Stories of Critical Moments Contributing to the Development of Applied Sport

Psychology Practitioners

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Abstract

This study explored the stories of critical moments experienced by applied sport psychology practitioners. The 13 recruited practitioners (eight male and five female) were in different stages of their development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced) and were asked to tell one story about a critical moment that significantly contributed to their development as applied practitioners. Narrative analysis was used to explore the stories of critical moments. Four distinct narrative structures were evident; *Re-birth, Rags to Riches, Tragedy,* and *The Quest.* There was one consistent narrative feature that supported these plots: *critical moments contribute towards an alignment between a practitioner's beliefs and behaviour, which supports the development of a congruent philosophy of practice and the environment they choose to work within.* We recommend future research, such as the use of narrative analysis to explore alternative narrative structures and the investigation of successful and unsuccessful consultancy experiences.

Keywords: critical moments, practitioner individuation, identity, applied sport psychology, narrative analysis

Stories of Critical Moments Contributing to the Development of Applied Sport Psychology Practitioners

Applied sport psychology practitioners are one of the key instruments to successful service-delivery within elite sporting environments (Poczwardowski, 2017). In turn, the development of competence as an applied practitioner is directly related to the person behind the practitioner (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). Practitioners whom demonstrate high levels of self-knowledge and self-awareness in relation to their core values and beliefs are able to develop a congruent philosophy of practice (Lindsay et al., 2007), a coherent professional identity (Tod et al., 2017), and demonstrate authenticity in their careers (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). Individuals are presented with an opportunity to develop their self-knowledge at key moments throughout their lives, in both a personal and professional capacity (Ronkainen et al., 2015).

These personal and professional moments have been described in the existential literature as boundary situations (Jaspers, 1932). Karl Jaspers wrote extensively about how these boundary situations (like death and suffering) were an unavoidable part of human life. Through these boundary situations, people have the opportunity to realise the purpose and meaning of their own lives. When faced with these ever-present boundary situations an individual must demonstrate courage in the face of anxiety and adversity. This courage is fundamental to successfully navigating these situations, as individuals are aware that action (and inaction) can and will have unknown consequences that an individual must take responsibility for. Ultimately, these boundary situations require an individual to reflect on themselves and the world around them. This reflection can allow the individual to experience growth, and usually results in a change to a person's belief systems and view of the world.

These moments have been described in the sport psychology literature as critical moments (Nesti et al., 2012). Critical moments can be small or large, intended or unintended,

positive or negative, but always cause an individual to confront anxiety associated with changes to their identity (Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). These critical moments can provide individuals with the opportunity to reflect on their belief systems and ultimately who they are as an individual (Nesti et al., 2012). Critical moments have been explored in the sport psychology literature in a variety of individuals and contexts, including; professional football (Nesti et al., 2012), coaches (Ronkainen et al., 2015), and elite endurance sports (Ronkainen et al., 2013) The exploration of critical moments experienced by applied sport psychology practitioners could be essential in better understanding their optimal development, given the importance the practitioner has on successful applied service delivery (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011).

Recently, McEwan and Tod (2015) highlighted the similarities between the training and development of counselling psychologists and sport and exercise psychologists. Theories of counsellor development (Carlsson, 2012; Carlsson et al., 2011; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2009; Worthington, 1987) could provide a framework to help us better understand the symbiotic relationship between the person and their role and how this differs in practitioners at distinct stages of development. For example, Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013), who adopted a life-span perspective on counsellor development, found that optimal practitioner development involves the integration of the personal self with the professional self. This integration means there is an increasing consistency between practitioners' values and beliefs (and development of a congruent philosophy of practice) and their behaviour. Furthermore, with experience, practitioners are more likely to engage in professional roles where they can act freely and naturally; demonstrating an enhanced alignment between themselves and their environment where professional and personal beliefs align, and congruence is reached. This alignment between practitioner (core values and

beliefs, behaviour) and the context (the roles they choose to engage in) has been described as practitioner individuation (McEwan et al., 2019).

McEwan, Tod, and Eubank (2019) explored practitioner individuation in trainee and experienced sport psychology practitioners. They found that the trainee practitioners were still attempting to identify a method of working that aligned with their own view of the world and were more likely to change their approach to fit the role. Experienced practitioners seemed to approach their work without feeling the need to separate who they were from their approach in an applied setting and were more likely to choose a role that fit with their own values and beliefs. As they gain experience, practitioners are more likely to develop a philosophy of practice that is congruent with their own values and beliefs (Tod et al., 2009). There then becomes an alignment between the practitioners' beliefs, behaviours, and the environment they choose to work in. This alignment has been found to occur in a number of practitioners immediately following formal training and education (Lindsay et al. 2007; Tod & Bond, 2010), where the practitioner begins to practice in a way that represents their core self. As practitioner individuation occurs, practitioners start to develop an enhanced sense of confidence and learn to trust their own professional approach to practice (Tod et al., 2011). This process occurs over time with experience and reflection, during which the practitioner experiences a variety of personal and professional critical moments (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013) and attempts to find meaning and purpose in their professional lives (Tod et al., 2017).

Whilst the collection of studies exploring the development of sport psychologists has grown in recent years (e.g., Fogaca et al., 2018; Johnson & Andersen, 2019), there remains a lack of research that focuses on the critical moments experienced by practitioners and how these critical moments contribute towards practitioner development. Practitioner development literature has typically explored the characteristics of applied sport psychology practitioners (Woolway & Harwood, 2018) or has focused on the skills required of applied practitioners

(Hutter et al., 2017). Furthermore, a lot of the practitioner development literature to date has focused on trainees or experienced practitioners (Tod et al., 2011). There is a lack of research that has explored the development of newly qualified practitioners (Fortin-Guichard, Boudreault et al., 2018). By including practitioners in different stages of their development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced) we will be better positioned to identify the critical moments experienced by practitioners at distinct stages throughout their career (McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2011) and provide a more in-depth insight into the optimal development of sport psychology practitioners. Understanding the critical moments experienced by practitioners at distinct stages of development could also help inform and improve the learning and education pathways for applied sport psychology practitioners (Hutter et al., 2017) by providing support and supervision tailored to practitioners' unique experiences and challenges. Improving the training and development of applied sport psychology practitioners could; enhance trainees' learning experiences, contribute towards the optimal development of competent practitioners, improve client outcomes, and grow the reputation of the discipline as a whole (McEwan & Tod, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to explore stories, told by applied sport psychology practitioners, of critical moments that have contributed towards their overall development. The specific aims of the study are to understand; (a) *how* applied sport psychology practitioners tell their stories about these critical moments and (b) what features of those stories reflect beliefs about why those critical moments might contribute to personal and professional development. Practitioners at distinct stages of development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced) have been included because it is likely they have experienced different critical moments, leading to a variety of stories being told, and a deeper insight into how and why critical moments contribute towards overall development.

Method

Philosophical Assumptions

A "narrative is taken to mean a complex genre that routinely contains a point and characters along with a plot connecting events that unfold sequentially over time and in space to provide an overarching explanation or consequence" (Smith & Sparkes, 2009b: p.2). Narrative inquiry is underpinned by interpretivism and acknowledges the co-construction of narratives between people, contexts, and time (Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). Investigating narratives allows us to understand the meaning attributed to an experience. Our narrative analysis is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), informed by ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism, which allowed the primary researcher to adopt an approach to data collection and analysis that focused on the participants' co-constructed story (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Creswell, 2003). Understanding the participants' experiences and acknowledging the co-construction of meaning between participant and the primary researcher allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation (Yilmaz, 2013). For example, conducting a narrative analysis on the interview transcripts allowed the primary researcher to understand how the participants perceived their reality and made sense of the world through the stories they told (Jowett & Frost, 2007). Furthermore, by understanding the structure or plot of the stories and identifying narrative features underpinning these plots, the primary researcher was able to shift between the narrative (how is the story being told?) and the product of the story (what is being said?) (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a) to achieve the primary purpose of the research.

Participants

A total of 13 participants (eight male and five female) took part in the research (five trainee, five neophyte, and three experienced practitioners). To be included in the study, participants needed to be enrolled on, or have completed, the British Psychological Society (BPS) Stage Two pathway or the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences

(BASES) training pathway and have a full-time or part-time role working within professional sport. The participants belonged in three distinct categories based on their differing development stages. These stages were designed to allow the primary author to identify narratives features that were unique to each stage of practitioner development and to align with the development stages identified by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2013) (Table 1).

The trainee practitioners ranged between 24 and 32 years of age (M = 28.6 years). Four of the participants were enrolled on the BPS Stage Two pathway. Two of the participants were undertaking this training by means of a Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology. One of the trainee participants was enrolled on the BASES training pathway. The trainee practitioners had been enrolled on their respective training pathways between three and 20 months (M = 15 months). The neophyte practitioners ranged between 27 and 37 years of age (M = 30.4 years) and had been qualified for between 12 and 42 months (M = 24 months). Three of the neophyte participants were BPS chartered Psychologists and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Registered Sport and Exercise Psychologists and two were BASES chartered Scientists and BASES accredited Sport and Exercise Scientists (Psychology). The trainee and neophyte practitioners adopted a range of applied roles at the time of the interview, including; working in professional youth football, supporting Olympic athletes, and owning their own private practices. The experienced practitioners ranged from 36 to 52 years of age (M = 44.0 years) and had been consulting in an applied capacity for an average of 14 years. One of the participants was BPS chartered and HCPC registered, one was BASES accredited, and one participant held dual accreditation. All of the experienced practitioners worked at a higher education institute, as well as engaging in applied practice with sports such as gymnastics, swimming, and football.

Information Power

The primary author used the concept of information power to determine the sample size for the current study (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power can be determined by five overlapping factors: 1.) study aim (is the aim of the study broad or narrow?), 2.) sample specificity (do the participants possess extensive experience and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation?), 3.) use of established theory (is the study underpinned by relevant theoretical knowledge?), 4.) quality of dialogue (is the communication between the participant and researcher strong?), and 5.) analysis strategy (how in-depth is the analysis of the data collected?).

The primary author concluded that the information power for the current study was high for a number of reasons. Firstly, the aim of study was clearly stated and was specific in nature. Secondly, the participants were purposefully recruited to take part in the study because of their knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation; increasing the sample specificity. Furthermore, the study was guided by Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2013) theory of counsellor development, as well as literature related to practitioner individuation (McEwan et al., 2019) and critical moments (Nesti et al., 2012) and so had consistent use of established theory and research. The quality of the dialogue between the researcher and all participants was determined to be high based on the EPICURE (*engagement* (the researcher's relationship to the phenomenon being studied)*, processing* (process of producing, ordering, analysing, and preserving empirical material)*, interpretation* (act of creating meaning by identifying patterns and developing contexts for understanding of experiences), *critique* (appraisal of merits and limits of research)*, usefulness* (value in relation to practical contexts)*, relevance* (how the study contributes to the development of the field)*, and *ethics* (values and morals that are integrated in actions and reflections within the research)) framework (Stige et al., 2009), which focuses on developing and interpreting stories that facilitate change. Furthermore, the primary researcher had experience of

conducting qualitative interviews, had seven years' experience of conducting applied one-to-one sessions (so was able to confidently build effective relationships with people to facilitate communication), and had his own experiences of the phenomenon being discussed. This contributed towards the quality of the dialogue and the length of the interviews. Finally, the choice to conduct narrative analysis (through use of literacy theory (Bell, 2004; Booker, 2004) ensured that the analysis strategy was detailed and in-depth. These five factors combined contribute towards a high information power for the study. When information power is perceived to be high, a study needs a small number of participants (Malterud et al., 2016). 13 participants were chosen to take part in this study because it allowed the primary researcher to recruit; (a) enough practitioners to represent the experiences of the distinct stages of development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced), (b) practitioners on both BPS and BASES accreditation routes, and (c) enough practitioners to collect data on a variety of stories and experiences to meet the purpose and aim of the study.

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from an institutional review board. The participants were then recruited using a purposeful sampling technique (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) to identify individuals who had applied sport psychology experience and fit the inclusion criteria for the study. The primary researcher emailed all potential participants and arranged the interviews at a time and place that suited each participant. The participants who agreed to take part in the study participated in one interview, during which they were asked to tell the primary author one story of a critical moment (professional or personal) they had experienced throughout their life. Each participant was provided with an outline of the interview process in advance of the interview to allow them time to reflect on their histories. Only the primary author and the participant were present at the interview. The interviews lasted between 36 and 66 minutes (M = 48 minutes), were audio recorded using a dictaphone,

and transcribed verbatim. The transcription of the interviews included the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, including the participants' extended pauses, laughter, partial utterances, and speech repairs (Emerson & Frosch, 2004). The opening question ("can you tell me a story about a critical moment in your career that you feel has contributed towards your development as a practitioner?") was purposefully broad to allow the participant to direct the interview and tell a story about their development that was significant and meaningful to them (Smith, 2010). The primary researcher had no pre-planned prompts and adopted the position of active listener throughout the interview, encouraging the participants to tell their story and on occasion prompting to ensure clarity of meaning (Carless & Douglas, 2009). Transcriptions were returned to each participant upon request for use as a reflective prompt and personal development (not for each participant to verify the information in the transcriptions (Smith & McGannon, 2018)).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began with the primary author reading and re-reading the transcripts and immersing himself in the participants' stories to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. The primary author examined each participant's story one at a time and then moved onto cross case analysis (Riessman, 2008). The research team acted as 'critical friends' throughout the data analysis process, reviewing the data collected and critically examining the primary researcher's decisions regarding which plot best represented the stories being told.

Narrative Structure

The structural narrative analysis of the data began by identifying the beginning, middle, and end of each story within the dataset to ensure each participant had told a complete story. The primary author then drew on literacy theorists' (Bell, 2004, Booker, 2004) discussion of plot to better understand the structure of the participants' stories. All

participants' stories followed a similar generic structure; a) the participant was working towards a goal, b) they experienced an obstacle or a threat, c) they experienced growth and/or change in attempting to overcome this obstacle, and d) there was an outcome or ending to the story. Finally, to review any distinctions between the participants' narratives, the primary author re-read all the transcriptions again and explored how the stories paralleled common storytelling plots (Booker, 2004).

For example, the *Re-birth* plot underpinned nine of the 13 participants' stories. This plot can be understood in five distinct stages; (a) the main character starts the story incomplete in some way and falls under a 'dark shadow', (b) the shadow over the main character begins to grow, (c) the darkness reveals its true effect and completely takes hold of the main character, (d) the main character battles with this darkness, and finally, (e) the main character emerges from the struggle and is reborn. The Seven Basic Plots (Booker, 2004) were used as a framework to help the primary author understand how the participants were telling their story. These plots also provided the primary author with an opportunity to represent the common narratives in a creative, transparent, and meaningful way.

Narrative Features

The final stage of the narrative analysis involved the primary author looking for narrative features that underpinned the identified plots. This involved looking for the key aspects (themes) within the stories that focused on the participants' views relating to their critical moments and how it contributed towards their development as both people and applied practitioners. This part of the analysis allowed the primary author to understand *what* was being said. This process was similar to that of thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary author re-read the transcripts and noted any emerging areas of interest in relation to the focus of the research. The primary author then built upon these emerging areas of interest by creating initial codes and themes that represented patterned

responses from the interview transcripts. The dominant narrative feature present in all of the 13 stories was; *critical moments contribute towards an alignment between a practitioner's beliefs and behaviour, which supports the development of a congruent philosophy of practice* Hence, the primary author also explored connections (and differences based on experience level) between the participants' stories that would allow for meaning to be constructed across participants' experiences and a more in-depth perspective to be provided. Throughout this stage of the structural narrative analysis process the primary author adopted the stance of story analyst; identifying narrative features within the stories being told and making initial links between these segments and the existing practitioner development literature (Sparkes, 2005). This allowed the primary researcher to add an extra layer of analysis to the stories under investigation and further acknowledged the ontological and epistemological stance adopted throughout this study (Smith & Sparkes, 2006).

Quality Criteria

We adopted a non-foundational approach to judge the quality of the present study (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). This was achieved by first exploring the aims of the study and beliefs and values of the primary author (Smith, 1993). After reading and reflecting on Tracy's (2010) 'big tent' criteria, a number of values were identified that resonated with the primary author: *interesting, honest, innovative, expressive,* and *meaningful*, which were then aligned to five key criteria: e*ngaging, transparent, novel, rich description,* and *reflective* (Table 2).

We designed the study to meet these values/criteria in a number of ways. Engagement of the reader was achieved by representing all participants' stories in a novel and creative way. The use of detailed quotes and description surrounding each participants' context provides the reader with an opportunity to relate to and understand each participants' story. Transparency and rich description have been achieved by providing quotes directly from the

interviews to highlight the narrative structure and key narrative features and by providing detail about the methods used throughout the study. Rich description was also improved by providing in-depth details and context surrounding the participants' experiences and how this contributed towards the key findings of the study. Moreover, this is the first time that narrative analysis has been used as a method to explore practitioners' critical moments; adding to existing knowledge (from both a theoretical and practical perspective) and contributing towards the innovative nature of the research. Finally, the primary researcher consistently acknowledged and reflected on how their own experiences as an applied practitioner (and the critical moments they had experienced) contributed towards the co-construction of the narrative features within the stories, ensuring the study was consistently reflective in nature. The primary author achieved this by asking himself (and noting down) all the critical moments he had experienced in his career and how they had contributed towards his development as an applied practitioner.

Results

The results will be divided into two sub-sections: (a) the narrative structures of the participants' stories will be identified, and examples will be provided and (b) the narrative feature underpinning these narrative structures will be discussed.

Narrative Structure

Four distinct narrative structures were evident following analysis of the stories; *Re-birth, Rags to Riches, Tragedy,* and *The Quest.*

Re-Birth

Nine of the 13 stories told followed a narrative structure best represented by the *Re-birth* plot. Four out of five of the trainee practitioners, three out of five of the neophyte practitioners, and two out of three of the experienced practitioners told their stories in this way. For example, *Neophyte 1's* story began with them working for an organisation where

they had very little freedom over their practice philosophy. They experienced a sense of inauthenticity within this environment (they fell under a dark shadow) and the tension between their approach to practice and the approach of the organisation continued to grow. They then decided to quit their role within the organisation and set up their own private practice:

> So I made the decision to leave at the same time as renovating a house, with one kid and another on the way, because I just, I just knew I needed to…I couldn't carry on justifying that sort of, being restrained…working the equivalent of a 9-5 I suppose…long hours…average reward, but the biggest thing was not really…not developing at all…and starting to get more frustrated because you're at a point in your career where you're qualified now and you want to do different things and you want to did it your way, in terms of your philosophy, and practice your approach and your values…

 Whilst this was not without its challenges (worries about paying the mortgage and providing for a partner and two young children), the practitioner experienced a sense of authenticity for the first time in their professional career, as they were able to adopt an approach to practice that was congruent with their own core values and beliefs. The practitioner was re-born and was able to align their values and beliefs as an individual with their approach to applied practice:

> I feel much more congruent…I was working in the past to a framework where you deliver some corporate work, some sports work, some education work, but it's kind of the same stuff, like very formulaic…I don't mind following a framework, but now I can set the framework myself… 100% I'm more congruent now and I feel more confident

Another good example of the *Re-birth* plot was demonstrated by *Trainee 4's* story. They began their story by reflecting on their personal traits and characteristics as a person. They felt as though others perceived them to be 'awkward', 'cold', and 'uncaring'; traits that do not transfer well into a career as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist:

> Throughout my life, because I've always been like awkward, people would look at me as like cold and calculated a lot and like not necessarily caring…which obviously doesn't fit with what we do…

However, when their family unexpectedly experienced multiple deaths in a short space of time (they fell under a dark shadow), they instinctively took charge of the situation and cared for all family members. Through this critical moment they were able to reveal their true self. They were re-born and able to reveal themselves as a caring individual:

> We experienced several deaths in the family, the past four or five years, which I think has had a massive effect on me…so, first my husband's father passed away, then six months later his Grandpa passed away and then two months after that his aunt passed away, my mother in law's husband, father and sister passed away all within ten months…and I essentially held the family together at that point and I recognised how important it was for me to take care of other people

They were then able to transfer this caring nature into their applied consultancy with their clients, contributing towards their effectiveness and development as an applied sport psychology practitioner:

> it's about being authentic and being yourself, so if I was being one person one minute and one person the next minute, how would I be effective in anyway? Especially if someone saw me as two different things, how could they trust who I am? So, I think it's trusting yourself to do the right thing and being grounded in philosophy and ethics all the time

These professional and personal critical moments experienced by the practitioners in the examples above, perfectly highlight the opportunity these moments provide practitioners to reflect and consider their values, beliefs, and behaviours (Nesti et al., 2012). In both of these examples, the practitioners' beliefs and values were challenged, causing them to reflect on their current practice, resulting in a more authentic and congruent applied practitioner.

Rags to Riches

One of the trainee practitioners told a story that was best represented by the *Rags to Riches* plot. They started their story by discussing their initial success of gaining a place at University, despite being from a less "affluent area":

I was the first, the first person in my family to go to University, erm… you know, grew up on a counsel estate in [place name], which is not one of the most affluent areas in the world, believe it or not [laughter], so yeah, typically, erm… there aren't that many people from that area, that go onto…to go to University, erm, so I was kind of the first from my family to do it, to go to University and I think that was, that was a big step forward

Following successful completion of their undergraduate and postgraduate courses, they gained full-time employment within professional sport, whilst also working towards becoming a chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist. However, despite this initial success, there was still a sense that they were not quite ready to reach their final destination. Finding a balance between their studies, their applied work, and their personal life became an increasing challenge:

I was always in a rush, there was never a time where, I was chilled…I'm still like that now, because I'm terrible, because what happens is, you end up spending more time at work, because I live closer, you end up spending more time here [the club], which is not always great, but, erm, yeah I did always feel like I was constantly in a rush,

erm, and I felt like I was under pressure all the time, because it was like, I need to get

away before the traffic starts or wait to the traffic finishes, but then you're knackered

and you want to get home and you're not getting in while, 8:30, 9 O'clock and then

pfft… so that type of work-life balance, I don't think is good and definitely not

productive, or doesn't help you to be productive.

With time, they were able to find a better balance between their studies, applied work, and

personal lives and become more authentic as a practitioner:

I guess as a function of maybe being here for a period of time, I think you can be,

maybe more, authentic, more yourself maybe, because your position is, again,

whether it is ever secure is questionable, but you are a little bit… I personally feel like

my role at the minute is, erm… has grown and developed and is well embedded into

what the academy does, I think part of that I guess, helps you to feel a little bit more

secure about what you do and enables you to be yourself, more and I think, yeah

that's probably a learning thing as well, where you become a little bit more

comfortable in who you are, what you can do and what you can't do

Tragedy

Two of the neophyte practitioners told a story that was best represented by the

Tragedy plot. For example, *Neophyte 3* became aware of a safeguarding issue at the

organisation in which they worked and as a result, found themselves experiencing a

progressive misalignment between their beliefs, values, and behaviour. This experience

prevented them being the practitioner they wanted to be in an applied capacity:

I think before all this happened…I think me as a practitioner was me as a person,

whereas I think now no, I engage in role play and I act, to be seen as the professional

practitioner as opposed to me as a person and I actually think me as a person is a

better practitioner than me the practitioner. I've think I've gone from somebody

who's quite care free, quite open, had a laugh and find it really easy to get good

relationships with people, to someone who is quite distant and takes time and doesn't

trust very easy and it takes me a while to figure things out. I am rigid and I am more

intense… I try to stick to the book a lot more

Having experienced this challenging critical moment, they began to purposefully disassociate

themselves from their professional role in an attempt to protect themselves. They clearly

wanted to be able to demonstrate more authenticity in their applied role, but had not been

able to achieve this at the time of the interview:

I hope it changes in time…with more and more experience and interactions and

confidence and understanding that people want me to behave in a way like I always

have behaved… and there was nothing wrong with that… but, you're just conscious

of what you do and how you conduct yourself and I think the person I was in that

environment at that time, I always feel associated with it and may have taken some

element of blame, although it wasn't going on when I was there, so I don't know if

I'll take it with me or not…I don't know…

Neophyte 5 also told a story that was best represented by the *Tragedy* plot. Just like

Neophyte 3, they began to disassociate themselves from the organisation at which they

worked, because of an incident with one of the younger players at the club. This critical

moment made them question whether their own values and beliefs were aligned with the

culture of the sport itself:

What really got to me was… how normal this was for him, he was sick, got himself

together, and went and played at the age of eight… and I came home and rang my

mum and said…what industry are we working in when kids the age of eight are sick

and feeling like that's just what they have to do to be a [sport] and I just thought, god,

can I continue to work in this industry? I just thought, what are we doing? What are

we actually doing?

The Quest

One of the experienced practitioners told a story that was best represented by *The

Quest* plot. They were diagnosed with a chronic and debilitating health issue a number of

years prior to the interview, which made it challenging for them to engage in the applied

settings that they normally would. As a result of this, they decided to go on their own journey

as a client, by engaging in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This journey allowed them

to experience what it was like to be "on the other side" of the consultancy process and

allowed them to empathise more with their own clients:

> It's been a difficult few years and I think, once you've been through that process, and
>
> erm…as you grow with experience, sometimes you can forget what it's like to be
>
> somebody who needs support, I think we lose touch with that and that support for me
>
> was important…I think we lose a sense of, what it's like to be a client or a participant,
>
> but also how we learn…as part of it [recovery] I took up [hobby] and it was so hard
>
> and there was this big event in front of 1,500 people and it was scary and you think,
>
> athletes go through this [performance anxiety] every single week! I wouldn't want
>
> anyone to go through what I've been through, but it does change your perspective and
>
> as I say, from that came something really good…I can understand and empathise
>
> more closely with athletes now

Narrative Features

Once the structure of each story had been established, the primary author identified

narrative features from each participants' stories that underpinned and reinforced the four

plots identified. One prominent narrative feature was evident throughout the transcripts

(regardless of the way the participants' told their stories); *critical moments contribute*

towards an alignment between a practitioner's beliefs and behaviour, which supports the development of a congruent philosophy of practice and the environment they choose to work within. This narrative feature, which represents the on-going practitioner individuation process and the participants' search for a professional identity, was discussed by practitioners regardless of experience. However, practitioners in different stages of development were clearly at unique and distinct points of this practitioner individuation process.

Trainee Practitioners

For the majority of the trainee practitioners, a distinction still existed between how they viewed themselves as a person and how they viewed themselves as a practitioner. However, most individuals recognised this as something they wanted to change as they progressed throughout their training. *Trainee 2* was over halfway through their BPS Stage Two training experience and had worked with a number of clients where they had struggled to be authentic during the consultancy process:

> The thing I'm finding really hard at the minute, and I'm planning on taking this to supervision, is I'm trying to work out how to be professional and how to be authentic as a person. For me, I want to try and find a nice sweet spot between practitioner and person and the sooner the better! That's something at the minute that I've been finding quite conflicted. **(Trainee 2)**

This distinction between person and practitioner caused some of the trainees to experience a sense of inauthenticity within their applied roles. *Trainee 1* worked full-time at a professional football club and often found it difficult to be authentic within this environment through a lack of confidence in his own abilities:

> There have been times, particularly earlier on in my role, where I was maybe playing more of a role and when you're doing that, you're being inauthentic and it's like

wearing clothes that don't fit, it just doesn't feel right, it can cause you to experience

a lot of anxiety **(Trainee 1)**

The trainee practitioners were beginning to explore how they, as both people and

practitioners, fitted into their environment. Without fully understanding how their values and

beliefs influenced their philosophy of practice, individuals at this stage of development were

experiencing a level of inauthenticity and anxiety around their applied practice. However, as

the trainees progressed with their training, there was an acknowledgement that this distinction

between person and practitioner was beginning to recede. In an attempt to reduce the

distinction between person and practitioner, the trainee practitioners seemed to first reflect

upon their core belief system and then on how their values influenced their applied practice

and the development of a congruent philosophy of practice:

Know yourself, so actually know yourself, know your values, so in the sport

psychology world, get to know that core values level of the philosophy and know who

you are, because having that means you can develop a clear philosophy of practice

and that has been the biggest thing that has contributed towards my development,

because, it's not actually my development as a practitioner that I'm talking about, it's

me as a person **(Trainee 2)**

By reflecting on their core belief systems, the trainee practitioners were beginning to

develop a congruent philosophy of practice, which was positively influencing the practitioner

individuation process by helping them understand how their approach translated into practice.

One of the trainee practitioners, whilst discussing a critical moment, reflected on their

transition out of sport as an athlete, which resulted in a loss of identity. This experience

demonstrated that this particular individual had already experienced challenges to their

identity as an athlete; contributing towards the development of a more coherent and authentic

professional self:

You can't separate them and I think that's what I learnt, when I reflect back on gaining that knowledge of what I went through as an athlete I'm quite sure of the person who I am, who I want to be, who I aspire to be on a daily basis and what's interesting is, I feel I could go into any sporting environment, any academic environment and not necessarily change who I am, you know, be confident with who I am and just be content with that environment **(Trainee 5)**

This participant seemed to show he had progressed further along the individuation process by demonstrating high levels of self-awareness regarding his own values and beliefs and how they translated into their professional practice. This progress may have been due to their age (oldest of the trainees), their proximity to finishing the BASES training pathway (near completion), or their variety of challenging life experiences (being released from a professional football club). Their narrative was more aligned to the neophyte practitioners' experiences, suggesting that ones' personal experiences can influence an individuals' applied capabilities above and beyond the formal training pathway alone.

Neophyte Practitioners

Becoming qualified through their respective training pathways and being older (and more experienced than the trainees) seemed to expose the neophyte practitioners to a number of different critical moments, such as; leaving their jobs, divorce, and experiencing a loss of family members and friends. Four individuals in this stage of development discussed how their values and beliefs were becoming more closely aligned to their applied practice. It was evident that these individuals were further along the practitioner individuation process in comparison to the trainee practitioners, possibly due to the unique critical moments they had experienced and/or the increased experience they had as people and practitioners. For example, *Neophyte 2* had recently started a new applied role in an attempt to establish a more authentic approach to practice:

Practicing psychology is an expression of myself, it's an expression of myself and I

think the practitioner has to be sown into who I am as a person. I think if you try and

split the two, I wonder if others will see you as fraudulent and if you start splitting

them out it can eat into your values and what you think is important in life **(Neophyte**

2)

By discussing their applied practice as an expression of themselves, the neophyte

practitioners were demonstrating a closer alignment between their values and their approach

to applied practice. This alignment between values, beliefs, and behaviour seem to enhance

the neophyte practitioners' confidence in their abilities as applied practitioners and was also

beginning to make each individual question how their own approach to practice fitted with

the environment (and the role) they were currently in. One participant decided to stop

working in their current applied role and set up their own private practice. This allowed them

to demonstrate congruence and authenticity in their professional practice:

You feel more confident and you feel much more congruent, because they [*clients*]

are just expecting you, they're not expecting a business or something that they've

seen someone else do… so you're not having to live up to the expectations of the

style and the approach of someone else, you're just being you, you have no choice,

but to be authentic really and if people are going to buy-in to it, they're going to buy

into what I do… if I'm genuine and I come out of a meeting and was very honest and

true to myself, whether you get the work or not, it's easier to accept **(Neophyte 1)**

Similar to the trainee practitioners, the neophyte practitioners were attempting to

negotiate a fit between their values and beliefs and the values of the environment they were

situated within. However, instead of changing their approach to practice to fit the role, they

were more likely to find a role that allowed them to be more authentic as a practitioner. This

demonstrates the vital interaction that occurs between the individual and their context. As

practitioners, we are able to act on the environment to suit our needs, but the environment and context also acts upon us. Based on the stories told, neophyte practitioners were able to negotiate a better fit with the contexts in which they were situated in comparison to the trainee practitioners.

Throughout the interviews, practitioners also began to tell stories of critical moments that occurred outside of sport (death of family and friends, relationship break-ups, and having children) and how this had contributed towards their development and approach as applied sport psychology practitioners. These personal challenges seemed to give them a new perspective on their life and careers, by making the participants reflect on what was important to them as people:

So, it took me a while to figure out, but for a long time and I admit this freely, I have put my wife second in my ambitions. I always said she was top of my list, but she wasn't, but now with what we've been through [*losing a child and a close friend in a very short space of time*] I understand where I really have to put my time and effort and it's into building a personal life, because you can create like a paper mâché house, you think… I have a home, I have a wife, I have a car, so I take that for granted, so I can really focus on my career, but the house will just disintegrate and all you'll be left with is a hollowed out shell, so we have to be careful not to put the career at the top of the list…for me anyway…I'm becoming a happier, better human being, for not doing that. What really needs my attention, what really is important to me, is the stuff that goes on when I close the door at night, that's the stuff that will really rip you in half, it won't be because some young athlete decides that they don't want to work with you anymore and I suppose there's a part of me that, if I have to…if I have to walk away from it all, in terms of my PhD or as a psychologist and never use it and I walk away for personal reasons, then I'm happy to do that and that's a strange thing to say after

putting in that much work, because I started to realise that the bigger stuff, like my

relationship with my wife now does come first, I do believe that, but it's taken me a

long time to get there **(Neophyte 2)**

It got to the point where I would be leaving the house at 5 o'clock in the morning and

not getting home until 10 o'clock at night and that was six days a week, so obviously

that has a major impact on you and your relationship… eventually we got divorced

and it makes you question everything…is this really all worth it? With time I came to

understand that the personal stuff was more important, and it actually doesn't have to

come at the detriment of your career, it actually makes you a better practitioner if

anything **(Neophyte 4)**

Both of these neophyte practitioners' stories provide strong support for the *Re-birth*

plot. It was evident that their values and beliefs had been challenged and consequently

changed whilst experiencing very personal critical moments. Both practitioners seemed to

possess a strong professional identity that was having a significantly negative impact on their

broader life. This highlights how vital it is for applied practitioners to develop self-awareness,

so they can prioritise self-care and the care of their significant others.

Experienced Practitioners

Those in the experienced category, continued to demonstrate progression throughout the

practitioner individuation process. Each participant in this stage of development was able to

reflect on an increasing alignment between their beliefs, values, and behaviours as they

progressed throughout their careers:

I remember saying to someone years and years ago, you've got to be a chameleon to

be effective and I don't know how they interpreted that [*laughter*], but what I was

trying to communicate is the fact that you have to flex to the client, but I think the

way I would describe it now, compared to then, is that…whilst maintaining your own

personal qualities and preferences, you have to flex to meet you clients' needs, but the amount of flex you need to give can take you too far away from who you are… so that shift over time…I think I'm more aware of the connectiveness between me as a person and me as a professional… (**Experienced 1**)

The experienced practitioners also seemed to have very high levels of self-awareness in relation to how their philosophy of practice was a representation of their core values and how this had been influenced by key critical moments throughout their lives:

Philosophy is not necessarily about the way you practice, it's more about who you are as an individual… it's about the values you hold and values for me are fundamental to what I do. All of those experiences I've had as a child, firstly led me into sport psychology as a profession, but I think more importantly, informed me of the fact that those other elements are more important, so those life experiences are important to how I practice now (**Experienced 2**)

Just like the neophyte practitioners, the experienced practitioners used their awareness of how they practiced and reflected on the compatibility with their applied roles. One participant, just like some of the neophyte practitioners, left their role, because their approach did not fit with the culture of the sport:

The work was difficult, because of the personalities in the system and the culture, the actual working one-to-one with the athletes was fine, but you just felt you were constantly battling against the system in a way, so I left and I don't see myself working with an organisation in that sense again (**Experienced 3**)

However, one distinction between the neophyte and experienced practitioners was that the experienced practitioners were at a stage in their career where they were more inclined to discuss their role in the development of other practitioners:

I mean philosophy, you can very quickly be taught philosophy and I think we probably

do it the wrong way round actually, we teach philosophy, but I actually don't know if

teaching philosophy is the right thing…people need to discover philosophy…what I

mean by that is, based upon your experiences, you have an understanding of the world

and what it is and what you know and then you should start to think about how that

then informs what you do (**Experienced 2**)

I feel that that is a great contribution you can make to any industry, any profession, to

train the next generation…and I hope that that's what I can do, I hope I am part of doing

that anyway, already, but, that's really the heart of what I do now (**Experienced 1**)

Given their roles with higher education institutes, the experienced practitioners seemed to be

experiencing a second re-birth. The first saw the merging of the person and practitioner earlier

in their careers, and the second, was beginning to see them transition from applied practitioners

to supervisors and mentors.

Discussion

The present study explored stories of critical moments that contributed towards the

development of applied sport psychology practitioners. After analysing the narrative

structure, four plots were evident; *Re-birth, Rags to Riches, Tragedy,* and *The Quest.* Nine of

the 13 stories were best represented by the *Re-birth* plot. Furthermore, the consistent

narrative feature underpinning all plots, highlighted an alignment between values, beliefs,

and behaviours that was facilitated by the critical moments experienced. The results add to

existing knowledge in a number of ways.

The first way this research adds to knowledge, is by providing an insight into what the

practitioner individuation pathway might involve and how this might change depending on

the experience level of the practitioner and the critical moments they experience. By

including practitioners of differing developmental stages, the research team were able to

identify the different critical moments experienced at different stages of development and how they contributed towards an alignment between beliefs, values, and behaviours. For example, the trainee practitioners were still attempting to understand how their own values and beliefs contributed towards the development of a congruent philosophy of practice (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). Without fully aligning their values to their philosophy of practice, a distinction between the person and practitioner still existed. This lack of a coherent professional identity seemed to cause them to experience inauthenticity when engaging in applied practice and meant they were more likely to change their approach to practice, and experience anxiety, as opposed to finding an environment that aligned with their core values and beliefs (McEwan et al., 2019). Further along the career spectrum, the neophyte practitioners demonstrated a closer alignment between their values and philosophy of practice. This seemed to contribute towards less of a distinction between person and practitioner and allowed them to experience an increased sense of authenticity and confidence (Lindsay et al., 2007). This suggests that the practitioner individuation process is supported through formal training pathways (Tod & Bond, 2010), but also through personal and professional critical moments. By understanding the stories of practitioners in different stages of development, we can highlight unique experiences and tailor support to contribute towards the continuing development of practitioners' dependent on their personal and professional needs.

The second way these results add to our knowledge, is by demonstrating how development theories can apply to sport psychology practitioners' development. For example, the first of Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2013) themes highlights that optimal practitioner development involves the merging of the person and the practitioner. The similarities between their findings and the findings of the current study further strengthens the parallels between the development of counselling psychologists and the development of

sport psychologists (McEwan & Tod, 2015) and provides us with more confidence that the counselling literature can provide a framework, within the unique culture and context of applied sport psychology, to understand the optimal development of applied sport psychology practitioners.

Another way these findings add to existing knowledge is through the use of narrative analysis. By using narrative analysis, the primary researcher was able to explore and understand each of the participants' subjective experiences and how experiencing these critical moments throughout their personal and professional lives, changed their view of the world (Jowett & Frost, 2007). Furthermore, this approach to the data analysis process placed practitioner identity development as a central focus of the study. This was achieved in the knowledge that the stories people tell, provide meaning to their lived experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a). Furthermore, human beings lead storied lives (Sarbin, 1986) and these stories provide a lens into our identities as individuals (Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). Moreover, stories help individuals understand themselves (Smith, 2010) and reveal how we are influenced through our social and cultural settings (Frank, 1995). Therefore, by understanding what practitioners experience and how they tell their stories, we are in a better position to understand how our dominant narrative contributes towards who we are and how we develop as applied sport psychology practitioners. For example, the dominant and most consistent narrative from the participants' stories was that of the *Re-birth* plot. This suggests that, as practitioners experience critical moments in both a professional and personal capacity, they are forced to consider who they are and who they want to be (Nesti et al., 2012). Hence, these critical moments are integral to the development of a coherent and authentic practitioner identity (Tod et al., 2017).

Narrative analysis was chosen as the method of data analysis for this study as it provided the primary author with an insight into how critical moments influenced the

participants' development. Whilst one narrative plot seemed to define the majority of the participants' stories, it is possible that the participants chose to silence other narratives in an attempt to tell a more meaningful story. It is possible that other narratives exist that could provide us with key information about how practitioners develop as they experience critical moments. However, these narratives may have been marginalised as a result of how the data was collected (only being asked to tell one story) or because of what they reveal about the individual. Perhaps, these stories were not as positive or were perceived to provide less of a meaningful contribution. Nonetheless, they may still be influential in helping us understand the optimal development of applied sport psychology practitioners.

Future research should continue with the use of narrative analysis, in an attempt to investigate and explore some of these alternative narratives. Furthermore, more attention could be dedicated to understanding how the context and culture surrounding the development of practitioners, influences the stories that are told. Understanding the cultural construction of these stories, would not only allow for more individualised practitioner support, but would also allow education providers to reflect on the environments they are creating when educating and developing applied sport psychology practitioners. For example, the sample of the current study overcomes flaws in previous studies by including practitioners from both the BPS and BASES accreditation routines. However, the sample still only includes participants from the United Kingdom (UK). Future research should include participants from an international sample to identify if these alternative practitioner development pathways are comparable to the UK routes investigated in this study. Future research could also use narrative analysis to explore other aspects of practitioner development, such as; stories of supervision, stories of successful/unsuccessful consultancy experiences, and stories of non-optimal practitioner development. Moreover, if a longitudinal approach to the research design was adopted, we would be able to observe how these stories

change over time and the impact this had on practitioner development. Finally, there may be value in measuring the frequency at which applied sport psychology practitioners experience critical moments in their careers. This may allow researchers to establish a connection between the quantity of critical moments experienced and the perceived effectiveness of practitioners in an applied setting.

This study explored the stories of critical moments experienced by applied sport psychology practitioners. The results provide a critical insight into the experiences and challenges faced throughout the developmental process and highlight how practitioners evolve along the practitioner individuation process over time. The majority of the stories told were most closely represented by the *Re-birth* plot, which highlighted the on-going development of a coherent practitioner identity. Narrative features were presented that were unique and distinct to each stage of development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced). Finally, future research was suggested such as: use of narrative analysis to understand alternative narrative structures and themes, exploration of successful and unsuccessful consultancy experiences, and the use of quantitative methods to measure the frequency and impact of critical moments on the development of applied practitioners.

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