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1 Practitioners' use of motivational interviewing in sport: A qualitative enquiry

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14

Abstract

15 The purpose of this study was to explore the use of motivational interviewing (MI) in
16 sport contexts by experts in that approach. Specifically, to understand which aspects
17 of the MI approach are deemed valuable for working in sport, and begin to
18 understand how these aspects are best applied. Nine practitioners participated in
19 semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis identified themes related to core
20 and sub-components of MI (e.g., relational spirit, technical microskills, applied tools
21 and the MI communication styles continuum). Additional themes relate to integrating
22 MI with other interventions, challenges of working with athletes (e.g., mandated
23 attendance, ambivalence about change) and unique aspects of working in sport
24 contexts (e.g., frequency, duration and location of contact points). Participants also
25 outlined essential ingredients for an MI training curriculum for practitioners in sport.
26 This counseling approach appears to have valuable relational and technical
27 components to facilitate the building of the therapeutic alliance, enhance athlete
28 readiness for change, and support delivery of action-orientated interventions in
29 applied sport psychology.

30 *Key words: motivational interviewing; applied sport psychology; therapeutic*
31 *alliance; ambivalence; integration*

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Introduction

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The relationship between sport psychology practitioners and their athlete clients is consistently recognised as very important for the outcomes of sport psychology consultancy, (e.g., Andersen & Speed, 2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). Nevertheless, what is required in the discipline is greater clarity on how to cultivate and maintain these working alliances, beyond broad descriptions of rapport building and verbal and non-verbal communication. In this regard, repeated recommendations have been made for sport psychology to learn from wider disciplines within psychology (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999), with limited sources delineating specific relational and technical communication skills for sport psychologists (e.g., Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Watson, Hilliard, & Way, 2017).

One approach which seeks to maximise the working alliance, and is starting to receive attention in applied sport psychology (Mack, Breckon, Butt, & Maynard, 2017; Mack, Breckon, O'Halloran, & Butt, 2019; Turner et al., 2019, Wood, Mack, & Turner, 2020), is motivational interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). MI is a counseling therapy which was founded on the principles of client-centred psychotherapy of Carl Rogers (1959), yet is different to traditional Rogerian counseling, in that it is intentionally directional (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005). Guided by its underlying 'spirit', MI primarily facilitates the building of an interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client, and aims to resolve ambivalence towards behavioral change. Initially applied as a pre-treatment to action-orientated intervention work on substance addictions (Miller, 1983), MI was conceived not from testing empirically-driven hypotheses, but phenomenologically

57 from intuitive clinical practice, as an alternative to the more confrontational styles of
58 therapy which were prominent at the time (Miller & Rose, 2009).

59 Breckon (2015) offers an extensive description of the core elements of MI: the
60 relational component (spirit) which consists of partnership, acceptance, compassion
61 and evocation; the technical component (microskills) which mobilises the spirit,
62 known by the acronym OARS - open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections,
63 summaries; the four+ processes (engaging, focussing, evoking, planning,
64 maintaining) within which the relational and technical components are actualized;
65 and the language of behavior change (change talk, sustain talk).

66 Psychotherapy research has repeatedly concluded that therapists who form
67 stronger alliances with their patients show better treatment outcomes than therapists
68 who form weaker alliances (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2007; Horvath & Symonds, 1991;
69 Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Wilmots, Midgley, Thackeray, Reynolds, & Loades,
70 2019). MI acknowledges conceptual differences between relational and technical
71 components, and offers a philosophy of professional relationship development and
72 maintenance, and techniques to achieve those aims, in keeping with working alliance
73 theory (see Hatcher & Barends, 2006). Many of the therapist attributes and
74 techniques associated with strong alliances reported by Ackerman and Hilsenroth
75 (e.g., exploring, reflecting, providing accurate interpretations, and affirming; 2003)
76 can be found within the MI approach (e.g., Miller & Moyers, 2015, Table 1, p. 408;
77 Miller & Rollnick, 2013), not least the value of empathy and engagement with clients
78 (Miller & Rose, 2009). Similar attributes and techniques have been repeatedly
79 outlined as ideal for sport psychology practitioners (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish,
80 2015). What appears to be sparse in applied sport psychology literature is not the
81 importance of demonstrating engagement, forming working alliances and

82 communicating effectively with athletes (e.g., Sharp & Hodge, 2015), but explanation
83 of the fundamental processes or mechanics of achieving these things, i.e., the *how*
84 of alliance building and intervention delivery. This is a gap that MI can fill potentially,
85 particularly for students and neophyte practitioners in sport and exercise psychology.
86 One further contribution that MI may make to applied sport psychology could be a
87 framework to underpin the action-orientated approaches, such as cognitive-
88 behavioral therapies and strategies, which are dominant in the discipline. This
89 integration was, in fact, the purpose of MI upon its conception, with the MI spirit
90 (ways of *being*) supporting the techniques (ways of *doing*) of other approaches
91 (Miller & Rose, 2009). An MI-CBT integration is becoming understood in other areas
92 of psychology (e.g., Naar & Safren, 2017), and this is perhaps where sport
93 psychology could seek guidance on how to effectively integrate these complimentary
94 approaches on a common factors, assimilative or theoretical level, as opposed to
95 eclectically combining tools and techniques from multiple approaches with little
96 regard for their underpinning theories (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005).

97 Mack and colleagues (2017) identified a limited use and understanding of
98 core elements of MI by applied sport psychologists, but a significant role for MI in
99 sport psychologists' work - including the use of MI as a stand-alone or an integration
100 with other approaches. Subsequently, Mack et al. (2019) shared a single session
101 case study outlining the use of MI with one professional athlete. Therefore, the aims
102 of the current study were to provide an in-depth exploration of which components of
103 the MI approach underpin expert practitioners' work in sport, and to begin the
104 process of understanding the application of these components, for example to
105 enhance verbal communication, facilitate alliance formation and maintenance,

106 increase athlete readiness for intervention, or in conjunction with other
107 psychotherapeutic approaches.

108 **Method**

109 **Participants and sampling**

110 Nine practitioners took part in data collection. To qualify for inclusion,
111 participants were required to have extensive knowledge of, and experience in
112 applying MI, and be doing so in a sporting context. The Motivational Interviewing
113 Network of Trainers (MINT; www.motivationalinterviewing.org) provides training
114 internationally for practitioners wishing to become trainers in MI, and determines the
115 content and curriculum for MI training globally. MINT has a rigorous application
116 process for new members, and membership of MINT was therefore used as an
117 indication of knowledge and experience in MI, and was deemed essential for
118 inclusion in this study.

119 A purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of 16 MI practitioners known within the
120 research team's network, and thought to be using MI in a sporting context, were
121 contacted via email to participate voluntarily in this study. Further, four practitioners
122 responded to a public message broadcast on the MINT eForum (self-recruited
123 sampling; Gomm, 2008) and six practitioners were recommended to the primary
124 researcher by practitioners from the initial round of sampling (snowball sampling;
125 Patton, 2002). This represents an exhaustive initial sample, on a global scale, of
126 practitioners thought to be applying MI in a sporting context. Of these 26
127 practitioners, 17 were eliminated due to failing to satisfy inclusion criteria, or being
128 unresponsive to repeated requests to participate. This gave a final sample size of
129 nine participants, based around the world (two in Australia; five in the U.S.A.; two in
130 mainland Europe). Participants came from a range of educational and training

131 backgrounds, including clinical psychology (n=1), health psychology (n=1), sport
132 psychology (n=3), counseling (n=2) and sport coaching (n=2). All participants were
133 members of chartered societies and governing bodies of their relevant fields (e.g.,
134 Australian Psychological Society; Southern Association for Counselor Education and
135 Supervision; National Association of Social Workers). Finally, all participants were
136 applying MI in a sporting context, in roles such as head coach, sport psychologist,
137 addictions counselor, and MI trainer. The sample comprised of seven males and two
138 females, aged between 32 and 53 years (41.2 ± 6 years). Participants had between
139 4 and 23 years of experience (13.2 ± 6.9 years) in their respective fields. Finally,
140 participants were working with a range of athletes, including amateur (e.g., club, high
141 school), college (e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)), professional
142 (e.g., National Football League (NFL); Major League Baseball (MLB); Australian
143 Football League (AFL)), and Olympic level.

144 **Procedure**

145 Those recruited were sent participant information, participant consent forms
146 and a demographics questionnaire prior to their interviews. Voluntary, written,
147 informed consent was received from all participants. Ethical approval was provided
148 by the governing institution of the research team (HWB-2016-17-S&E-13, Sheffield
149 Hallam University). Data were collected in the form of semi-structured qualitative
150 interviews, which were conducted by the principal researcher. The semi-structured
151 nature of the interviews permitted the interviewer to deviate from the interview guide,
152 to explore novel concepts as and when they arose (Patton, 2002). Interviews were
153 conducted using internet-based conferencing software (Zoom; <https://zoom.us/>), as
154 this was a sample of international participants. All interviews were audio recorded on
155 a manual Dictaphone. Audio recordings were then transcribed (converted to written

156 form) verbatim, which initiates immersion in, familiarity with and reflection on the
157 collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and can mark the beginning of the data
158 analysis process (Emerson & Frosch, 2004).

159 **Interview guide**

160 The interview guide was designed deductively, in that it was informed by
161 existing MI theory, but with flexibility to ask spontaneous, probing questions. Each
162 member of the research team contributed to the development of the final interview
163 guide. Questions in the interview guide focused on key aspects of the application of
164 MI, including the application and relevance (to sport contexts) of MI spirit, MI
165 technical skills, MI processes, eliciting change talk, managing ambivalence and
166 discord, and integrating MI with other approaches.

167 **Data analysis**

168 As latter participant interviews were being conducted, and former interviews
169 were being transcribed verbatim from audio recordings, the primary researcher
170 began to suspect that data saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018) had been reached.
171 This was due to a repetition of responses given by participants in earlier interviews.
172 Therefore, additional participants were not initially sought prior to commencement of
173 data analysis. This impression of data saturation was strengthened as interview
174 transcription was completed, and after performing several initial sweeps of the
175 transcriptions to become familiar with the data, though without being pre-emptive
176 regarding what would eventually constitute themes (Saunders et al., 2018). Data
177 saturation was subsequently discussed and agreed upon within the research team
178 as data analysis progressed.

179 In order to gain a clear understanding of how MI is being applied in sport, a
180 deductive to inductive thematic analysis of the data was conducted in two phases

181 (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019) by the primary researcher. In line with
182 the deductively-designed, a priori interview questions determined by broad MI core
183 components and language (e.g., Miller & Rollnick, 2013) an initial deductive sweep
184 of the data was performed. The purpose of this was to identify responses related to
185 the MI core components of spirit (e.g., partnership, empathy), microskills (e.g.,
186 reflections, affirmations), four+ processes (e.g., engaging, focussing) and language
187 of change (e.g., change talk, sustain talk). In the second phase, transcripts were
188 analysed inductively to identify, analyse and report novel themes from the data
189 (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013) which did not fall immediately within the MI
190 core components, such as communication styles and traps to avoid, and applied
191 tools of MI.

192 The primary researcher extracted codes consisting of discrete, original
193 participant responses from interview transcripts, and grouped codes of similar
194 meaning to create sub-themes, using spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel). A
195 similar process was executed on a sample of interview transcripts by other members
196 of the research team. Sub-themes were discussed, discrepancies were addressed
197 and codes were re-grouped within the research team, until consensus was reached
198 that the shared meaning of codes within each sub-theme was consistent, and had
199 been labelled appropriately (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A similar process took place to
200 group sub-themes in order to construct themes, and to label themes in ways which
201 both accurately captured theme content and would be most meaningful for the
202 reader. The research team included two practitioners who are trained in MI, and two
203 who are not, whose analysis of interview transcripts was therefore not lead by prior
204 MI knowledge. This assisted with reducing researcher bias in the data analysis.

205 Throughout the analysis, MI-specific language has been used where possible
206 to label themes and subthemes, to maintain clarity and consistency with existing MI
207 literature, and the MI practitioner training process. Novel themes which were
208 constructed were labelled accordingly with new terminology. In keeping with previous
209 articles (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2019) themes and sub-themes are presented
210 briefly in Tables 1-4, in conjunction with thick descriptive quotes from participants to
211 provide detail and context for the reader. Quotes were chosen based on how
212 accurately they captured the shared meaning of the theme or sub-theme they
213 represent, and those which would provide the most meaning, context and clarity for
214 the reader. Consideration was given to the eight criteria for excellence in qualitative
215 research (worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant
216 contribution, ethics, meaningful coherence) in the design, implementation, analysis
217 and reporting of this research (Tracy, 2010). To give one example of this, to
218 represent the perspectives and contributions of the entire sample, quotations from all
219 nine participants, rather than a select few individuals, were chosen to add detail and
220 context to the themes for the reader (multivocality, contained within credibility; Tracy,
221 2010). Participants have been identified with a label in accordance with their
222 professional role (e.g., Psychologist 1).

223 Results

224 Participants highlighted numerous aspects of the MI approach which feature
225 prominently in their applied work in sport, including the four core components of MI,
226 the applied tools of MI, sharing information and expertise with athletes in an MI-
227 consistent manner, relational and technical traps to avoid, and the MI verbal
228 communication styles continuum. Participants also described their consideration of
229 structure and processes of integrating MI with other approaches or interventions, and

230 several aspects of the MI approach which are relevant to working with athletes in
231 brief contact, or as a team. A number of challenges associated with working in sport
232 settings, and unique aspects of the sport environment, which give rise to
233 opportunities for implementing the MI approach, were also described. Finally,
234 participants shared insights on what are considered to be essential ingredients and
235 structure of MI training for sport psychologists.

236 **Core components of MI (Table 1)**

237 All nine participants commented on the four core components of MI (spirit;
238 technical skills; four processes; language of change; see Table 1), indicating that
239 these are paramount in their work with athletes, and felt these would be relevant
240 regardless of the context of their work. A summary of these can be seen in Table 1.
241 All participants indicated that the spirit of MI was essential to their work with athletes,
242 was something which drew them to the MI approach and something upon which they
243 placed great value. For example, Psychologist 2 said, "I use a lot of MI with athletes,
244 but one thing I always, always use is the spirit. To me, that's the most critical
245 component."

246 Participants spoke of the importance of each of the technical skills, primarily complex
247 reflections and affirmations:

248 *I think what the MI training did for me was really help me sharpen my use of*
249 *reflections, in particular complex reflections. I've really noticed a difference*
250 *when I've been working with clients in terms of how much quicker it is to*
251 *engage with the client now, and how we're getting better results than I was*
252 *previously. [Psychologist 2]*

253 Psychologist 1 described affirmations as "something that is specific and that you're
254 observing that's positive about an internal quality that they have." All participants

255 reported their use of the original four processes model (engage, focus, evoke, plan)
256 and several spoke of a phase of maintenance or troubleshooting, which has been
257 proposed elsewhere for addition to the original model as a fifth process (maintain),
258 known as the four+ processes (Breckon, 2015). Participants were asked to elaborate
259 on how they specifically apply these processes with athletes. Two points in particular
260 were clear and recurring; firstly, that engaging is something which is ever-present,
261 regardless of the stage in the relationship or the intervention. And secondly, that the
262 processes do not take place in a linear, stepwise manner, but rather in a fluid,
263 flexible, non-linear manner:

264 *Let's say suddenly the athlete comes up with some kind of sustain talk that*
265 *gives us a hint that maybe we are too far now in the process, do we really*
266 *have the right focus here, since here comes a lot of sustain talk? Should we*
267 *proceed to help this person resolve ambivalence, or should we maybe take it*
268 *a bit slower and just do a big mapping of the athlete's whole situation and see*
269 *what's the most important focus right now? Maybe we were a bit too quick*
270 *when we tried to move further on... it's not a step by step process.*

271 [Psychologist 4]

272 Regarding the language of change, participants referred specifically to change talk
273 (athlete language in favour of behavior change), sustain talk (athlete language
274 against behavior change), ambivalence (athlete language which indicates mixed
275 feelings about behavior change) and resistance (athlete language which indicates a
276 lack of readiness for behavior change). All participants stated that they are
277 constantly listening to the language being used by their athletes regarding behavior
278 change, and become more attuned to this the more they practise MI. Participants are
279 consciously trying to evoke change talk from their athletes, as well as trying to

280 reinforce it upon hearing it. Several participants indicated that they are deliberate
281 and selective in their responses to athlete sustain talk, opting to stay strengths-
282 orientated and frame their responses in a way that will evoke change talk rather than
283 reinforce sustain talk. It was acknowledged that change talk in particular tends to
284 come primarily in the form of 'preparatory' language:

285 *The form that I hear the most in terms of change talk is usually more of that*
286 *preparatory change talk, that desire to change, or 'I need to change' or 'I*
287 *should change', 'I should study more at night', 'I know I shouldn't be partying',*
288 *'I know I should go talk to the trainer about this injury', it's a lot of that.*

289 [Counselor 1]

290 Participants generally stated that their work with athletes is primarily about applying
291 MI in sport as they would in other settings, as opposed to a sport-specific version of
292 MI being required. For example, Coach 2 would ask themselves, "how effective is
293 this, how can I use MI, the techniques or the spirit, how can MI help this conversation,
294 this coaching session be better?" Nevertheless, participants indicated that an
295 intimate understanding of elite sport environments and challenges is essential, as
296 well as athlete cultures, norms, pressures, risks and rewards. It was felt that
297 adaptations to the MI approach may have to be made in order to fit with these, and
298 opportunities to apply MI in sport settings may have to be actively sought. Another
299 participant described MI as "home base", and stated, "...if I'm confused at where we
300 are, or where we're going, I always just go back to MI" [Counselor 2]. To that end,
301 participants commented further on how MI enhances their work in sport settings,
302 including applied tools, sharing information and expertise, traps to avoid, challenges
303 of working with athletes, unique aspects of the sport context, brief MI interactions,

304 the communication styles continuum, using MI with teams, integrating MI with sport
305 interventions, and MI training.

306 **MI Applied tools (Table 2)**

307 Participants referred to several tools from the MI approach, the most common
308 of which were scaling rulers, agenda setting, and elicit-provide (with permission) -
309 elicit (E-P-E; see discussion for description).

310 *I think that [collaborative agenda setting] does a couple of really useful*
311 *things... you're getting a sense of what is most important for the athlete, and*
312 *often we make assumptions about 'ah yes they'd like to work on this first', or*
313 *'this is most important', but by agenda setting, we're essentially asking them*
314 *'ok what's most important for you right now?', and they're then giving us that*
315 *feedback which is really valuable. [Psychologist 2]*

316 **MI-consistent sharing information and expertise (Table 2)**

317 Participants reflected that the E-P-E format is a valuable and efficient tool for
318 sharing key information with athletes in a respectful and collaborative manner, and
319 that it can be used in conjunction with more instructional or educational approaches,
320 to share information in an MI-adherent manner:

321 *I think that it's much more effective if you offer it in that MI-consistent way, that*
322 *E-P-E, asking what they know about imagery, cognitive rehearsal, asking if*
323 *they've used it before and getting some input about that. Then saying 'would*
324 *you like to hear more about it' if they don't have much knowledge about it and*
325 *how it can work, then asking if it would be useful for them and in what way.*
326 *When you do that, you get greater buy-in. [Psychologist 2]*

327 Relational and technical traps to avoid (Table 2)

328 Participants spoke of 'traps to avoid' from the MI approach, including the
329 'expert trap' (and associated 'righting reflex') and the 'premature focus trap'.
330 One participant gave a specific example of conflicting feelings and concerns
331 between them and an athlete who was playing through a potentially career-ending
332 injury, and highlights how priorities can be completely different between stakeholders.
333 This example contains the expert trap and righting reflex, sustain talk, acceptance
334 and equipoise (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

335 *I had this gut feeling of 'oh my gosh, I just want this guy to get an MRI, I want*
336 *this guy to get healthy so he can dominate at the next level' but he really felt*
337 *so much like 'if I go through this and tell my coach that I'm hurt, I'm losing*
338 *eligibility, I'm afraid I'm going to miss out on being drafted, if I rehab I may not*
339 *get the velocity on my fastball that I had before', so it's hard for me in those*
340 *instances when I feel like 'I know what's best for you', and I need to leave that*
341 *feeling at the door and be willing to sit with that sustain talk, sit with some of*
342 *that resistance to change, and honour it some, rather than push and go*
343 *'you've really got to get this fixed, you need to figure this out, you need to be*
344 *honest with your coach' because I'm not in his shoes, I'm so removed from*
345 *being there. [Counselor 1]*

346 Participants also described differences between praising (i.e., attaching value or
347 making judgements about behavioral or performance outcomes) and affirming (i.e.,
348 enhancing self-efficacy, self-exploration and autonomy), and spoke generally of
349 always striving to affirm rather than praise. Nevertheless, one participant explained
350 being conscious of using both praise and affirmation in their role as a coach:

351 *I use praise as a coach, and I think most coaches do, 'nice hitting, nice job*
352 *there', but one thing that motivational interviewing has caused me to do is ask*
353 *a question like 'how do you think that went?' and I go into MI from there, so an*
354 *affirmation that I'll give them would be along the lines of 'you're thinking about*
355 *this more deeply' or 'you're taking this more seriously'... [Coach 2]*

356 **MI communication styles continuum (Table 2)**

357 Two participants, both of whom are coaches, commented on the directing-
358 guiding-following continuum of communication, and how they attempt to stay mostly
359 in the guiding style. The first of these participants acknowledged that this is openly
360 discussed between coaches during their coaching sessions:

361 *I think it's important to have a guiding style, like 95% of the time... And I talk to*
362 *my colleagues about this as well, 'we have to be more guiding now', 'now is*
363 *time to be more directive'. Often if we have been directive we have to go*
364 *quickly back to the guiding style. [Coach 1]*

365 The other participant acknowledged that there are times when they have to be
366 directive in their role, but limit this to when necessary, and described a conscious
367 process of "slipping in and out" of the MI approach [Coach 2].

368 **Brief contact MI interactions (Table 2)**

369 The unique settings and circumstances of sport contexts (see Table 3) give
370 rise to conversations which participants stated could last as little as 30 seconds. This
371 has led participants to recognise the need to be able to interact with athletes in a
372 carefully considered way in these very brief moments:

373 *Sometimes these conversations are two minutes long, but starting with that*
374 *open-ended question, 'what were you thinking here, what was the plan?', or if*
375 *I go out to the mound with a pitcher who is struggling, it's really trying to*

376 *understand better, instead of saying 'this is what you need to do, here's what*
377 *you should be doing'. [Coach 2]*

378 **Using MI with teams (Table 2)**

379 Several participants acknowledged that this was perhaps an area to which
380 they should give more consideration. Nevertheless, two participants were able to
381 give specific examples of their use of MI with teams. Psychologist 5 spoke in detail of
382 their use of MI during team sessions, for example a session to resolve conflict
383 between players and a coach:

384 *... this team meeting, I spent 90% of it reflecting back to them. A lot of it was,*
385 *'so you don't feel like the coach is listening to you; it's frustrating that he's not*
386 *asking you all what you think and just telling you what to do; so he's frustrating*
387 *you because he's moving you to new positions and he's not telling you why',*
388 *those kinds of things. And it built engagement like I haven't seen.*

389 [Psychologist 5]

390 **Integrating MI with other interventions in sport (Table 2)**

391 The suitability of MI for integrating with other approaches or interventions in
392 sport was highlighted by all participants, who felt that as a minimum, the spirit, the
393 technical skills and listening for change talk would probably be relevant in any
394 circumstance:

395 *I haven't really come across any mainstream approach that's incompatible*
396 *with motivational interviewing. People can find some way to weave it in there*
397 *in some form or fashion. [Psychologist 3]*

398 When it comes to the process of integrating MI into one's applied work, what appears
399 to be essential is having an in-depth understanding of the different approaches being
400 integrated:

401 *No matter what intervention style I'm doing, I always have motivational*
402 *interviewing running in the background, and I was trained in person-centred*
403 *therapy and existential psychotherapy and then moved into the more CBT-ish*
404 *kind of stuff, and it [MI] just fits really well. [Psychologist 3]*

405 This participant also spoke of two options for integrating MI with an approach like
406 CBT or interpersonal therapy, either as preparation for another intervention, or
407 applied extemporarily when faced with, for example, ambivalence:

408 *One is you just kind of do it as a precursor to CBT and then the other one is*
409 *you look at the common elements and you blend them together and I think*
410 *you could take a utilitarian approach. [Psychologist 3]*

411 Three participants shared more details of how they would integrate MI with another
412 approach for the duration of an intervention. Psychologist 2 described a framework
413 for underpinning action-orientated intervention work such as cognitive-behavioral
414 strategies:

415 *I see MI as the kind of framework for working with the athlete, and then*
416 *cognitive behavioral strategies might be some of the tools that you use within*
417 *that framework, so your mindset of working with the athlete is very much*
418 *about the spirit of MI, you're using some of the techniques of MI and so forth,*
419 *and then you're using the CB strategies, and you're delivering them within that*
420 *framework. [Psychologist 2]*

421 Psychologist 4 described how their work was 'topped and tailed' with more MI-
422 specific work, and how MI was used to support a middle phase of intervention
423 delivery:

424 *... I think I always start from MI in my approach, to explore the situation and*
425 *the goal and so on... Then I'm combining my work with strategies from*

426 *cognitive behavioral coaching, for example using mindfulness... MI is always*
 427 *helpful to strengthen the readiness and to strengthen the feeling of how*
 428 *important this is, and to strengthen confidence also... I always have a follow-*
 429 *up session two or three months after the last session, and in that follow-up*
 430 *session of course a lot of MI is the focus. [Psychologist 4]*

431 Counselor 2 indicated both an MI-intensive period at commencement of the
 432 relationship, and the ever-present nature of MI in their work:

433 *I tend to be heavy on MI in the beginning, because I think the spirit is what*
 434 *really creates the most fruitful relationship... after five or six sessions, we're*
 435 *moving into mindfulness strategies or CBT, or for some a lot of traumatic*
 436 *experiences come up, so we'll move into strategies to work through that. [MI]*
 437 *is always interwoven, especially if emotions get high and an athlete needs a*
 438 *break, I'll go right back to just basic reflections, that's 'home base'. [Counselor*
 439 *2]*

440 **Challenges of working with athletes (Table 3)**

441 Several participants spoke of the challenges of working with athletes,
 442 including mandated attendance, coaches wanting to know the content of sessions,
 443 stigma attached to mental health and psychology, athletes not being used to
 444 answering questions or having opinions, and athletes being mistrusting of 'outsiders'.
 445 The MI core components of spirit and technical skills were repeatedly highlighted as
 446 primary strategies in overcoming many of these challenges.

447 *I have found that I have to lay a lot more groundwork in terms of establishing*
 448 *rapport and trust with athletes than I do with most of my other clients... they're*
 449 *so consumed with their responsibilities to the team that I'm like an outsider... it*
 450 *takes time to inspire trust. [Counselor 2]*

451 Unique aspects of the sport context (Table 3)

452 Several participants acknowledged that interactions in sport take place in
453 settings which are very different to other contexts (e.g., healthcare), including locker
454 rooms, training grounds, gyms and corridors. Additionally, participants acknowledged
455 that contact with athletes can occur with reduced frequency and significantly reduced
456 duration compared with other settings. Examples of these include half time, time-
457 outs and in-game situations, such as visiting a pitcher's mound during a baseball
458 game. Psychologist 4 labelled these conversations as "MI on the go". Participant 9
459 highlighted how most MI work takes place 'out of the moment', for example treatment
460 for alcohol addiction, but working in sport can involve working 'in the moment', in
461 situations which have literally just taken place, referred to here as 'hot' issues:

462 *... in baseball we're doing it often right in the moment... sometimes it's not*
463 *even after, it's in the midst of it, if it's a pitcher and I've visited the mound to*
464 *talk to him and he's struggling through something, and you're right in the*
465 *middle of it... we use this metaphor it's 'hot', it's a hot issue and they're feeling*
466 *it. [Coach 2]*

467 MI training for sport psychologists (Table 4)

468 Participants cited several aspects of the approach as being essential for
469 training curricula for practitioners. Firstly, there was consensus from all participants
470 that the MI core components and their constituent parts were paramount, and would
471 need to be covered and understood in depth. Auxiliary components of the approach
472 which were mentioned include the righting reflex, elicit-provide-elicited, demonstrating
473 accurate empathy, maintaining practitioner equipoise (consciously deciding not to
474 use professional expertise to influence an athlete's decision in a direction the
475 practitioner views as optimal), and how to integrate MI with other strategies.

476 Practitioners indicated that this should be achieved through a combination of
477 context-specific methods, including experiential exercises, case studies, and video
478 samples. Further, Psychologist 2 commented on the sequence of training in MI and
479 other more action-orientated approaches, which potentially has implications for
480 training pathways:

481 *And then once you have that pure understanding of how this framework [MI]*
482 *might work, then it'd be introducing the cognitive behavioral strategies,*
483 *because I think if you do them first, I think that people would often just jump*
484 *into suggesting those, and not within the framework. So my preference*
485 *would be to build the MI before the [CB] strategies. [Psychologist 2]*

486 **Discussion**

487 The purpose of the current study was to explore the components of MI which
488 expert practitioners are applying in sport contexts, and begin to describe the
489 application of these with athletes. Findings revealed ways in which MI can enhance
490 the work of practitioners working in different roles in sport (e.g., psychologist,
491 counselor, coach). Participants have confirmed that the four core components of MI
492 (spirit; technical skills; four processes; language of change) are as pertinent to
493 working in sport as they are to working in any other setting, something which has
494 been questioned in previous research (Mack et al., 2017). Significant overlap can be
495 seen between sub-components of the MI spirit (see Table 1) and components of the
496 'real relationship' in sport psychology as outlined by Longstaff and Gervis (2016),
497 indicating that MI is one way for students, neophyte and established practitioners to
498 develop and maintain these relational aspects of their practice.

499 The MI technical skills mobilise this spirit, helping practitioners to build
500 engagement and demonstrate empathy (which are key predictors to success in

501 talking therapies; Miller & Rose, 2009), by showing that the practitioner is listening to
502 what the athlete is saying, doing their best to understand the athlete's perspective,
503 and prompting a raised consciousness of the actual words they are using, their
504 meaning and the potential directions of the conversation. In psychotherapy, empathy
505 is consistently shown to be correlated with client satisfaction and compliance with
506 treatment, and positive outcomes of treatment, and this was recently shown also to
507 be the case for athletic trainers working with NCAA athletes (David & Larson, 2018).
508 Sub-components of the MI technical skills (Table 1) are clearly linked with 'general
509 counseling skills' for developing relationships with athletes identified by Longstaff
510 and Gervis (2016). The MI four processes can provide practitioners with a conscious
511 structure for everything from a single consultancy or coaching session to long-term,
512 ongoing support, as has previously been suggested (Mack et al., 2019). It was also
513 highlighted that practitioners are considering a period of maintenance following the
514 action/intervention phase, which may constitute a fifth process (maintenance and
515 managing relapse) as proposed by Breckon (2015), and it may benefit practitioners
516 in sport to be cognizant of maintenance and lapse response when implementing
517 psychological interventions.

518 Practitioners spoke of constantly listening for opportunities to evoke,
519 acknowledge or strengthen change talk from their athletes, to increase momentum
520 towards change. The finding that athletes' change talk is usually preparatory (client
521 language which expresses perceived desire, ability, reasons or need for behavior
522 change) rather than mobilizing (client speech which indicates intention, obligation or
523 steps taken to change behavior; Miller & Rollnick, 2013) shows support for previous
524 findings on a lack of athlete readiness for change (Massey, Gnacinski, & Meyer,
525 2015) and that athlete resistance is a crucial but neglected aspect of sport

526 psychology consultancy which should be receiving greater attention (Gardner, 2017).
527 Barriers to 'gaining entry' to athletes and teams were identified a number of years
528 ago (Ravizza, 1988), and today there are still factors which can influence an athlete's
529 attitudes and openness to engaging with sport psychology (e.g., gender, previous
530 experience, stigma tolerance - see Martin, Zakrajsek, and Wrisberg (2012) for a
531 summary). Taken together, these findings indicate that sport psychology
532 practitioners need to be prepared to work with athletes who present initially as
533 ambivalent or discordant, and to work with this as it arises, responding to sustain talk
534 and ambivalence in a non-confrontational way (Apodaca et al., 2016). This has
535 previously been identified as something which is perhaps missing in applied sport
536 psychology in the UK (Mack et al., 2017), and may begin with a recognition that
537 sustain talk and ambivalence towards change are naturally-occurring aspects of the
538 change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Miller & Rose, 2009). Athlete reluctance to
539 engage with sport psychology support has been acknowledged for at least 30 years
540 (e.g., Orlick, 1989), and yet strategies for overcoming this are yet to be widely
541 acknowledged and implemented within the discipline. The initial assumption can
542 often be that the 'blame' for a lack of engagement or motivation lies with the athlete
543 (Gardner, 2017), and practitioners are instead encouraged to examine their own
544 approach and behaviors to determine if they might be contributing to athlete
545 resistance (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019). Such self-
546 examination was described in a recent case study regarding an MI-rational emotive
547 behavior therapy (REBT) intervention with an athlete (Wood et al., 2020). Athlete
548 ambivalence and scepticism about sport psychology support arose after several
549 consultancy sessions, when the practitioner introduced the REBT phase of work
550 before client allegiance (Tod et al., 2019) had been achieved. Relational and

551 technical aspects of MI, combined with the practitioner's awareness of their role in
552 inducing athlete resistance, proved effective for addressing these issues, and
553 progressing the athlete to the point of readiness for intervention work. It has recently
554 been suggested that strategies for working with athlete resistance should be factored
555 into intervention guidelines (Latinjak, Hernando-Gimeno, Lorigo-Méndez, & Hardy,
556 2019), which presents on way in which MI may support intervention delivery.

557 Participants commented on many other aspects of the MI approach beyond
558 the four core components. The need to share information or advice in an MI-
559 consistent way (viewing the athlete as resourceful and knowledgeable; being mindful
560 of collaborating and supporting athlete autonomy) was highlighted repeatedly, with a
561 need to avoid the 'expert trap' and its inherent 'righting reflex' essential to forming
562 successful relationships. One tool for doing so which was often mentioned was the
563 elicit-provide-elicited (E-P-E) framework, which facilitates practitioners in gathering
564 information held by the athlete on a certain topic, then gaining permission to fill any
565 gaps in this knowledge, and finally checking with the athlete so see how they
566 understand this new knowledge, and what they might do with it (Miller & Rollnick,
567 2013). The E-P-E framework has previously been approximated in applied sport
568 psychology literature; Petitpas et al. (1999) discuss the need for psychologists to
569 collaboratively solve problems with their athletes, by first taking time to understand
570 the athlete's issues, and then checking to see firstly whether the athlete will accept
571 information from the practitioner, and secondly if the athlete understands this
572 information once it is provided. Sachs (1999) extends this idea by suggesting an
573 additional step which takes into account the athlete's ideas for what might work for
574 them, or even strategies which they have previously (perhaps unsuccessfully)

575 attempted. The EPE framework can add value to sport psychology consultancy,
576 when applied in a skilled, considered manner.

577 The differences between praising and affirming (practitioner statements which
578 value a client positive attribute or behavior, and build self-efficacy; Miller & Rollnick,
579 2013) were discussed. Participants stated that where possible they seek to affirm
580 rather than praise, but occasionally (particularly in the role of a coach), there is a
581 need to step away from this MI-adherent strategy and offer praise which may help to
582 teach or reinforce the performance of a skill, or congratulate an athlete on their
583 performance. This ability to consciously 'slip in and out of' the MI approach also
584 appears relevant to the 'directing-guiding-following' continuum of communication
585 styles (Rollnick, Miller, & Butler, 2008), which was cited here as giving participants a
586 consciousness of which style they were adopting, and their reasons for this, and
587 helped them determine when it was appropriate to switch from the coach or expert-
588 like style of directing back to the MI-consistent style of guiding. Being conscious of
589 affirming rather than praising, and of the flow of communication styles within a
590 conversation, appears beneficial for practitioners and has recently been further
591 supported elsewhere (Wood et al., 2020).

592 Participants' comments on integrating MI with other approaches have
593 significant implications for applied practice in sport psychology. It was stated that at
594 the very least, the MI spirit, technical skills and an awareness of athlete change talk
595 are valuable in any circumstance and regardless of other approaches being used.
596 This indicates that training in MI is a route to developing and maintaining one's
597 professional philosophy, communication strategies and self-reflection in striving to
598 cultivate meaningful professional relationships with athletes, and generate
599 momentum towards athlete behavioral change. It is likely for this reason that MI was

600 described by participants in this study as 'home base'. It is noteworthy that all nine
601 participants spoke of having at least one other approach that they applied regularly
602 in their work with athletes, so MI was by no means regarded as a universal remedy
603 (cf. Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

604 Several ways of integrating MI with other approaches were indicated,
605 including: a precursor to an intervention deemed appropriate for the athlete's issues
606 or concerns; a strategy for working with ambivalence or discord, should these arise;
607 or a framework which can be used to underpin and facilitate the delivery of an
608 intervention or ongoing support from beginning to end. Regarding the latter, this is
609 likely a period of MI-intensive work at commencement of the relationship, followed by
610 delivery of the appropriate action-orientated intervention supported with relevant core
611 components from MI, and concluded with a second period of MI-intensive work for
612 review, maintenance, or possibly to assist reassessment and reformulation
613 processes. This comprehensive knowledge of the MI approach, and conscious
614 consideration of the steps for integrating MI into applied sport psychology with other
615 relevant and compatible approaches, represents a level of integration at least akin to
616 'assimilative integration', potentially even 'theoretical integration'. This is a step up
617 from 'technical eclecticism' (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005), or a 'cherry picking'
618 or "scattergun" (Cecil & Barker, 2016, p. 63) approach, which has been proscribed
619 by the British Psychological Society as an unsuitable approach for trainee
620 practitioners (BPS, 2018). These deeper levels of integration can only be achieved
621 through greater understanding of the theories, common factors and techniques of
622 multiple approaches (Boswell, 2016), and are perhaps what practitioners in applied
623 sport psychology should be striving for. Research has already begun to describe

624 such integrations of MI with different cognitive behavioral therapies in applied sport
625 psychology (e.g., Turner et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020).

626 Practitioners highlighted aspects of the sport context which create challenges
627 when working with athletes (Table 3). Several of these were in keeping with
628 previously identified factors which may prevent athletes from taking up or engaging
629 fully in sport psychology support (e.g., Mack et al., 2019; Martin, Zakrajsek, &
630 Wrisberg, 2012). MI appears to have several valuable tenets to assist practitioners in
631 navigating these challenges. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of consultancy
632 in the sport context also appears to create some unusual opportunities for contact
633 with athletes, often outside pre-set appointment times and in non-clinical locations
634 which would be typical of other contexts where MI has traditionally been applied.
635 These contact points can also be extremely brief, perhaps a passing conversation in
636 a corridor or changing room, and even in-game situations lasting as little as 30-60
637 seconds, when issues are 'hot' and performance may or may not be going according
638 to plan. This is absolutely the briefest of brief contact consultancy, and participants
639 were adamant that MI has a role here, by being conscious of embodying elements of
640 the MI spirit (e.g., evocation) and focusing on the MI communication microskills (e.g.,
641 asking, reflecting, affirming).

642 **Implications for training in MI**

643 Participants indicated aspects of the MI approach which would be essential
644 for a training curriculum for practitioners working in sport settings (Table 4). The
645 general consensus that practitioners are applying MI in the context of sport, as
646 opposed to a sport-specific version of MI, indicates that a grounding in broad MI
647 theory and training (i.e., Tables 1 and 2) is a suitable initiation for any practitioner
648 wishing to add MI to their applied work in sport. It was proposed by one participant

649 that students of sport psychology should be taught an approach like MI, with
650 relational and technical aspects to form the therapeutic alliance, *before* action-
651 orientated interventions. This could minimise the risk of neophyte practitioners
652 prematurely applying the only intervention strategies they have learned so far,
653 regardless of athlete resources or readiness and without developing a sound alliance,
654 assessment and formulation (e.g., Cecil & Barker, 2016). This is perhaps something
655 for professional bodies, universities and supervisors of trainees to consider.

656 **Implications for future research**

657 The training of practitioners in the MI approach opens avenues of possible
658 further research. It is of course important to investigate the impact of this training on
659 their applied practice, in terms of MI-consistency, professional relationship
660 development (from both practitioner and athlete perspectives), and impact on
661 desired outcomes, such as intervention goals and sport performance. But, only once
662 competence and consistency in applying the MI approach has been achieved,
663 reported and evidenced, can its impact in sport be truly measured. Such an
664 investigation would likely further inform best practice guidelines, help to identify
665 sport-specific adaptations of the approach (e.g., MI with teams; brief-contact MI with
666 athletes), and contribute to the development of a model for integrating MI with other
667 interventions in sport.

668 **Strengths and limitations**

669 Several sampling methods were employed to ensure the search for
670 participants for this study was as exhaustive as possible, producing a global sample
671 of practitioners who are a) working regularly in sport with amateur, international and
672 professional athletes, and b) proficient in the MI approach, as indicated by their
673 membership of MINT. The research team has attempted to show rather than tell

674 (Tracy, 2010) the reader participants' responses, using their own words and the
675 established language of the MI approach.

676 There are limitations to this study, which also need to be acknowledged. It is
677 debatable if this study has identified specific adaptations to the MI approach for use
678 in sport psychology, for example during moments of brief contact with athletes. It is
679 possible that this may only be achieved through action research or case studies, to
680 identify the nuances of adapting this approach to this specific context. Additionally,
681 the participants in this study have not provided evidence of their competence in
682 using MI, nor their fidelity to the approach. Their comments are based on their recall
683 and their self-assessment of their applied work. This opens their testimonies to
684 questions of bias and accuracy, as is the case with any qualitative research of this
685 nature. Recent research on an MI-based intervention in sport (Wood et al., 2020)
686 has begun to address this limitation by audio recording practitioner-athlete
687 consultations, assessing for practitioner MI competence and fidelity, and providing
688 verbatim extracts to support practitioner assertions and reflections.

689

Conclusion

690 This study has offered the most in-depth exploration to date of the
691 components of MI being applied by MI-proficient practitioners in sport settings, and
692 determined that the approach has much to offer psychologists, coaches, and other
693 practitioners working in the sport context, for whom the practitioner-athlete
694 relationship is fundamental to their role and the success of their work. This includes
695 the MI core components and tools, communication styles, traps to avoid and
696 integrating MI with action-orientated interventions. More research is needed on
697 sport-specific adaptations to the approach, including working with teams and brief
698 contact interactions. MI is a viable option for neophyte and established practitioners

699 to develop their professional philosophies, sharpen relational and communication
700 skills for building and maintaining working alliances, and enhancing their self-
701 reflection.

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Table Titles

881 **Table 1**

882 *Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport*

883 **Table 2**

884 *Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport*

885 **Table 3**

886 *Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI*

887 **Table 4**

888 *Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context*

889 **Table 1**

890 *Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport*

Core Components of MI	Sub-components
Spirit	Partnership Build athlete autonomy Acceptance Unconditional regard Evocation Compassion Accurate empathy Equipoise
Microskills	Open Questions Affirmations Reflections (simple and complex) Summarising
Language of change	Preparatory change talk Mobilising change talk Sustain talk
Four+ Processes	Engage Focus Evoke Plan Maintain

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893 **Table 2**

 894 *Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport*

Theme	Sub-themes
MI applied tools	Elicit-Provide-Elicit Agenda mapping Values sort Scaling rulers (importance; confidence; readiness) Goal setting
MI-consistent sharing information and expertise	Consider the therapeutic alliance Dialogue not monologue Collaboration Athlete autonomy Athlete as expert MI-adherent
Relational and technical traps to avoid	Elicit-Provide-Elicit Expert trap Righting reflex Premature focus trap Affirming not praising
MI communication styles continuum	Directing Guiding Following
Brief contact MI interactions	MI spirit is essential MI is adaptable to brief contact Short, intentional interactions Moment-to-moment scenarios Know when to direct/instruct
Using MI with teams	MI processes Reflections 'Global' affirmations
Integrating MI with other interventions in sport	Accurate empathy Spirit Microskills Change talk 'Home base' Precursor Common factors Underpinning framework Follow-up Cognitive behavioral strategies

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897 **Table 3**

898 *Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI*

Theme	Sub-themes
Challenges of working with athletes	Mandated attendance Confidentiality Stigma towards psychology support Heteronomy (athletes are unaccustomed to being asked for their opinions/answers) Athlete mistrust of 'outsiders' 'Quick fix' mentality within sport Performance-driven environment Deficit view of athlete issues Practitioner equipoise towards athlete change Managing discord in the relationship Athlete ambivalence towards change
Unique aspects of sport context	Reduced frequency of contact Limited duration of contact Non-clinical locations 'In the moment' contact 'Hot' issues

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901 **Table 4**

902 *Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context*

Theme	Sub-themes
MI training content	Core components of MI Traps to avoid Elicit-Provide-Elicit Accurate empathy Equipoise MI integration with other approaches Sport culture, norms, pressures
MI training design	Multi-method Experiential Sport-specific materials

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