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Emotional labor and professional practice in sports medicine and science

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to explore how sport medicine and science practitioners manage their emotions through emotional labor when engaging in professional practice in elite sport. To address the research aim a semi-structured interview design was adopted. Specifically, eighteen professional sport medicine and science staff provided interviews. The sample comprised sport and exercise psychologists ($n = 6$), strength and conditioning coaches ($n = 5$), physiotherapists ($n = 5$), one sports doctor and one generic sport scientist. Following a process of thematic analysis, the results were organized into the following overarching themes: (a) factors influencing emotional labor enactment, (b) emotional labor enactment and, (c) professional and personal outcomes. The findings provide a novel contribution to understanding the professional demands faced by practitioners, and are discussed in relation to the development of professional competencies and the welfare and performance of sport medics and scientists.

Keywords: emotion, emotional displays, emotion regulation, well-being, professions, professional development

Emotional labor and professional practice in sports medicine and science

The pursuit of athletic excellence in high performance sport is increasingly informed by innovative medical, scientific, and technological advances driven by the expertise of sports medics and scientists (SMSs) (Wagstaff, Gilmore & Thelwell, 2015), who are relied upon to improve and optimize athlete performance. The persistent demands for performance success, the obligation to interact with various stakeholders, the need to work as part of a multi-disciplinary sports medicine and science team, and the emotionality of the elite performance context has arguably increased SMSs necessity to perform emotional labor. The term emotional labor has been recently defined as, “emotion regulation performed in response to job-based emotional requirements in order to produce emotion toward – and to evoke emotion from – another person to achieve organizational goals” (Grandey, Diefendorff & Rupp, 2013, p. 18; see also Hochschild, 1983). Previous research has demonstrated how individuals are required to enact emotional labor as part of their role in sport, including athletes (e.g., Tamminen & Crocker, 2013), coaches (e.g., Nelson et al, 2013), personal trainers (e.g., George, 2008), and performance directors (e.g., Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012). Nevertheless, to date there has been no research into the role of emotional labor in SMS professionals.

Professional practice in sport

Given the salient role that SMS play in sport organizations (Reid, Stewart & Thorne, 2004), the aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which SMSs’ are required to engage in emotional labor and to examine the implications of our findings here for professional practice in the elite sport environment. Within this study, the term “professional practice” refers to the development of students, trainees, and qualified practitioners in the educational or work context in accordance with training guidelines set down by relevant professional or accrediting bodies (e.g., Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004). Indeed, although professional practice guidelines are typically characterized by theoretical knowledge and practical skills that are underpinned by evidence based practice to be deemed “competent” in each professional domain, recent research

68 has highlighted the need to devote attention to the interpersonal and relational skills required for
69 SMS's to be effective in their role (Tod, Marchant & Andersen, 2007). Specifically, Tod et al.
70 (2007) found displays of empathy were perceived as critical to effective practice when
71 interacting with athletes. Moreover, practitioners have reported difficulties when attempting to
72 transfer theoretical knowledge to emotion-laden situations in applied practice across one-to-one
73 and team settings, and when travelling to unfamiliar locations (see Tonn & Harmison, 2004).
74 Similarly, practice reflections of physiotherapists portray the range of positive and negative
75 emotions felt, concealed, and expressed with clients as part of their professional demands
76 (Foster & Sayers, 2012). In the SMS domain, the salience of organizational change such as a
77 change in management have been reported to increase emotional labor requirements of SMS's
78 which might lead to higher incidence of burnout (Wagstaff et al., 2015). Therefore, emotional
79 labor might have far reaching positive consequences for professional practice when working
80 with stakeholders in sport, which previous findings have yet to detail.

81 **Emotional labor in sport**

82 Sociological studies exploring sport-specific cultural norms have provided insight into
83 the emotional display requirements athletes and coaches face (Gallmeier, 1987; Galvan &
84 Ward, 1998). For example, Gallmeier (1987) found emotional display requirements and
85 emotional expressiveness changed before, during, and after professional hockey games for the
86 athletes and head coach. To elaborate, Gallmeier observed that the head coach and players were
87 expected to display a calm and business-like demeanor before matches. In contrast, during the
88 game the head coach and players were expected to display intense, positive emotions to
89 maximize team performance. Interestingly, there is also evidence from interpersonal
90 perceptions literature to indicate the value of emotional expressiveness on sport performance.
91 Manley, Greenlees, Thelwell, Filby, and Smith (2008) found facial expressions, body language
92 and gestures to be important cues for athletes when forming impressions of their coach. These
93 findings indicate that when coaches' express emotions in adherence to emotional display

94 requirements during competitive matches, this is associated with desired effects such as positive
95 psychological states and match-winning performance. Further, an interview study examining
96 stress in the coach-athlete relationship found athletes could perceive when their coaches were
97 under strain through facial expressions and verbal tone. This implies that coaches need to mask
98 their negative emotions through emotional labor, and the effort associated with displaying
99 desired emotions to athletes might lead to the detriment of coaches' general well-being and
100 effectiveness (Thelwell, Wagstaff, Rayner, Chapman & Barker, 2016). Subsequent work has
101 extended these findings to the sport and physical activity domain (Tamminen & Bennett, 2017).
102 Conceptualizing emotional labor as a psychosocial and performative process, Tamminen et al
103 (2017) found the socio-cultural contexts that sports athletes, coaches, and trainers operate in
104 dictate the degree to which emotional expressiveness is appropriate. Such elements of
105 professional practice could be critically reflected on and developed as interpersonal skills by
106 trainees and practitioner SMSs.

107 In recent years, emotional labor has become a variable of interest to coaching science
108 scholars (see, e.g., Larner, Wagstaff, Thelwell, Corbett, 2017; Lee & Chelladurai, 2016; Lee,
109 Chelladurai & Kim, 2015; Nelson et al., 2013). Revealing the emotionality of professional
110 practice in football coaching, Nelson et al. (2013) illustrated how a coach expressed and
111 concealed his true emotions to achieve desired ends. Despite feelings of inauthenticity, the need
112 to exude desirable emotions in front of athletes to drive performance was prioritized. A
113 quantitative program of research by Lee and colleagues (2015; 2016) found surface acting
114 predicted increased psychological costs such as emotional exhaustion, emotional dissonance,
115 and feelings inauthenticity. This implies that the increased emotional effort needed to surface
116 act (i.e., suppressing felt emotions) can lead to negative mental health outcomes in coaches. In a
117 recent multilevel questionnaire study examining emotional labor in sport organizations, athletes
118 and coaches who demonstrated high levels of surface acting were more likely to perceive the
119 frequency of organizational stressors encountered as negative, and therefore suffer burnout

120 (Larner et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate links between emotional labor and both
121 positive or negative personal and professional outcomes for sports coaches.

122 Overall, the research above provides a valuable insight into the potential salience of
123 emotional labor in sport. Nevertheless, no research has explored the emotional labor process in
124 SMS professions. Such a dearth seems curious given the emotive nature of elite sport and
125 pivotal role of support staff for the performance and wellbeing of athletes and teams in elite
126 sport. What remains unclear is the nature of emotional display requirements, emotion
127 regulation, and emotion expressiveness for SMSs in elite sport, and the influence of such
128 demands on practitioners. Therefore, this study presents a novel investigation of emotional
129 labor in SMS professionals. The findings of such explorations have the potential to
130 contextualize the work of SMS professionals in elite sport, and potentially inform education and
131 training, professional guidelines, codes of conduct, and governance regarding how practitioners
132 are expected to act when working in elite sport. To this end, the following research questions
133 guided the study: (a) to what extent do SMS professionals feel they enact emotional labor? (b)
134 what factors influence the enactment of emotional labor? (c) in what ways do SMS practitioners
135 enact emotional labor with athletes and members of multi-disciplinary teams, and (d) how does
136 emotional labor impact professional practice in SMSs?

137 **Method**

138 **Design**

139 This investigation was underpinned by philosophical assumptions of ontological
140 relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created, and mind dependent) and epistemological
141 interpretivism (i.e., knowledge is subjective and shaped by lived experience). Specifically, a
142 qualitative design was implemented to address the research questions. Semi-structured
143 interviews were chosen to address the research questions to allow adequate collection of
144 information about the topic of interest while giving participants a degree of flexibility to expand
145 on their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding pertinent issues (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

146 The authors engaged in abductive reasoning, which involved “dialectical movement between
147 everyday meanings and theoretical explanations” (Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek & Ng, 2012, p. 85),
148 which were then applied to the data. Such a procedure was followed because the aims of the
149 study were to establish whether and how emotional labor was constituted in SMS (deductive)
150 and to understand the impact of emotional labor in professional practice (inductive).

151 **Participants**

152 Participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling. The sampling criteria
153 included participants who were fully qualified and professionally accredited practitioners, and
154 were actively practicing in the United Kingdom at national sport level. Therefore, research
155 participants were accredited by one or more of the following national governing or regulatory
156 bodies; the General Medical Council (GMC), the Health Care and Professions Council (HCPC),
157 the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), the British Psychological
158 Society (BPS), the Chartered Society for Physiotherapists (CSP), or the United Kingdom Strength
159 and Conditioning Association (UKSCA).

160 The sample comprised eighteen active sports medicine and science practitioners (15 male,
161 3 female) including six sport and exercise psychologists, five strength and conditioning coaches,
162 five physiotherapists, one sports doctor, and one generic sports scientist. The decision to include
163 various SMS roles in this study was guided by Lerner et al (2017) to achieve a varied sample to
164 provide insight into emotional phenomena. The hard-to-reach nature of the target population, the
165 lack of sampling frame, and the gender imbalance of SMSs in elite sport (e.g., Bekker & Blake,
166 2016) resulted in a sample that is predominantly male. All participants, either in the past or at
167 present, practiced within a range of individual (e.g., golf, swimming, triathlon) and team based
168 (e.g., football, rugby, cricket) national and international level sports in the United Kingdom.
169 Demographic information such as names and locations were edited and pseudonyms used to
170 depersonalize participant quotations. The number of years of experience for each participant is
171 also displayed in ranges to protect anonymity (see Table 1).

172 **Data collection**

173 Following institutional ethical approval, interviewees were recruited through initial email
174 contact with SMS employed by national sports institutes or listed on publicly accessible registers
175 (e.g. Football Medicine Register). The email included a participant information sheet detailing
176 their ethical rights and what their involvement in the study would include, and an informed
177 consent form. Those practitioners who indicated an interest were contacted to arrange an
178 interview. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the interview. The
179 interviews lasted on average for 63 minutes and were conducted with each participant on a one-
180 to-one basis. Interviews were conducted by the first author either face-to-face ($n = 8$, mean
181 duration 64 minutes), online using Skype video calls ($n = 6$, mean duration 69 minutes), or over
182 the telephone ($n = 4$, mean duration 60 minutes). Seventeen interviews were audio recorded and
183 handwritten notes were made concurrently. One interviewee declined to be audio recorded but
184 consented to the use of their data from the researcher's handwritten notes.

185 **Interview guide.** An interview guide with three sections was developed; the interview
186 structure and questions drew on the research questions and the trifocal theory of emotional labor
187 (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015), addressing emotional display requirements, emotion regulation, and
188 emotion performance aspects of emotional labor. Open ended questions were used and pertinent
189 avenues of conversation deemed important to the research questions were probed. The interview
190 schedule is available on request from the first author. One pilot interview was conducted with a
191 sport and exercise scientist and the data is included in this paper.

192 **Data analysis**

193 In keeping with the aims of the study and its interpretivist epistemology, the data were
194 analyzed through interpretive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). This analysis
195 method was chosen because of its potential to provide insight into people's experiences, as well
196 as any aligned factors or processes that might influence a given phenomenon (Braun et al.,
197 2016). The research team engaged in the six-step analytical process outlined by Braun et al.

198 (2016). First, the data were transcribed verbatim, which produced 516 pages of double-spaced
199 typed text. The first and second authors then read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize
200 themselves with the content. Second, the data were coded in a systematic manner using general
201 labels across the dataset. Memos and codes were handwritten on the transcripts and transferred
202 to a master codebook that included 70 codes. Throughout this process, the first two authors
203 engaged in analytical conversations, looking for concepts that contributed to the research
204 questions. Third, and incorporating stages three to five of the analysis, the codes were
205 developed and organized into themes. For example, codes relating to self-awareness, reflection,
206 and flexibility in emotional labor approach were amalgamated in to the experience theme.
207 Overarching themes representing the subthemes and the interconnectedness of each theme were
208 developed. The themes were reviewed and refined by the research team by creating and
209 progressively altering a thematic map, as well as renaming and defining the themes. The final
210 step of writing up was aided by further analysis in response to peer review comments of an
211 earlier version of the paper, and were integral to the creative analytical process.

212 Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a checklist to promote robust research procedures
213 from start to finish. Following this approach, the research team maintained an audit trail of the
214 transcripts, coding, and analysis phases of the analysis (i.e., paper trail and member checking of
215 the research materials). In alignment with our ontological and epistemological position we also
216 sought to engage with the interpretative potential of the qualitative approach when making
217 sense of the data (Cassidy, 2016). We strove to be reflexive and interactive with one another
218 throughout the analysis phase, attempting to acknowledge and explore the complex nature of
219 elite sport organizations, and the practitioners that operate within them.

220 As a qualitative study, universally applied criteria are inappropriate for its evaluation
221 (see Tracy, 2010) and the method we deployed here was guided by Smith and McGannon
222 (2017) to enhance the substantive contribution of the topic, the emotional and intellectual
223 impact of the topic, and the coherence with which the research questions, method, and results

224 create a meaningful picture. This involved maintenance of an audit trail incorporating both data
225 collection and theoretical matters and aimed for SMS practitioner and academic resonance (i.e.,
226 how the research relates to readers through naturalistic generalization; Smith et al., 2017;
227 Burke, 2016).

228 **Results**

229 The results are presented under three overarching themes that elucidate emotional labor
230 and professional practice in SMS: (a) factors influencing emotional labor enactment, (b)
231 emotional labor enactment, and (c) professional and personal outcomes. The overarching
232 themes are presented separately for the purposes of organizing the data, yet the themes are not
233 mutually exclusive. Indeed, and as shown in Figure 1, our interpretation of these data are that
234 emotional labor and professional practice in SMS is a social, intersubjective and reflective
235 process whereby SMSs become increasingly aware of the influencing factors and outcomes of
236 their emotional labor enactment through reflection.

237 **Factors influencing emotional labor enactment**

238 The participants spoke at length of personal and situational factors that influenced how
239 they enacted emotional labor. The data suggest a range of contextually specific situations and
240 cultural or organizational expectations as well as personal characteristics that prompted this
241 behavior and the extent to which learning through reflection on past experiences of emotional
242 labor also influenced their subsequent reactions to emotional encounters.

243 **Context.** An influential factor affecting emotional labor enactment was the context or
244 situations practitioners found themselves in with stakeholders (i.e., athletes, coaches, backroom
245 staff) and the specific context of their sport.

246 **Emotional transactions.** The participants described array of emotionally laden
247 contextual situations their work involved, from total elation, “When we won the Premiership, I
248 remember standing in Twickenham stadium looking at a group of men with tears streaming
249 down their face” (Lilly, sport and exercise psychologist), to hopeless despair, “They had lost a

250 player, a team mate, he committed suicide relatively recently” (Rory, sport and exercise
251 psychologist). On occasions, emotional contexts were complex and ambiguous. For example,
252 Jonny, a sport and exercise psychologist, recalled a distressing encounter with a professional
253 cricketer who broke down after receiving a prestigious award from his club due to the
254 emotional trauma of his wife’s post-natal condition:

255 He came onto the balcony and literally a minute later he sat down next to me and was in
256 floods of tears. His wife had just had a baby and she had post-natal depression and was
257 suicidal. You can see people looking at this individual being applauded and at that point,
258 it was the last thing that was important to him. Listening to somebody, supporting them,
259 letting them know that you are available and always be there to support them.

260 Jonny reacted to his client by quickly altering his emotional display (i.e., expressions)
261 having assumed his client would have been feeling happiness after receiving such an honor.
262 Further, Jonny pushed beyond professional remit to show that he cared for his client on a
263 personal level when they were enduring a difficult situation.

264 **Culture.** The different socio-cultural norms of each sport also influenced the emotional
265 labor enactment of SMSs when working with athletes, coaches, performance directors, and
266 SMS staff. Participants were members of, or worked on an ad hoc basis in, varying elite sport
267 organizations across the UK, all of which held divergent histories, values, and aspirations which
268 affected emotional labor enactment. Nuances in culture affected the development of implicit
269 expectations regarding acceptable emotional behaviour, including what emotions to express and
270 avoid, and whether emotions could be spoken about in general.

271 **Emotional display requirements.** Participants described unwritten and implicit
272 expectations regarding emotional displays in their respective roles within sport organizations: “I
273 do not think the emotional side is ever discussed, it is always ‘behaviour’ and what is expected
274 of you.” (Lilly). Yet, it was also clear what emotional displays were appropriate and
275 inappropriate. Regarding appropriate emotional displays, Darren, a sport and exercise

276 psychologist, summarized the implicit consensus between participants regarding professional
277 demeanor with athletes and coaches and how the emotional state of the client or immediate
278 situation influenced whether and which emotional displays were appropriate.

279 I am conscious of keeping neutral facial expressions if we are talking about something
280 negative but when there are things you want to reinforce when there are things that
281 people are getting excited about. I feel like if you reflect that back to someone then they
282 buy into your relationship much more because you come across as understanding.

283 Although all participants provided examples of appropriate and inappropriate emotional
284 displays, they also noted that the interpretation of emotional display requirements was
285 subjective and open to contestation with many 'grey areas'. These areas were often problematic
286 requiring a combination of experience and professional judgment to decide the most appropriate
287 course of action. Adam, a male physiotherapist, described a conflict between his professional
288 duties as a physiotherapist and his status as an employee of a football club:

289 Players trust you with information of a medical nature... You then make a conscious
290 decision of whether that affects their performance and if you should share that
291 information with the coaches or the manager. However, quite often players might have
292 trusted you with that information either consciously or subconsciously thinking that you
293 won't pass it on. There's an unwritten rule that you choose what to say and who to say it
294 to... But you soon realize that you can't really be a true physiotherapist in a professional
295 sense and in an ethical and moral sense because you can't be confidential.

296 Adam was aware that this situation could be perceived as a violation of trust in the
297 practitioner-client relationship, and could evoke a strong emotional response by the athlete. The
298 potential for emotional labor enactment after disclosing private information is concerning and
299 ethically questionable. Therefore, SMSs find themselves attempting to resolve tensions between
300 professional codes of conduct and the cultural and practice norms in sport organizations.

301 ***Sport organization.*** Interview data also highlighted the unique culture of different sports
302 organizations that permitted certain types of emotional expressions and discouraged others.
303 Zak, a strength and conditioning coach, compared his own experiences in boxing to other sports
304 where the environment affects emotion expressions:

305 So cycling is very sterile. No emotion, no banter. Just get in, get the job done, get out.

306 Whereas boxing is very loose. It is like rugby, there is a lot of chat, there is a lot of
307 banter, so I think managing one's emotions in the boxing is very easy, well it is always
308 hard to do, but it is less energy consuming than it would be in a sterile environment.

309 That is, the respective values and attitudes championed by each sport organization influenced
310 the participants' emotional labor enactment. The interview data revealed a sense of ambiguity;
311 it was important to SMSs that the emotions expressed contributed to professional ends, but
312 sometimes those emotional displays might seem unprofessional to others outside the sport. For
313 example, one topic frequently mentioned was the exchange of banter as Darren recollected:

314 In a football club it is called banter, but there are situations that professional football
315 will put you in and things that you might say in those environments, that you would not
316 say when working with other clients. I would love to give you an example but I am
317 fairly certain it is far too inappropriate.

318 This willingness to be teased was seen to be important to the SMSs' effective
319 functioning, and acceptance by other stakeholders. Nevertheless, SMS were aware of the
320 ambiguity; their professional 'self' might deem the behavior as inappropriate but it was none-
321 the-less considered to be necessary. Stephen, a sports doctor, remarked that despite his
322 professional level of seniority and responsibility, it was important to engage in banter with
323 athletes and other stakeholders to get to know them and appear approachable.

324 **The practitioner.** Participants showed differing interpretations of what appropriate
325 emotional labor enactment constitutes in sports cultures and situations. Throughout the analysis,

326 it was apparent that individual differences between practitioners also affected their emotional
327 labor enactment.

328 ***Personal characteristics.*** When asked how they express emotions at work, some SMSs
329 reflected on the personal qualities that influenced how they enacted emotional labor.
330 Participants felt it necessary to demonstrate emotion abilities such as emotional intelligence to
331 be successful in their role. Lilly, for example, described her ability to read her disgruntled
332 athlete's emotions:

333 I had a consultation with an athlete on the phone, where that person had not made
334 selection and so their appraisal of that situation is that the coach is useless. I
335 fundamentally disagreed with everything that athlete was saying. Whilst I was listening,
336 I was also internalizing that that person is feeling very emotive, is very frustrated, is
337 very disappointed. The last thing that that person needs is for me to demonstrate that I
338 disagree with them or I am agitated. So you have to. It was completely natural for them
339 to experience a plethora of emotions and totally logical for them to project.

340 Paul, an experienced strength and conditioning coach, highlighted the responsibility and
341 need to 'read' others to achieve work related goals:

342 I think we have to be very good at judging personality types and behaviors, and then be
343 able to respond in the right way to get information across, therefore showing the value
344 that we can deliver... Athletes just behave in their way and the expectation is on you to
345 ensure that you manage your behavior to get the best out of them.

346 For Paul, the ability to judge others' personality, to empathize and be aware of others' emotions
347 was instrumental to achieving effectiveness when practicing.

348 ***Experience.*** A common element affecting emotional labor enactment was the past
349 experiences of participants. The disparity between the challenges of emotional labor when
350 entering the profession for the first time through to years' worth of experience was evident in
351 participant accounts. Reflection on experience was key to developing the skills required to enact

352 emotional labor and develop flexibility in the ways SMSs reacted to certain situations (see
353 Figure 1). As participants became more experienced interacting with stakeholders, the
354 importance of communicating emotions effectively became clear, especially when seeking
355 credibility as a practitioner. For example, the ability to reflect on emotional labor enactment
356 was perceived as critical to the participants' effectiveness as SMSs, as Lilly articulated:

357 When I think about myself as a person and as a practitioner, I think I could do this job
358 now, I do not think I could have done at the start of my career. Every sport had got its
359 own narrative, its own context, its own rules, and it is quite a unique environment. It is
360 very male dominated, it is very ego driven, and people are not afraid to say what they
361 think. There is a huge emotive aspect to that.

362 Indeed, for many of the practitioners they perceived experience to develop flexibility in one's
363 approach to emotional labor enactment, as Jim mused when trying to push athletes to the best of
364 their ability:

365 It's difficult because I don't think there is an easy way of doing [emotional labor]. It's a
366 question of recognizing when you are under pressure and dealing it. Some players you
367 have to have your arm around them, and sometimes you have to be aggressive with
368 them... actually having a mix of that sometimes works quite well.

369 With increased experience came the confidence to act authoritatively, if required, or
370 affectionately towards athletes without prior concerns about professionalism. Indeed, as
371 indicated in the next theme, emotional labor enactment, it appears that emotional labor
372 perceived as professional depending on the context in which it is performed.

373 **Emotional labor enactment**

374 Given the influence of many personal and situational factors, the data indicate the
375 interplay between felt emotions, observable emotional expressions, and verbal communication
376 in the emotional labor enactment described by participants. Key issues are a sense of 'acting'
377 out emotions and the 'authenticity' that this might connote.

378 **Acting.** Many participants reported instances where they were required to put on a
379 professional ‘act’ in front of stakeholders and to moderate their own emotional behavior, this
380 was dubbed the difference between a good SMS and a bad one by Zak, “I think good coaches
381 are like actors in how they can get people to do things. That is just all about being subtle in the
382 way you say things, how you say things, and how your body language is”. However, the
383 emotions felt by SMSs were not always congruent with observable and verbal expressions; this
384 surface acting displayed by the participants was characterized as the “professional mask”,
385 whereby the SMSs in this study faked emotional expressions needed to appear professional in
386 certain situations. Louise, a sport and exercise psychologist, recalled working with two
387 problematic athletes and the need to conceal her felt emotions:

388 I masked my emotions literally every day with those girls because they were a
389 nightmare. Not only did I not like their behavior, but I did not like one or two of the
390 individuals at all. I had to cover up my feelings because if I told them what I thought of
391 them that would have been the end of our working relationship and the end of my
392 contract quite frankly... because what I wanted to say was not professional.

393 Situations such as these show the effort and self-control required to suppress or to fake
394 emotional expressions. For Louise, the necessity to act professionally outweighed the need to
395 speak out and highlight poor behavior in this case. Despite the discrepancy between Louise’s
396 felt emotions and expressed emotions, the need to be remain positive and to act in a
397 professional manner was prioritized.

398 In contrast to such surface acting, some SMSs felt it appropriate to perform deep acting,
399 whereby practitioners purposively modified their felt emotions to be in alignment with the
400 expressions that were required in a specific context. Andrew, a strength and conditioning coach,
401 felt arriving ten minutes early to sessions to prepare emotionally gave him the confidence to
402 execute a coaching session to a high standard and led to appropriate emotions being expressed.
403 “Preparation allows you to focus on the parts of the session that are important, and allows you

404 to be clear about how you are going to manipulate your emotional state to get the result you
405 want from the athletes.” In this case, Andrew made the effort to adjust his felt emotions to be
406 positive or neutral with respect to the feelings of the athlete, leading to emotional congruence,
407 and therefore conveyed authenticity to the athlete. Conveying the professional mask through
408 observable expressions to athletes was critical to professional practice, regardless of the method
409 of acting.

410 **Authenticity.** The issues of deep and surface acting are complex and some participants
411 described their need for their internal and external emotions to be congruent, not only for the
412 benefit of stakeholders in sport, but also for themselves. Many SMSs disclosed their awareness
413 of felt emotions in everyday practice and discussed the effortless congruence between felt
414 emotions and emotional expressions in specific situations. Despite this, Andrew reflected that
415 his natural state of authenticity in developing rapport with his athletes could be perceived as
416 problematic by other SMSs:

417 I have always had friendly engagement with my athletes, whereas I think some
418 practitioners will think you cannot be friends with athletes. I think to deny your own
419 tendencies in relation to something like personal relationships is actually a bit false. I
420 still like to be approachable and friendly in professional relationships, rather than cold
421 and typical.

422 Andrew was not typical among the participants, and for many the effort associated with
423 the conflict of felt and expressed emotions was troublesome and depleting. Even so, Rory
424 recognized that authentic emotional displays were not always possible when consulting with
425 athletes. As illustrated by the following quotation, he felt emotions become something that are
426 not advisable or helpful to display:

427 My internal feelings are quite often obvious externally... There are certain
428 circumstances where I control them much better than others, so my natural style is to be
429 very congruent externally and internally... because... to change that... is quite labor

430 intensive. In a one-to-one situation with an athlete or a one-to-two situation with a coach
431 and an athlete or even a group educational session, or where I am doing psychology,
432 then I would [conceal emotions]. You would not be able to tell if I was struggling.

433 Ultimately, for Rory and many of the other participants, the most appropriate
434 professional mask for a given situation must be conveyed, regardless of the increased emotional
435 effort and potentially damaging outcomes.

436 **Verbal expressions.** In addition to the silent and observable emotional expressions
437 characterized by “the professional mask” many participants recalled that verbalizing emotions
438 often resulted in avoidable conflict. Ash spoke about how the type of emotions communicated
439 impacted upon others’ personal and professional opinions of him as a physiotherapist:

440 I think you learn quickly not to show yourself up and you learn which individuals you
441 can and can’t say certain things to. You’ve got to be prepared for the backlash, because
442 sometimes [honest, but negative] things do need saying.

443 Clive, a physiotherapist, struggled to understand the injury of an introverted athlete and
444 used positive emotive communication to help the athlete. This way, he created an environment
445 whereby the athlete could talk about the things on his mind:

446 My strategy with the introvert who is not very responsive is to ensure that once a week
447 we have quiet time, where he is free to say anything. It’s because our sessions are 100
448 miles an hour otherwise, where I lead a rather clinical meeting. I say, “you’re the boss,
449 you’re doing the rehab and you tell me what you feel.

450 According to Clive, one result of this emotive communication was athletes ‘opening up
451 in a safe environment’. The subsequent information revealed by athletes allowed Clive to better
452 treat the injury and progress their recovery with an enhanced working relationship.

453 **Professional and personal outcomes**

454 Throughout the analysis, outcomes associated with emotional labor enactment were
455 evident in SMSs responses. Participants described how emotional labor enactment was used as

456 a professional tool to achieve work goals, which had professional and personal effects on the
457 practitioner. SMSs highlighted the unique pressures associated with the requirement to persuade
458 athletes to undertake certain interventions.

459 **Professional outcomes.** When discussing the outcomes of their emotional labor
460 participants emphasized their professional priority to enhance sports performance and engage in
461 positive, transformational work with athletes. The data indicate that work leading up to
462 performance improvements is inherently emotional, and requires SMSs to manipulate their
463 emotional expressions to achieve optimal performance environments and working relationships.
464 The analysis indicates that trust and relationship management are important outcomes of
465 emotional labor for SMSs.

466 **Buy in.** Many participants discussed enacting emotional labor to persuade an athlete to
467 cooperate and engage in beneficial activities that would aid their performance. Louise spoke
468 about ‘selling the value of sports psychology’ to athletes to promote engagement by managing
469 her emotions:

470 It's all about impression management and selling sports psychology. We know goal
471 setting works from the evidence base but if you're not selling goal setting and this
472 person doesn't trust you, then it is not going to work with them.

473 Zak echoed this sentiment and found managing his emotions critical to reaching goals with his
474 athletes:

475 I think unless you can control [your emotions] it is game over because at the end of the
476 day you need that athlete to buy in to what you are doing. You are trying to get them to
477 do something that they may not like, the only way you are going to do that is if you get
478 buy in. It is always about finding what works for that individual and trying to get the
479 emotion across to their level to get the outcome that you want.

480 **Professional relationships.** The emotional labor outcomes manifested in professional
481 relationships with clients was indicated-by all the participants as an important part of athlete

482 career improvement. However, negotiating and navigating professional boundaries is complex
483 as no “professional” relationship described was the same and decisions made by the SMS, and
484 the emotions displayed in the practitioner to athlete context was significant for the efficacy of
485 those relationships. Louise stated, “You cannot build a relationship and you cannot build trust
486 without demonstrating appropriate emotions”. Louise also reflected that:

487 I think [emotion management] is really important because the way you say things, the
488 way you conduct yourself, the way you manage your reactions to what they may say,
489 influences their whole experience of you... So, you manage your emotions to manage
490 how a person experiences you, that is influencing the relationship. It is the way you sit,
491 the way you react, the way you listen, the eye contact you give, the way you use humor,
492 put people at ease... it all involves emotions and trying to influence someone, not in a
493 manipulative way, but in a way that will help them.

494 Through emotional labor enactment, therefore, SMSs developed rapport and trust, which
495 became the foundation of fruitful professional working relationships and provided the basis for
496 positive athlete engagement.

497 ***Positive emotional contagion.*** A further outcome of emotional labor, linked with issues
498 of surface and deep acting that participants highlighted relates to the priority of developing
499 positive emotions that increase athlete engagement with the SMS. The data indicate that the
500 interviewees regarded negative emotional displays as unhelpful and unprofessional; the needs
501 of the athlete outweighed personally felt emotions in the workplace. Ryan discussed displaying
502 positive emotions visually and verbally to increase the output of athletes in his sessions:

503 If you are not showing a great deal of enthusiasm for a session that you think is quite
504 important, why should you expect your athletes to not mirror that? The level of emotion
505 I push in my description is going to be something that really gets them engaged.

506 **Personal outcomes.** Although participants were clear about the needs of the athlete they
507 also reported personal detriments associated with their emotional labor and the personal

508 consequences of strains between surface acting and the challenges of achieving professional
509 goals and athlete performance outcomes. This study highlights that there is no right or wrong
510 way of approaching emotional labor when working as a professional SMS. However,
511 inexperience, a lack of reflection on past experiences, or a misjudgment about professional
512 distance had a profound and detrimental personal effect on SMSs. The data indicate the
513 personal and professional pressures of using emotional labor to achieve professional impression
514 management and the struggle to negotiate a balance of personal and professional demands and
515 identity as an SMS.

516 **Responsibility.** Participants in the present study often reported the emotionally charged
517 feeling of personal responsibility when athletes were not performing to the best of their ability.
518 Ash recalled, “You feel very responsible sometimes, like it's actually your fault. It's that ‘Oh
519 God...’ you know? You're feeling responsible for it and you're feeling bad for the player.”
520 Louise questioned her own professional effectiveness and publicly devalued herself on a
521 professional and personal basis when athletes suffered defeat:

522 I have a role to ensure that they achieve and performed optimally when it mattered
523 which is at this event, they weren't. So it wasn't necessarily the moment of emotion
524 regulation that affected me, I mean it was effortful, but I did it so I was proud of myself.
525 It was actually my reflection of ‘how have we got to this point? What was my role?
526 What was my failure?’ So I actually took it really hard that they had under-performed so
527 significantly. It made me think that I wasn't as good as I thought I was.

528 **Personal impact.** The data also suggest complexities associated with emotional labor
529 outcomes; emotional labor to develop relationships with athletes can be significantly positive
530 for professional effectiveness but it also poses a risk should the relationship be suddenly ended.
531 Lilly worked with an athlete over many years, and when this athlete was at a competition in
532 Australia, they became seriously ill, which had knock on effects for the SMS:

533 He was given a less than 5% chance of survival. So you have supported an athlete for
534 prolonged period of time, you have worked with them every week for two or three
535 years, and then you get a call to say, 'I need to let you know, that this person is not
536 likely to survive.' His parents had also received the call who would have then had to
537 have got onto a flight to Australia and would not know whether their child would be
538 dead or alive when they got to the other end. You can't be unaffected by those things.
539 You cannot walk into your house at the end of the day with a smile on your face.

540 The profound impact of situations such as these can have significant implications for
541 SMSs operating in emotionally demanding environments and some SMSs reflected on their
542 own health outcomes as a result.

543 ***Mental health issues.*** The balance between enacting emotional labor and being
544 successful over a prolonged period was reported by SMSs to lead to mental health issues, as
545 illustrated by Jonny's quotation:

546 I think sometimes in managing the demands of work, and the emotional aspects of the
547 work and trying to be successful, my personal life has suffered. So I was effective in
548 what I was doing at work, but it took its toll. And I think sometimes the nature of sport
549 is influential, the unsociable hours, the unpredictability of it, it can be all-consuming,
550 and therefore you look like you are coping with it, and you are, but you are using so
551 much of your resources in trying to cope with it.

552 Lauren made similar comments regarding the demands of SMSs in high performance
553 sport having implications for her mental health:

554 Often, because you feel quite isolated you tend to internalize things. I've got a few little
555 strategies that might help with coping with things like that. But often you don't have an
556 outlet and you've got to be professional all the time.

557 **Discussion**

558 The three overarching themes illustrated how emotional labor impacts SMSs
559 professional practice: (a) factors affecting emotional labor enactment, (b) emotional labor
560 enactment, and (c) professional and personal outcomes. The analysis provides the basis for
561 a model of emotional labor in sports medicine and science (see Figure 1) that emphasizes
562 the importance of experience and reflection for becoming aware of and enacting emotional
563 labor in elite sport organizations. The personal accounts of sports medics,
564 physiotherapists, sport and exercise psychologists, and strength and conditioning coaches
565 underline the value of the findings for a range of audiences, not least: prospective SMSs;
566 those responsible for managing SMS and performance departments in sport organizations;
567 human resources departments in charge of recruiting and retaining talent, and; professional
568 bodies and institutions responsible for educating, training, and developing SMSs for
569 employment in elite sport.

570 Personal and situational characteristics of SMSs are important influences on
571 emotional labor which seems to be a pragmatic issue of emotional control that
572 practitioners in this study needed to deploy when faced with various situations and
573 displays of intense emotions by athletes. As Figure 1 illustrates, emotional labor is
574 developed as a form of tacit knowledge to meet the emotional demands of elite sport. On-
575 the-job experience and the ability to reflect on that experience as a practitioner in the field
576 are important influences on developing capacity for emotional labor enactment. Those
577 practitioners who had been in the elite sport context for longer were often better equipped
578 to deal with emotional labor demands, yet unpredictable and previously unencountered
579 situations influenced their engagement and affected their ability to manage. These findings
580 are also apparent in studies of professions such as teaching (Zembylas, 2007) and nursing
581 (Herbig, Büssing & Ewert, 2001) which indicate that experience and a reflective
582 awareness of emotional knowledge is important when dealing with critical situations. To
583 some extent it might be expected that, due to the nature of psychological practice, that

584 sport and exercise psychologists in this study would face numerous and diverse emotion-
585 laden transactions with their clients (principally athletes), some of which fell outside of
586 their professional remit (e.g., clinical mental health issues). Nevertheless, physiotherapists
587 and strength and conditioning coaches also reported similar situations, despite limited
588 professional training for the management of such situations or their emotional fallout.
589 Emotional display requirements were largely influenced by the norms of the sport to an
590 extent (Wagstaff et al., 2012), but these data also show the influence of practitioners'
591 personalities, personal philosophies, and self-awareness.

592 The findings presented here also indicate the relevance of concepts established in
593 the literature (cf. Grandey & Gabriel, 2015); this study provides further evidence of
594 enactment methods of emotional labor (i.e., surface acting, deep acting, and authentic
595 emotional expression). In the case of elite sport, however, participants described their
596 emotions as inherently inter-subjective (i.e., influenced by interactions with others) and
597 performative (i.e., purposefully adjusting observable emotional expressions) in the elite
598 sport socio-cultural context (Tamminen et al., 2017). Indeed, the results of this study
599 indicate that it is reasonable to expect that SMSs, in common with other professional
600 groups such as medical, legal and academic practitioners (Day & Leitch, 2001; Herbig et
601 al., 2001; Anleu & Mack, 2005) will perform a combination of surface acting, deep acting,
602 and authentic emotional expression on any given day via a combination of visual, verbal,
603 and non-verbal communication that conveys professionalism. In response to the array of
604 influential factors on emotional labor enactment, SMSs were aware of the need to wear a
605 “professional mask” and control their emotional reactions. If the appropriate emotions
606 were put across to the athletes in their unique contexts, and were perceived as honest and
607 authentic to athletes, this led to fruitful consequences for professional practice.

608 Figure 1 also identifies outcomes pertaining to the consequences of emotional
609 labor for professional practice in SMS. Participants reported emotional labor to be

610 beneficial to professional practice, but potentially negative in its personal affect.
611 Unreflective behavior was also considered to be detrimental to professional practice.
612 Specifically, the results contribute further evidence about the personal (e.g., mental health
613 issues; Lee et al., 2016) and the professional (e.g., turnover intention or being ousted from
614 a role; Lerner et al., 2017) ramifications associated with emotional labor. Despite their
615 awareness of the potentially negative personal implications for practitioners, the
616 participants in this study reported a perceived need to convey the professional emotions to
617 achieve work goals regardless of the method of, or personal cost of, its enactment.

618 A significant contribution from this study is that the achievement of optimal work-
619 related outcomes (i.e., improving athlete performance) was more important than the
620 personal impact of surface or deep acting for SMSs. Given the potentially negative
621 consequences of emotional labor demands, findings such as this highlight the need for
622 governing bodies (e.g., CSP, BPS, British Association of Sport and Exercise Medicine)
623 and elite sport organizations to review their range of services to SMSs to raise awareness
624 about the emotional requirements associated with this form of work and the potential
625 effects on practitioner welfare. Further studies into the effects of emotional labor demands
626 on SMS's mental health are also necessary. Such investigations could lead to the design
627 and provision of adequate social support systems (e.g., communities of coping and
628 counselling; Korczynski, 2003) for SMSs when dealing with sensitive issues or difficult
629 life periods, and mitigate professional competency issues before they come into fruition.

630 **Applied implications**

631 Three implications for SMS professional practice arise from the salient
632 competency requirement for emotional labor in the SMS professions. First, emotional
633 labor formed a necessary part of practice in all SMS roles sampled, yet it is currently not
634 evident in ethical codes of conduct and professional practice guidelines (e.g., Health Care
635 and Professions Council) and from policy debates in elite sport organizations. This

636 warrants further attention by these bodies. Second, these findings indicate that an
637 education-training-practice gap exists in SMS with regards to the emotional labor
638 requirements of professional practice. It may be that neophyte practitioners are unaware of
639 the need to enact emotional labor to stakeholders and in differing situations, or the reasons
640 as to why they may enact emotional labor. Previous research has shown the usefulness and
641 effectiveness of reflective practice in sport and performance psychology (Devonport &
642 Lane, 2014), sports physiotherapy (Hollingworth, Dugdill & Prenton, 2014) and sports
643 coaching (Peel, Cropley, Hanton & Fleming, 2013). Third, Figure 1 indicates the priority
644 of encouraging reflective practice to understand the intersection between emotional labor
645 and practical skills throughout taught education, training and continuing professional
646 development initiatives to enables practitioners to personally and professionally benefit
647 from reflecting on experiences (their own and that of others) of emotional labor.

648 These results and our interpretation of them indicate several avenues for further
649 research. Specifically, given the pragmatic use of emotional labor dependent on the
650 situation (i.e., event characteristics), and individual differences contingent to the
651 practitioner (i.e., person characteristics) reported here, we encourage practitioners to
652 provide their own in-depth ethnographic accounts to illustrate their personal experiences
653 of emotional labor (e.g., factors influencing emotional labor, emotional labor enactment,
654 professional and personal outcomes). For example, original accounts by practitioners in
655 sport professions would provide meaningful, more personalized understandings of the
656 manifestations of emotional labor and the effects it may have on professional practice.
657 Further, exploration of emotional labor requirements at differing levels of communication
658 (i.e., practitioner to client, practitioner to group, within practitioner groups) would further
659 elucidate the emotional demands faced by practitioners who provide services to a range of
660 stakeholders in sport organizations.

661 **Limitations**

662 Two principal limitations of this study are acknowledged. First, the inclusion
663 criteria for this study and the snowball sampling strategy led to the recruitment of a
664 sample that is predominantly male. This is aligned with the current male domination of
665 SMS professions; European Union statistics indicate fewer women working in sport (43%)
666 compared to men (57%) in the UK (Eurostat, 2015) and gender inequality has been
667 identified in sport and exercise medicine (Bekker et al., 2016), strength and conditioning
668 coaching (Magnusen & Rhea, 2009), and sports psychology (Lovell, Parker, Brady,
669 Cotterill & Howatson, 2011). Therefore, the study findings might not represent the
670 potentially gendered emotional labor required by females in male dominated environments
671 and this represents an area where further research is required. Second, a combination of
672 face-to-face, telephone, and computer mediated interviewing (i.e., Skype) was used to
673 interview participants and this diversity brings with it a limitation (Hanna, 2014) as visual
674 cues and a volume of contextual and nonverbal data were not available from non-face to
675 face interactions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

676 **Perspectives**

677 This study provides a novel exploration of the emotional labor experiences of SMS
678 practitioners operating in elite sport in the UK. It shows that emotional labor enactment is
679 critical to professional effectiveness, despite potentially negative personal outcomes. The
680 consistent perceived necessity of emotional labor enactment in SMS professional practice
681 raises the question as to whether emotional labor should be considered a professional
682 competency and thus included in education and training. These findings should inform
683 policy and practice in sport organizations (e.g., national sport organizations), Higher
684 Education Institutions involved with training prospective SMSs, professional bodies
685 involved with the training and development of SMSs (e.g., BASES, BPS, CPS), and
686 professional practice bodies in charge of producing ethical codes of conduct and
687 regulating such professions (e.g., Health Care and Professions Council).

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1 **Table 1.** Participant demographic information.

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Professional Role	Qualifications/ Accreditation	Practitioner experience
Louise	Female	Sport and exercise psychologist	BSc, MSc, PhD/ BPS, BASES (psychology – scientific support)	16 – 20 years
Ash	Male	Physiotherapist	BSc, PGCert/HCPC, CSP	0 – 5 years
Jim	Male	Physiotherapist	BSc, Dip, MSc/HCPC, CSP FSMM	20+ years
Roger	Male	Sport and exercise psychologist	BSc, MSc, PhD/ BPS, HCPC, BASES (psychology – scientific support)	11 – 15 years
Jonny	Male	Sport and exercise psychologist	BSc, PhD/BPS, HCPC	20+ years
Darren	Male	Sport and exercise psychologist	BSc, MSc/BPS, HCPC	6 – 10 years
Lauren	Female	Physiotherapist	BSc, MSc, PGCert/HCPC, ACPSEM, CSP	11 – 15 years
Lilly	Female	Sport and exercise psychologist	BSc, MSc, PhD/ BPS, HCPC	11 – 15 years
Andrew	Male	Strength and conditioning coach	BSc, MSc/UKSCA	16 – 20 years
Zak	Male	Strength and conditioning coach	BSc, MSc/ UKSCA	6 – 10 years
Ryan	Male	Strength and conditioning coach	BSc, MSc/UKSCA	11 – 15 years
Frank	Male	Sports scientist	BA, MA	0 – 5 years
David	Male	Strength and conditioning coach	BSc, MSc/ UKSCA, BASES (sport and exercise scientist)	6 – 10 years
Paul	Male	Strength and conditioning coach	BSc, MSc/ UKSCA	11 – 15 years
Stephen	Male	Sports Doctor	MD, MSc BSc, MSc, BSc, MSc, PhD/BASES	11 – 15 years
Rory	Male	Sport and exercise psychologist	(psychology – scientific support), BPS, HCPC	11 – 20 years
Adam	Male	Physiotherapist	BSc, MSc, PGCert/CSP, HCPC	11 – 15 years
Clive	Male	Physiotherapist	BSc/CSP, HCPC	16 – 20 years

1 **Figure 1:** Emotional labor and professional practice in sports medicine and science
2 practitioners.

