further […] I did a Sports
>
> Science degree and within that, sport psychology […] I enjoy it the most and I was
>
> best at it. […] that made me decide that I wanted to do a masters in sport psychology

Most students had ambitions to work in elite sport, for example, Douglas says "I mean

obviously I'd love to work with an Olympic athlete" and many perceived that this was a

viable easily accessible career path and that "there must be quite a few opportunities with the

Olympics coming up" (Felicity). Additionally, most participants envisaged that completion

of the MSc would allow them to access employment opportunities as practitioners [quote]. It

was "kind of a dream when I started Uni, to be able to work with Olympic athletes" (Louise).

Simon stated that: "If you work with that person and they win Olympic gold... Although

you've only contributed a very small part of that, I think that would be massively satisfying

that you've been involved in that sort of success." Some participants seemed unhappy to

work "with athletes that are […] at the very bottom. I mean if you have to do that to get to

the top, that's fine, but it wouldn't necessarily be my favourite, kind of group" (Georgina).

Additionally, no participants expressed their interest to work with exercisers.

Realisations of a limited job market. Participants experienced disillusionment

regarding their training and career prospects. Throughout the module, they realised further

training was required, and that there were limited job opportunities, particularly in elite sport.

Participants' expectations changed in recognition that the "reality of working with elite

athletes was very unlikely" (Joanna). Some expressed how this "realism" had a sudden

influence on them, and for Claire, it had 'hit her for six':

> It kind of hit me for six a bit, so I don't think… well I certainly wasn't expecting all
>
> that kind of extra stuff [training]. Um, especially obviously, not being BPS
>
> accredited, now having to do another course, just to become BPS accredited before
>
> you can get onto all the kind of sport psychology um accreditation, so… that was a bit
>
> of a… a bit of a shock.

For many, this realisation seemed to have a significant influence on the level of their

engagement, behaviours, and emotions throughout the module. Finding out that "the chances

of you working with an elite athlete is quite low, at the Olympic Games… kind of shatters

your dreams" (Louise). Claire was:

> Quite gutted and disillusioned and kind of wondering what I'm doing here you know,
>
> completely lacked motivation after we got told that, cos I thought, I've spent all this

money on doing this course that I <u>thought</u> would get me half way through, and it's

barely gonna be a quarter of the way there.

Reflections on motivations. Realisations of a limited job market stimulated some

participants to reflect on their motivations to work in elite sport and helped increase their

understanding of why they were doing the course. Louise expressed in her diary how "I think

it brings you down from the clouds, doing the MSc" and Georgina reflected a little further:

> I always knew that I really liked sport and sport psychology and the older I got the
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> more interested I was and I guess in terms of motivations, for me it is really the
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> unfulfilled dream that I had that I think I can make up by becoming a sport
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> psychologist […] but I guess that now I know that may not be the case, so I have to be
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> aware of that but, I do know that now, so that's sort of maybe one thing that I am
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> more aware of, um that's something I have never quite reached or achieved as an
>
> athlete myself. So I guess I am almost trying to relive the experience by, you know,
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> helping others achieve it.

Partially altering ambitions. By the end of the module most participants seemed to

be gaining a more realistic expectation of what was involved in ASP and participants "altered

my ambitions slightly" (Joanne) in acknowledgement that opportunities existed, but that they

would need to be proactive and committed; "it's just a case of going out there and selling

yourself [and] try and [get] the opportunities for myself" (Jane). Some began to find or look

for solutions (e.g., looking for applied voluntary work, finding an ASP supervisor) to be able

to be a practitioner, although many did not feel that they were ready.

However, some questioned their career paths and one participant said, "I've got…

different couple of routes that I kind of wanna go that are easier" (Louise). Additionally,

once Claire realised the amount of investment, work and length of time involved in training,

she asked herself: "God would I really wanna do that as a career?" because there was much

more involved has she initially thought. And Doug entered into his diary, "I can't be

bothered to apply for jobs now – get more knock backs! I don't think I can keep taking this!"

Despite this, Joanne was still considering the possibility of starting up her own ASP business

after she completed the course and Louise could see the positives of having completed the

course, "I have… kind of matured enough to er cope with it (stress) myself and sort myself

out".

Changing Perceptions of Service Delivery

  Rigidity and client-led approaches. Initially, participants saw ASP as the simple,

linear application of mental skills: Joanna initially thought that there would be like "a menu

where they [sport psychology experts] say right you've got to do X, Y, Z and this is what you

can charge". Participants also felt that "you've gotta know what they [athlete] want and what

they're going to get out of it" (Jane), and "it's always more helpful to be an expert on it"

(Georgina).

  During the course of the module, however, there was a realisation that ASP was more

multifaceted than their preconceived ideas as outlined above. For example, Claire realised

that "there's other things that are… [just] as, if not more, important than obviously just

delivering mental skills". As the course progressed Joanne also realised that there was not a

"recipe or [...] a check list to go through. I think every situation will be very individual".

  All participants discussed how case study accounts of practice helped them start to

recognise that sport psychologists were more "facilitators to aid athletes develop their own

skills" (Georgina) than experts dispensing advice. During the module participants started to

understand that ASP is much more complicated than they initially expected and that there is a

need for flexibility and openness, and an 'art to listening.'

  Guiding approaches and theories. Initially, most participants discussed how they

had not really considered the importance of their philosophy and were unable to articulate it,

but then had realised that: "it's obviously important to, to kind of know and realise your own philosophy a bit more obviously working <u>with</u> an athlete" (Claire).

After this realisation, most participants began to lean towards one perspective and 'philosophy' of practice developed (which was predominantly cognitive-behavioural), partially so that they were able to broadly discuss what their philosophy might be, because they lacked specific detail. After an intake-interview it appeared that some were experiencing incongruency with their initial philosophical approach. Joanna was still experiencing ambivalence and was "sitting on the fence" regarding her philosophy.

I do think there's a lot, a lot you can change behaviour form that angle, if you make people focus on the way they think and, and identify dysfunctional ways of thinking, or irrational ways of thinking um that behaviour can be changed from that, well I wouldn't say easily, but certainly easier than um, I dunno whether it's easy or not, but I think it, it's possible and I think it's definitely the case in, especially in sports, like um… golf. So I'm sitting on the fence… still.

Having initially experimented with the humanist approach with her athlete she was now questioning whether it suited her because:

I felt a bit sort of um a bit impatient because I could see, I could see it so clearly what was going on and um... and she can't and I know there's a very, very long road to, to get her there.

Consequently, Joanne felt that she did not have the tolerance to be congruent with the humanistic approach. In the final stages of the research, whilst they had the ability to broadly discuss what their philosophy might be, most participants were still unsure about their core values and beliefs.

Emotional Demands

Disillusionment. As discussed above, prior to the module, hope and excitement echoed throughout the interviews. These feelings quickly turned to disillusionment and were linked to the realisation that their graduate education and training and career prospects were not as they had anticipated.

Anxiety and Isolation. Additionally, throughout the training, participants experienced anxieties; Claire said, "I was being really nervous about it and not very confident with it [the performance profile]." Some participants experienced a sense of loneliness where they felt "you're just kind of, by yourself" (Georgina). Joanna even described how "the MSc started as an adventure and turned into a prison sentence" because she felt so trapped by the MSc which seemingly dominated her life at this time. Initially, participants appeared to believe they were alone in experiencing anxiety and self-doubt. With time, students began to realise that their anxieties were shared with other neophyte practitioners, and this helped them normalise their feelings of isolation and anxieties about feeling responsible for being expert problem solvers. Jane, found it a relief when she realised that she was not alone experiencing these feelings:

> I guess the assessment from [a visiting lecturer], really um sort of struck home that we're not alone and there are other people out there who are obviously like us that, they're experiencing the same sort of things and anxiety and worry and self-doubt about what's coming next.

Despite this normalisation of anxiety, worry was heightened again with the prospect of leaving University and feeling unprepared, alone, and uncertain about their future careers, which was "quite daunting" (Claire) and "it just feels like… you're flooded" (Georgina). Because of the physical and emotional demands of the course, Doug reflected after reading through his diary: "Well, I've just read through the diary. I think I realise how tired I've been!" At the end of the module, those who were still interested in pursuing ASP careers

expressed concerns around (a) getting a supervisor and 'good' training, (b) the expense

involved in further training, (c) doing harm to future clients, and (d) feeling isolated on

completion of the MSc.

Pivotal Experiences

Experiences and information sources that influenced students' development included:

(a) live demonstrations, (b) client experience, and (c) interactions with colleagues.

Live demonstrations. Participants relied on their supervisors for what to do with

athletes. Given their reliance, participants felt that watching the supervisor conduct live

consultation sessions was helpful because they could "see how to approach such sessions and

where you can go with the information given by the athlete" (Jane). These live

demonstration sessions helped participants realise that "there are loads of things that can be

picked up from the athlete" (Georgina). Whilst live demonstrations helped during initial

practice encounters and enhanced confidence (mastery) in participants, they recognised that

"the real confidence would only come from doing it myself" (Georgina). Participants

realised that practical experience was essential.

Client experience. Participants emphasised the need to obtain experiential

knowledge of certain techniques and use themselves as 'guinea pigs' as Jane explains:

> I've used goal setting… quite a bit um, with other athletes and, and on myself as a
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> guinea pig. Um, because I think that's really important, to, to be able to show the, the
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> client or performer or whatever you want to call them, that you're prepared to do it.
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> During the course of the module, participants expressed the importance of learning

from working with clients and many describe how they "prefer to be much more hands on

rather than have to read a book, to be honest" (Claire). As a vivid illustration, one student

worked with an athlete whose issues could not be addressed by mental skills training, because

the athlete was "very, very depressed" and she "found it was very difficult to have a

conversation with her without getting into the self-esteem issues and, and into tears"

(Joanna). For Joanna, this made her aware of her limitations: "I probably shouldn't have

worked with her and I'm not going to". Additionally, this uncomfortable experience

prompted Joanna to explore counselling literature to help her understand the complexity of

the client-practitioner relationship dyad. This experience for Joanna increased self-awareness

of the emotional and time demands of some clients. Joanna wrote in her diary that her athlete

"was very negative about her prospect and I am finding it hard to remain positive". It appears

that this student experienced challenges with emotional overload with her client.

Interactions with colleagues. The influence of professional elders and feedback

from others (clients, peers, supervisors) was evident in classes, for example, Georgina said

> I just like even seeing [supervisor] go through that you know the whole process […] I
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> thought that it was nice to see how you can actually go about it and you know, may be
>
> see, you know this is good, you want to use that for yourself or may be here I
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> would've done something different.

Louise found a guest speaker helpful because of the role-play with peers during the

performance profile:

> [the] performance profiling guy, he was really good, like I didn't really know how to
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> do a performance profile properly before that and then, since then I've done one with
>
> an athlete and it was like quite easy to do cos I knew what to do and what to kind of
>
> expect from it. Um so that was, that was kind of a practical application which, I think
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> is what we should be doing in every kind of thing, like not just watching someone but
>
> doing it ourselves

Peers also provided a source of reflection which sometimes (re-)motivated participants. For

example, Doug's mood was reflected back to him by another peer which prompted him to get

back on track. He wrote in his diary:

> I was pretty moody Monday, Louise even commented on how negative I was about
>
> work. Like how I'd given up. I guess I just couldn't be bothered so now I'm getting
>
> myself back on track.

It seems that interactions with clients, supervisors, hearing about practice and being able to practice these applications are just as (if not more) important contributors to the student's development than theory and literature. For example, one participant said

> the theory side of it was great but I'm really looking forward to the applied version
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> […] I come here always wanting to work [in an applied setting] […] this is the bit
>
> which is really interesting to me […] I'm very much looking forward to the […]
>
> [learning] the practical things (Joanne).

General Discussion

Previous research has mostly relied on participants reflecting back on their experiences over several months or years, allowing people to perhaps re-story their accounts to fit with their current values and beliefs. This study is unique in allowing data to be collected as participants were engaged in the learning process which contributed to an in-depth picture of participants' dynamic lived experiences. Furthermore, the use of diary data added a methodological advance over previous research and was effective in capturing some more emotive data, which can often be difficult to collect face-to-face in interviews (Corti, 1993).

There were a range of reasons to become an ASP practitioner including reflected glory; making a difference to a person's life; to be appreciated by the athlete; rectifying failure as athlete; staying/moving into performance sport as a coping mechanism related to a transition from being an athlete. Indeed, practitioners enter into service delivery for reasons associated with their own experiences and needs and if they are not aware of these needs there is then a risk of over-involvement with clients (Andersen, 2000; Rønnestad & Skovholt,

2003). In mainstream counsellor research, helping others with issues one has faced and a need to compensate for one's own past are common motives for entering the profession (Guy, 1987; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For some participants, awareness and understanding of motivations grew over the module. Through the process of self-exploration it appears that some participants discovered motives of which they were not aware, supporting similar findings from Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003). However, at the end of the module a few participants still did not express an awareness of their motivations. Although raised self-awareness has been highlighted as a reasonable level of growth for neophytes (Holt & Strean, 2001), it is evident from this research that students need reflective practices to assist them with this self-knowledge.

Additionally, Taylor (1991) argued that entering sub-disciplines within field of psychology calls for self-motivation, creativity, and initiative. It seems vital that graduates entering into Sport and Exercise Psychology are aware these characteristics are needed so that they are less likely to experience disillusionment which may de-motivate them during their training. Indeed, it is common for many novices to experience disillusionment with their training program when they realise that they are not sufficiently equipped to enter the practice world (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Despite participants receiving career information prior to the course, participants appeared to have misconceived expectations about their career prospects. Similar to Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) novice descriptions, in time, some participants developed much clearer, more realistic, and less glamorised expectations. And some participants discussed a change in interest to work in other areas of psychology, such as educational, clinical, and counselling as well as exploring possibilities in other countries, such as Germany and Australia. Nonetheless, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) state that the higher the expectation before training begins, the greater the eventual disillusionment, disappointment, and anger; therefore it seems likely that such

anticipated excitement of ASP and the thought that they would be qualified after the MSc to work with elite athletes resulted in this disappointment.

Additionally, findings provided detail on the rigid and client-led approaches. In particular, when working with athletes, although most described their philosophy as 'athlete-centred' and their role as facilitatory and non-directive, participants perceived the practitioner as an advice giver and 'expert' and in line with this, took 'rigid problem-solver' approaches to working with athletes. This is perhaps because of a tendency to focus on performance enhancement techniques that includes teaching psychology skills training; an approach much in line with CBT that has dominated in sport psychology.

In the final stages of the research, whilst they had the ability to broadly discuss what their philosophy might be, most participants were still unsure about their core values and beliefs which is common given that it takes time it takes to develop philosophical congruency (Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2007; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Therefore, whilst participants started to explore what guiding theories might work for them, in the final research stages participants realised that they had only just scratched the surface of ASP knowledge. Hence, this research adds to knowledge about trainee's initial expectations, motivations, and perceptions, prior to working with clients, which has not been explored before in the literature. In particular, the findings highlighted the desires of ASP students to work with Olympic athletes and how these ambitions were altered by the end of the course.

Isolation has been cited as a major source of stress for therapists and trainees (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), and the stage of development explored in this study seemed just as isolating and anxiety-provoking for participants, which is why Guy (1987) stressed the importance of spending time with others. Another common theme for beginner students is a reliance on their supervisors for what to do with athletes which participants expressed as vital (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). This finding parallels research that learning directly from

those who are qualified practitioners is a valuable experience (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). Also common during beginning stages of development is trouble detaching themselves from clients during intake sessions and some participants appeared to have this experience with athletes during the 8 week applied experience (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Joanna found this a particularly challenging experience which seemed to influence the whole group's level of awareness. This experience is in line with research from Holt and Strean (2001) who also found that a trainee's level of self-awareness increased as a result of an initial intake meeting with an athlete.

These findings extend previous research on the early stages of practitioner development (e.g., Tod et al., 2009; Tod & Bond, 2010), such as providing more detail on the pivotal transition from "lay helper" to "beginning student" than other studies. Pivotal learning experiences that involved interactions with clients, supervisors, guest speakers, and peers parallel with Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) stage model detailing the influence of professional elders and feedback from others (clients, peers, supervisors). Clinical/psychotherapeutic intervention was indicated and was a pivotal learning experience for Joanna in particular. The group also learnt from this experience about the need for referrals through discussions about the difficulty Joanne had with her client's depression in a forum with the module leader. Joanna's experience was important for participants in shaping their views of the scope of ASP and the competencies required to be effective. However, there was also an indication that this experience contributed to anxiety and doubts about their competence. Challenging moments with athletes also appeared pivotal to development if reflected upon and appraised fully. Example lessons included maintaining emotional detachment with clients and resisting the urge to give advice to clients. These findings parallel those identified in other ASP research (e.g., Tod et al., 2009, 2011) about how pivotal experiences (live demonstrations, client experiences and interactions with colleagues)

influenced student's development. The longitudinal and in-depth nature of the research, and the use of both interviews and diary data, meant that an understanding of the meaning of events and change throughout participants' daily lives could be developed.

The "insider" approach may be subjected to critical scrutiny, particularly from more "traditional" (positivist) forms of research requiring a separation between the researcher/s and the participant/s. Steps and procedures were taken to counter any emerging concerns throughout the research. For example, [Author 2] critically discussed these issues with [Author 1] and [Author 3] acted more "objectively" as he was not involved in the data collection of the project.

With regards to the potential issue of the involvement of the module leader, every possible opportunity was used to ensure confidentiality to participants. For example, in the interviews [Author 1] reminded the participant that the supervisor would not be listening to or reading full accounts of their interviews. No data was seen or discussed by the second or third author until the module was over, participants had been awarded their degrees, and data had been collected and de-identified. Participants were assured that involvement (or not) did not influence their performance in the module or degree and informed consent, along with the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, was offered four times during the research.

ASP trainees could use the current findings to assist in their own self-explorations, such as, the ways they manage their own development. Similar to previous findings, (Strean & Strean, 2005), many of the participants had been former athletes whose motivations for pursuing applied careers involved addressing past sporting failures. Such motivations may influence service delivery outcomes negatively if not managed. Practitioners may develop awareness of and learn to manage such motivations through personal therapy. In many frameworks of individual counselling and therapy, it is unethical to practice without having engaged in some form of regular personal therapy (Hays, 2002). With more frequent

supervision and a raised self-awareness, practitioner effectiveness could be heightened (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000; Winstone & Gervis, 2006).

Helping graduates learn that entering ASP calls for self-motivation, creativity, and initiative may assist them in dealing with disillusionment and shifts in motivation, potentially avoiding disengagement. Helping students learn early that these characteristics are necessary for successful careers in an industry where stable 9-5 jobs are infrequent would also enable them to begin developing a knowledge base in the field, develop networks, and sufficiently prepare for their training (Taylor, 1991). Furthermore, if graduates are made aware of the ways in which they can succeed by educators who (a) manage expectations, (b) provide a realistic picture of the training process and career opportunities, and (c) provide messages that opportunities do exist through hearing others 'success stories', then this might help students feel more positive, optimistic and supported through the training process.

These current findings could help prepare prospective students for what is expected during the process of training and highlight career prospects; offering shared experiences from working applied sport psychologists might be beneficial. Specifically, the physical and emotional demands of the training involved to become an applied sport psychologist are highlighted by the participants. Future research, investigating students at other universities may provide a more national and international representation which could then provide more extensive conclusions.

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Footnote

[1]There were two degrees operating concurrently with the content and classes - 4 of these participants were enrolled on the MSc Psychology of Sport and Exercise which was BPS accredited (as they had a BPS endorsed undergraduate degree in Psychology), and 3 were on the MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology (as they did not have a BPS endorsed undergraduate degree in Psychology). All students completed the same modules and assessment, and had exactly the same educational experience.