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An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international disability footballers

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Date of submission: 11th September 2018

Accepted: 24th August 2020

Word count: 6401

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Date of Submission: 11th September 2018

Date of Re-Submission: 17th August 2020

Word count: **6401**

Abstract

Presently, disability athletes remain under-represented in organisational stressor research. Our study sought to bring novel insights to this area by determining the organisational stressors experienced by international disability footballers. Twelve current international disability footballers (10 male, 2 female) from a range of UK impairment squads took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant, and data were analysed by content analysis procedures. Organisational stressors data were abstracted into Arnold, Wagstaff, Steadman, and Pratt's (2017) concepts, and Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) four general dimensions: leadership and personnel issues, cultural and team issues, logistical and environmental issues, and performance and personal issues, revealing a series of football specific nuances. Our study is the first exploration of the prevalence of organisational stressors within international disability football. Our study also provides practitioners with an understanding of the common and unique organisational stressors faced by international disability footballers. Finally, we suggest a series of practical recommendations for policy development within disability football organisations to aid athletes to effective manage organisational stressors.

Keywords: elite, para-athletes, Paralympic, performance, soccer, stress

An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international disability footballers

In elite sport, athletes are typically exposed to a number of stressors at a personal-level (e.g., an athletes' own performance expectations) and at an organisational-level (e.g., environmental factors) that can subsequently affect their health (e.g., Tabei, Fletcher, & Goodger, 2012) and performance (e.g., Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2017). An important avenue of stress research relates to organisational stressors, which are defined as being the environmental demands associated with an organisation in which an individual operates (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006). Evidence indicates the importance of these stressors in that elite athletes have been found to experience and recall more demands associated directly with their sport organisation than with their competitive performances (e.g., Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005).

Extant literature into organisational stressors has sought to provide insight into the range of positive (Fletcher et al., 2006; Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012) and negative outcomes associated with organisational stressors across a range of facets including emotions, behaviours (e.g., overtraining), psychological well-being, and underperformance (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2012). To explain these effects, Fletcher et al.'s (2006) meta-model of stress, emotions and performance suggests: "stressors arise from the environment the performer operates in, are mediated by the processes of perception, appraisal and coping, and, as a consequence, result in positive or negative responses, feeling states, and outcomes" (p. 333). Using this current meta-model of stress as a backdrop, our study intentionally does not examine the effects or coping mechanisms used by players to deal with the stressors encountered. But instead, and given the paucity of research within disability football, we offer an

insight into the peformance environment the athletes operate in and their perceptions of organisational stressors encountered (Fletcher et al., 2006). We anticipated that taking this particular lens will provide a springboard for future researchers to explore other key aspects of the meta-model of stress within disability football (e.g., appraisal and coping mechanisms).

Non-disabled athlete populations have been, and continue to be, investigated extensively within organizational stress work in sport. Specifically, more recent findings have demonstrated the links between appraisal of, and influence of, organisational stressors upon performance (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017b), the range of emotional consequences if stressors persist (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2018) and how dealing with stressors may impact upon future playing time (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2020). Despite this emerging literature, studies with disabled athletes remain comparatively limited. With an ever-increasing number of disabled athletes at major sport competitions such as the Paralympic Games, researchers have outlined the importance of understanding this population group, and the potentially unique organisational stressors that they encounter, to aid with supporting athletes, coaches and practitioners in achieving a more optimal stress experience (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017; Rumbold et al., 2018).

To date, the most comprehensive study exploring the prevelance of organisational stressors within disability sport was conducted by Arnold, Wagstaff, et al. (2017). In contrast to previous literature (e.g., Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012), this study reported a number of salient similarities (e.g., selection processes) and differences (e.g., classification, lack of crowds, coaches being unaware of tailoring exercises, lack of knowledge) between the experiences of British disabled athletes compared to non-disabled athletes. In addition, findings from studies conducted

with Canadian (i.e., Allan, Smith, Côte, Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2018) and Kenyan para-athletes (Crawford & Stodolska, 2008) have identified comparable considerations including a lack of financial resources, coaching, and negative attitudes towards disability. Overall, this research provides an important foundation to develop from and adds to previous evidence that has explored other forms of stressors experienced by disabled athletes, such as social and policial issues (e.g., Bush, Silk, Porter, & Howe, 2013).

While Arnold and colleagues' (2017) findings develop the breadth of our understanding by focusing on eight sports and a range of disabilities, there is a need to gain a more detailed understanding within a specific sport to begin the development of evidence-based interventions tailored to the nuances of specific sports. By studying a range of disabiltities within a single sport we are better able to understand the contextual naunces (including intra-group differences and similarities) and the unique culture at play. Although some studies have examined disabled athletes within the same sport (e.g., Campbell & Jones, 2002), such studies have not specifically focused upon exploring the organisational stressors that the athlete encounters.

One sport absent from previous research is that of disability football. Football is one of the most popular global sports and although previous investigations have explored organisational stressors within football across a range of contexts at the highest levels of the game (e.g., Kristiansen, Ivarsson, Solstad, & Roberts, 2019), none have specifically focussed upon disability football at any level of participation.

Disability sport is governed according to the International Sport Federation (ISF) criteria relevant to each impairment group. One example of a unique stressor

disabled athletes are subject to is the ongoing and evolving eligibility checks according to the impairment specific ISF, a criterion not encountered within non-disability football. Disability football is the seventh highest participated team sport in England (Sport England, 2015), placing it above more established non-disability sports (e.g., rugby league) although below male and female football. Despite significant investment into disability football over the previous 20 years via a number of stakeholders, the amount of funding available remains comparatively very low to the non-disabled game which is able to attract significant sponsorship investment. Consequently, although both male and female football involvement has seen significant developments in their playing structures in recent years (for instance, through the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan in the boy's academy system in 2012 and the professionalisation of women's pyramid system resulting in full-time contracts for those in the Women's Super League in 2011), disabled footballers have to juggle the demands of working full-time outside of football as they seek to progress to the pinacle of their sport. The experiences that disability footballers encounter therefore are likely to be unique within the wider sport context and potentially create novel demands for performers particuarly as the public awareness of disability football, and sport, increases.

Evidently, organisational stressors are experienced by elite disabled athletes (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), but presently there is limited understanding of the organisational stressors prevalent within the novel context of UK international disability football. Using Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) framework as an underpinning, the purpose of our current study was to understand the organisational stressors experienced by international disability footballers. While not a central aim of our study, we also sought to provide data which may enable national govening

bodies (NGBs) and key stakeholders (e.g., coaches and sport science practitioners) working within disability football (and in other sports) to create effective organisational structures including an optimal stress environment.

Method

Approach

Underpinning our investigation are philosophical assumptions of ontological relativism (i.e., reality is mind dependent and multiple) and epistemological post-positivism (i.e., knowledge is multiple rather than singular; see Creswell, 2013). Given our focus upon organisational stressors and the population under study, it is pertinent to consider any analysis from the perspective of the participant given that previous researchers have indicated the importance of understanding experience from the perspective of the disabled athlete as each athlete will 'experience' their disability uniquely (e.g., Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). A qualitiative methodology was deemed best suited for this investigation in view of the limited literature examining organisational stressors in disability sport (Silverman, 2006).

Specifically, interviews were chosen to encourage participants to provide in-depth information based on their first-hand experiences and thereby allow participants to express their individual identities as a part of their personal story which is developed according to the cultural parameters they operate within (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Participants

Participants were selected via purposive sampling techniques to ensure representation from across the NGB international disability squads and impairment spectrum. Participants were required to have a classified disability (confirmed by their NGB and ISF) and be a current member of an international disability football

squad. As part of their preparations for a yearly major competition, the participants were training two days each month within the environment of their international squad While they were also expected to follow both a strength and conditioning programme provided centrally from the NGB as well as partaking in regular football activities within club football. All participants were interviewed prior to their next major competition with the sample comprising 12 footballers (10 male, 2 female), ranging in age from 19 to 33 (M_{age} = 25.50 ± 3.58), who had been international athletes for an average of 5.92 (± 3.20) years. Two starting footballers were included from each of the following squads: blind, cerebral palsy, deaf male, deaf female, partially sighted, and wheelchair football teams. All participants within the sample were part-time athletes and not paid for their involvement within their squad or to compete within their global competition cycle.

Procedure

Following institutional ethics approval, players eligible for the study were contacted to take part in the research and were informed about the study, what their involvement would entail and their participatory rights (covering aspects such as confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw) before arranging a convenient time and location for the interview. An interview guide was developed to explore the topics pertinent for disability footballers with a copy of the guide provided to the players one week prior to the interview to allow them to consider their responses more fully for the interview. Pilot interviews were conducted prior to the main study with two recently retired (less than two years) players to check the appropriatess of the interview guide, and allow the interviewer to refine questioning techniques. Based upon the pilot interviews, several further probes (e.g., “What effect do you think that had?”) were devised to support with clarifying and

elaborating on the player's perspectives (cf. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). Each player provided informed consent prior to the start of data collection. Interviews ($M_{minutes}$ = 88.56 ± 16.68) were conducted face-to-face or via FaceTime to account for the preference of the interviewee (i.e., offering access to an interpreter for deaf participants), were digitially recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Interview Guide

A five section interview guide was developed. The first section outlined to the participants the study focus and their participatory rights. The second section encompassed a series of questions to develop rapport with the player, for instance, "Tell me what you consider to be one of your major achievements so far in football" and "Tell me how your first call up to the [country] squad came about". The third section defined organisational stressors to check the players' understanding regarding the focus of the study. The fourth section included questions exploring the players' experiences of organisational stressors in their squad, for instance, "Tell me about your training schedule during your last tournament", "Talk to me about the different personnel working with the squad", "What can you tell me about the support players receive" and "Tell me about the team's goals and how they were determined". The final section allowed players to discuss additional issues they wished to raise which had not been already covered.

Data Analysis

In analysing the data, we used Fletcher et al.'s (2006) definition of organisational stressors to provide the basis for that which should be coded as a 'stressor'. The interview transcripts were manually analysed using inductive and deductive content analysis procedures (Weber, 1985). Specifically, environmental

demands associated primarily and directly with the NGB within which the disability footballer was operating were firstly identified (e.g., organisational stressors). The analysis process involved the interviewer reading, re-reading, and listening to the transcripts and coding the raw-data threads deductively into the concept groupings, themes, and general dimensions as presented within Arnold and Fletcher (2012) and Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017). These were: (1) leadership and personal issues; (2) cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and environmental issues; and (4) performance and personal issues. Constant comparative methods were used throughout the analysis process to compare stressors and anecdotes for any similarities, variations, or differences, as well as comparing across the analysis levels (e.g., stressors to concepts, concepts to concepts; Holt & Tamminen, 2010). At each stage of the deductive analysis, discussions with critical friends were completed before continuing the analysis to the next stage. Where new concepts emerged, these were inductively labelled before being deductively placed into the appropriate theme and general dimension grouping in accordance with Arnold and colleagues' (2012; 2017) findings.

Reflexivity and Methodological Rigour

In view of the nature of the study, our approach centred upon a relativist position (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) in that views are relative to differences in perception from the participants' own experiences of disability. Further, consideration also has to be given to the potential for the experiences and background of the primary researcher that had the potential to influence the data collection, analysis, and subsequent presentation of findings. Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, an audit trail was maintained and shared with the second and third authors throughout

the analysis process to consider the thematic ideas interpreted. Second, a critical friend was engaged with in order to challenge the decisions being made and encourage reflection of alternative interpretations (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Third, within the Results and Discussion, content codes are accompanied by contextually rich, direct quotations to enable readers to make their own meaningful interpretations of the data (cf. Biddle et al., 2001; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results and Discussion

In total, 428 organisational stressors were interpreted from the data that were then abstracted into the concepts detailed by Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017) and reviewed in-line with Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) four general dimensions: (1) leadership and personnel issues; (2) cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and environmental issues; and (4) performance and personal issues. Leadership and personnel issues encapsulate organisational stressors associated with management and support of a sports team (see Figure 1). Cultural and team issues encapsulate the organisational stressors associated with attitudes and behaviours within the sports team. Logistical and environmental issues encapsulate organisational stressors associated with the organisation of operations for training and/or competition. Finally, performance and personal issues encapsulate the organisational stressors associated with a performer's athletic career and physical self (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). Within each general dimension, we have identified nuances specific to the relativist experiences of international disability footballers, and football as a sport, that extends the insights provided in previous research (i.e., Arnold et al., 2017). Full analysis of the data is available on request from the first author.

Leadership and Personnel Issues

Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to coaching delivery and interactions, disability awareness of key staff, team expectations and pressures, playing experience within the squad, the governing body, media profile, and game officials. We found that athletes had concerns regarding the availability of specialist team staff which specifically related to how the functional efficiency of the team was impacted when key medical personnel were unavailable. Further to this, we also found the players' perceptions of favouritism within the NGB towards non-disability over elite disability squads was a key stressor identified. Previous research on performance environments has noted how athlete performance can be negatively impacted through both team management factors in non-disability (e.g., Arnold, Collington, Manley, Rees, Soanes, & Williams, 2019) as well as disability settings (e.g., Crawford & Stodolska, 2008), and the salience of coach leadership skills on and off the pitch (e.g., Allan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the favouritism towards non-disability football teams relative to the disability teams within the same NGB is a novel finding in this context. An additional finding related to the players' perceptions of the coach's interactions with them and, in particular, challenges resulting from coaches communicating with players in their preferred language. This was a consideration highlighted specifically in regards the deaf squads as one player noted:

> Without the interpreter, we wouldn't be able to even get any information across but it's just that I think a lot of times, like even the coaches and the manager, I'm not sure they're aware that sometimes it is second-rate information that's been passed on…So it's a little bit whether the coach is really getting his point across so sometimes that, like sort of, gets a bit muddled. (Participant 10)

Indeed, previous researchers have not recruited deaf athletes (e.g., Arnold et al., 2017) and thus our finding regarding the importance of the interpreter and the apparent strain on coach-athlete relations as a result of such communications advances our understanding of disability footballers' experiences of organisational stressors.

The international disability footballers in our current study also identified the potential impact and influence of parents upon the squad players and staff as a distraction to team operations. This was particularly apparent in relation to decisions made on squad selection for competitions and the tactics and/or strategies utilised where parents had direct access to the group throughout the duration of competition. For instance, one player expressed:

> So like the younger lads, their parents will come to games which is really interesting because they've probably been there now three or four years to all tournaments. So we've actually got genuine support when we go away and the other side of it is, you know, they have opinions as everyone does in football...but they have opinions that sometimes it's not that they're not right, but when everyone starts to have an opinion and you just think "That's not ideal saying that. That's gonna put something in someone's head". But they've gone out their way to come support their kid. So, you know, we have to manage parents…We're an elite squad yet the manager's managing parents so that's another bit where we, certainly senior players, try and manage it…Sometimes it could all be positive, and it's probably too positive, and you think "Humm, he didn't do that well. I wouldn't go over the top"…so it's managing them…that's a massive [impact on the staff and players], but if it [parental input] got out of hand, it'd be an absolute nightmare. (Participant 4)

Considering this stressor, researchers have identified comparable observations relating to 'detrimental parental behaviours' such as over-inflating player egos (e.g., Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012). Researchers within non-disability football academies have highlighted that parents experience organisational stressors too (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010). Studies have also shown that parents naturally feel empathy for their children in competitive settings (Harwood, Clarke, & Cushion, 2016) and go through several experiences associated with watching their child compete (e.g., Harwood et al., 2010). Additionally, several studies have indicated the increased presence and involvement of parents in sporting activities where their child has a disability (e.g., Shapiro & Malone, 2016) and the impact this has upon their participation. In our study, participants are on average 25 years old (adults) and are still talking about their parents in relation to their football performance. This data could imply that disability footballers are perhaps still, or at least more, reliant on their parents for a range of football-related issues. Indeed, the parental involvement and associated organisational stressors for footballers (non-disabled) would stop at approximately 18 years, but our novel findings indicate that for disability footballers, organisational stressors surrounding parents still prevail into adulthood, and therefore have important implications for coaches and sport psychologists working in international disability football.

In support of these findings, Ferrari (2019) has indicated that parents of children with disabilities tend to be more critical than other parents. Potential reasons for this parental dynamic may be that parents have differing experiences and knowledge of the sport (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008) and that parents may find it difficult to manage their child's emotional-motivational levels in dealing with failure (Ferrari, 2019). In our study, it is possible that players perceived

that their parents are still developing their understanding regarding international disability football, and their parents' psychological approach may hold more in common with that of amateur youth sport than international adult environments (e.g., Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). Through adopting dual empathetic and educational approaches with parents, therefore, NGBs and elite disability squad staff can support parents to maintain their parent-child relationships and identify how to prevent such over-protectionist tendencies occurring (i.e., Antle, Mills, Steele, Kalnins, & Rossen, 2007) through heightening their sense of being close to the overall setup (i.e., Ferrari, 2019).

Cultural and Team Issues

Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to teammates' personality and attitudes, cultural norms, and team atmosphere and support. One prominent observation related to the perceived sacrifices that players felt they made in relation to diet and fitness comparative to their teammates given that the squad spend very little time together. For instance, one player suggested:

> I mean it is hard to be motivated for some people if you're not being around the environment all the time. I can see, I can see why it would, like, some of the lads would find it hard to be motivated. I mean like, as I said, some of the lads are still quite young and young in the mind as well so like they, they so still like going out for a drink here and there and they do still like, like, they don't have the best diets…Like for me, personally I'm the sort of person that just loves the training, loves to eat well anyway so it's not really difficult for me that when a tournament comes around…Like I said, I remember coming away from [country] thinking like "We didn't do well there" because the lads, like, some of the lads have putting things on Snapchat like a week before we go and it, like annoying me, and I always

> felt like we come away and, even though you feel like yourself you could have done a little bit better, or could have worked a little bit harder leading up to it cause when you don't achieve your goals, you always, like that's the first thing you look at, thinking "What could I have done more of or better?" but then I was always sort of coming away and thinking like "The lads haven't trained as hard as", like I trained morning, noon and night for some day and you just feel like if they'd done the same, like, was it being in the same situation…we might not get the contact time together as much as we'd like but what you do away is as important, if not more. I think that kind of penny finally dropped with a few lads that they needed to go and sort themselves out a little bit…I think that's always one of the main barriers because you're not meeting up as much as you can, you need to do as much as possible away, and I know it's hard. Like everyone, we're not professional people, we've got jobs and whatever…it is hard to stay in, I know that cause I've been there. I remember going out with my mates and having to then get up at 7, 8 o'clock in the morning to go strength and conditioning. And it is hard, but like for me, you're an England player and you just go and do it. Don't moan about it, you go and do it and once you're back and its out the way, it's out the way isn't it? But I mean not everyone can have that mentality. (Participant 2)

The players' perceptions on this stressor tallies with research that has noted how antisocial teammate behaviours (e.g., being unwilling to partake in prescribed physical conditioning training) can negatively impact upon an athlete's sport experience in contrast to prosocial behaviours (e.g., partaking in team bonding exercises) which are positively associated with effort, performance, and enjoyment (Bruner et al., 2017). As noted by Allan et al. (2018), an athlete's sense of belonging is wrapped up within their performance and relational narratives, with possible

interpretations based around social acceptance as well as a sense of community within the group potentially influencing performance output.

Off-field relationships can play a significant role in social support and team effectiveness (e.g., Gershgoren et al., 2015) with player relationships shown to be related to self-confidence (e.g., Freeman & Rees, 2009) and performance in football (e.g., Gioldasis, Stavrou, Mitrotasios, & Psychountaki, 2016). Extending Arnold, Wagstaff et al.'s (2017) observations relating to team atmosphere and support further, for one elite disability football impairment group, social cohesion (i.e., Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002) within the playing group was particularly prominent (e.g., Roberts, Arnold, Gillison, Bilzon, & Colclough, 2020). This is illustrated by one participant who stated: "…when I first started it was very much the signers and the oralists. Which wasn't great (be)cause you don't want that in a team" (Participant 3), and another who noted, "…as bad as it might sound, I can hear, and like previously it was more of a deaf-based squad…so I sort of got on a bit better with the staff" (Participant 11).

Research within deaf sport and with deaf athletes signifies a key consideration relating to Deaf culture, and by association, the upbringing an individual player has had (e.g., Ammons & Eickman, 2011). In some cases, there may be no association with Deaf culture at all; for instance, recent statistics from the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) show that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, with the majority of deaf children educated within mainstream education and not accessing British Sign Language during their childhood (NDCS, 2017). These findings are significant to understand communication preferences between those who sign and those who communicate orally (i.e., Atherton, 2009), and the challenges of developing social cohesion within sport teams. The literature

is limited in this regard; however, one study that examines the role of football within the deaf community highlights the isolation that deaf players can feel off the pitch and how unfulfilling their experiences of playing can be (Atherton, Russell, & Turner, 2001). The insights from the deaf footballers in the current study highlight a stressor associated with encouraging deaf and hearing-impaired players volition to work together (social and task-related).

Logistical and Environmental Issues

Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to facilities and equipment, rules and regulations, travel, weather conditions, structure of training, competition format and selection. Selection was a prominent concept across all squads and specifically, two strands emerged relating to the identification of new players as well as selection into squads. Participants highlighted the lack of prospective players being identified to suitably challenge players within the current squad, as highlighted by one player who said: "It's not competitive at all to be honest. You kind of, without sounding big headed, you kind of know you're pretty much in the squad" (Participant 3). The apparent lack of a deeper player pool led to further stressors regarding the perceived disparity in team selection policy as illustrated here:

> I've seen like other players turn up late to, half a day late, leave half a day early since then they maybe are a bit more of a valuable player on the pitch and nothing happens with that…There are untouchable players in the squad. Definite, definite untouchable players in the squad. (Participant 6)

Similarly, stressors associated with classification were also raised with participants in the current study viewing the process as stressful from several perspectives. For instance, one stressor related to a new classification process which

was due to be implemented within cerebral palsy football, While another stressor related to being reclassified ahead of a competition in partially sighted football:

> I've been classified three times…you're just thinking "Oh my god, I just want to get this out the way" because it's very hard to focus on the tournament when you've got that in mind. (Participant 2)

A further stressor related to the perceived limited availability and use of the current NGB training kit. A particular part of this stressor was how the kit was comparatively available to and used by the non-disability squads despite all international squads being grouped within the same NGB operational matrix to receive centralised support:

> …when we've turned up and we've got the old, you know, last season's kits and stuff like that...You wouldn't give any other [NGB] squad these…that's more the stress side for me, because I think we're [country]…we're going to represent the country, we're representing the [NGB] so why not put us out in the newest of gear…instead of having us wearing last seasons and, it's more of a morale thing as well for the lads. (Participant 9)

This stressor, which centred on access to kit and how it may feed into squad morale, has not been identified in previous studies of disability athletes (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017). One potential rationale for this being perceived as a stressor may be contextualised from the perspective of the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To elaborate, previous researchers have shown that elite disability athletes desire to be recognised first and foremost as an athlete (Purdue & Howe, 2012). However, international disability football players in the current study felt that being unable to use the same training kit as the elite non-disability squads results in

the players perceiving themselves to be part of an out-group rather than an in-group within the NGB setup.

Further, investigations of Team GB at the London 2012 Olympic Games identified team kit to be a salient factor in the development of team identity, particularly in highlighting in-group characteristics comparative to other groups (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). The authors note that the use of a single team kit resulted in the development of a single organisational entity spanning across teams under Team GB. One comparable element which can be drawn between Team GB and the NGB elite squads in the current study are that both organisations operate within high performance environments. Further, Allan et al. (2018) identified within their review the notion of belongingness as one of several experiential elements of participation, and noted the inconsistencies perceived by individual athletes in the way each of these elements is experienced and can impact upon their sporting involvement. However, in contrast with this study and Slater et al.'s (2015) findings, the perceptions of the disability footballers in the current study indicate that they do not recognise themselves as being a part of the same organisational entity as the elite non-disability squads, and therefore the potential psychological benefits to enhance performance may not be present (cf. Høigaard et al., 2013).

Performance and Personal Issues

Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to finances, injuries, and diet and hydration. Players highlighted several concerns relating to financial considerations, such as apprehension at a loss of earnings While with their squad as a result of having to take time off from their job. For example, one player noted:

> … that was a big stress I had, just the financial side because it was just not worth . . . it wasn't financially viable for me to turn up to training camps and then miss work and not get paid for it. (Participant 9)

Equally, a prominent stressor for players centred around injury support away from elite squad settings. Researchers have reported that injury rates are comparable to those in non-disability sport and that injury is a significant stressor for disabled athletes (Fagher et al., 2016). One reason for this relates to the potential for an injury to pose additional limitations on a disabled athlete and their everyday activities (Weiler, van Mechelen, Fuller, & Verhagen, 2016). Although international disability sport is now viewed comparably to international non-disability setups (e.g., Fagher et al., 2016), the majority of the elite disability footballers do not have full-time contracts and undertake their preparations away from formal training camps. Consequently, players are potentially more likely to incur an injury in their home-setting. Previous researchers have shown that being unable to access a trusted medical professional may lead to increased stress and anxiety levels (e.g., Podlog, Dimmock, & Miller, 2011) however identifying appropriate medical support can be challenging for disabled athletes (Ahmed et al., 2015), as one player observed:

> I've had a few injuries in the past where it's really hard to get support if you can't prove you did [it] While at [nation]…anything we get injured by doing is stuff we're doing away in preparation for [nation]. You know, you're an [nation] player 12 months of the year. (Participant 4)

A further stressor related to the availability of lifestyle development support, particularly given the majority of elite disability footballers are not full-time athletes. The players' concerns related to the appropriateness of aspects such as following ascribed fitness programmes to fit in alongside their full-time employment

obligations: “Sometimes [staff member’s] programme’s a bit unrealistic with [their] morning and afternoon sessions. That’s probably based more around a pro-football player or a player that doesn’t work” (Participant 6). It may be that support staff with a background in football are not perceived to tailor their programme optimally for disability footballers in terms of time management.

Our findings identify novel and key stressors which have not been previously reported in the literature (e.g., communication barriers between hearing coaches and deaf players; parental influence on and around the squad; players’ perceptions of their teammates lifestyle in preparing for squad activities; and a perceived lack of identity with and to the other NGB squads). This study, therefore, not only contributes to knowledge in this area, but also can inform applied practice in international disability football. While some stressors encountered were similar to those previously reported with non-disabled athletes (e.g., injury support), other stressors were similar to disability specific ones identified previously (e.g., classification); thus, providing further evidence to the prevalence of organisational stressors within sporting environments.

Applied Implications

Although it can be challenging to identify and introduce stressor reduction interventions within sport organizations (i.e., Moore, Freeman, Hase, Solomon-Moore, & Arnold, 2019), our study provides a number of applied implications which may aid this venture. First, the findings illuminate a need to educate parents in regards to their involvement and support of disability footballers (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). This is a novel finding, and is particularly pertinent to parents who may feel unfamiliar with an international disability environment, and this could be achieved through educational workshops through the NGB (e.g.,

Knight et al., 2017). Second, national team identity-specific stressors could be reduced through embracing a shared team identity between elite disability and non-disability teams, initiated by and through the NGB (i.e., Slater et al., 2015). This could include access to National Training Centres for entire squad training and competition camps and using the same national kit for preparations and competitions. Third, to alleviate stressors relating to coach-player communication in football, clear short- (e.g., professional development opportunities), and long-term (e.g., mentoring schemes) solutions need to be presented. Fourth, the findings from this study provide supporting evidence for key NGB staff to use in seeking to influence internal policy. It may be prudent for football governing bodies to garner additional support within their organisation for elite disability teams centred upon organisational stressors that players are prone to, as found in our study, and which may negatively impact upon performance (i.e., Rumbold et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Researcher Directions

Regarding shortcomings of this study, first it is important to emphasise that the findings may only be specific to the organisation sampled or to disability football provision at the international level. However, it is possible that other athletes and NGBs may have encountered similar issues to those discussed, and thus may benefit from the findings and their implications. Second, the study focused on international disability footballers, and female athletes were under-represented as a result of the NGB elite squad structures. The data presented supports the notion that certain stressors are unique to certain groups and contexts (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012). Specifically within elite disability football, investigations may be directed towards developing deeper understanding of the potential variance of stressors reported by different impairment groups and genders (e.g., Atherton et al., 2001), and to the

effects of coping mechanisms utilised by players (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012). Further, investigations of organisational stressors within elite disability football from other countries may offer an opportunity to explore the stressors within different cultures (i.e., Arnold, Ponnusamy, Zhang, & Gucciardi, 2017). Finally, we provide our interpretation of the organisational stressors experienced by international disability footballers. Other researchers, particularly with different philosophies (e.g., an interpretivist position), may have interpreted these disability footballer experiences differently.

Conclusion

Our study is the first to explore the organisational stressors experienced by international disability footballers across all impairment squads within a single NGB. The study enhances awareness and understanding of the first stage of Fletcher et al.'s (2006) meta model, that is the stressors component within the P-E fit stage. Specifically, it helps to understand from a theoretical standpoint, which stressors might arise for international disability footballers, which is a fundamental first step before the rest of the meta model can then be applied (e.g., appraisal, coping etc). While the findings illustrate similarities with previous researchers sampling disability athletes (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), they also advance understanding by highlighting novel organisational stressors experienced by disabled international footballers, including: (1) the overreliance on parental support into adulthood; (2) a lack of continuity in kit across all football squads and potential for a shared social identity to be developed across the NGB and; (3) ineffective communication strategies.

*Conflicts of interest***:** None. This research did not receive any external funding.

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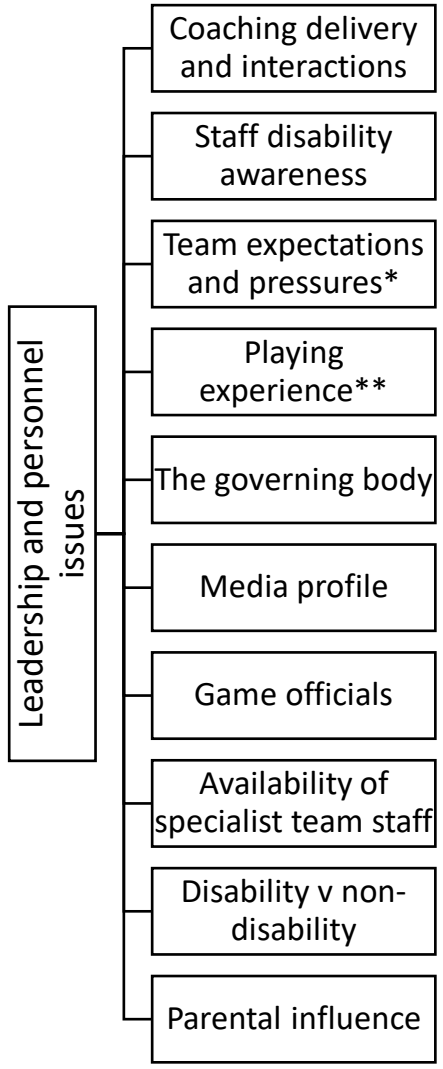
794

795 **Figure 1: Hierarchical sub-themes**



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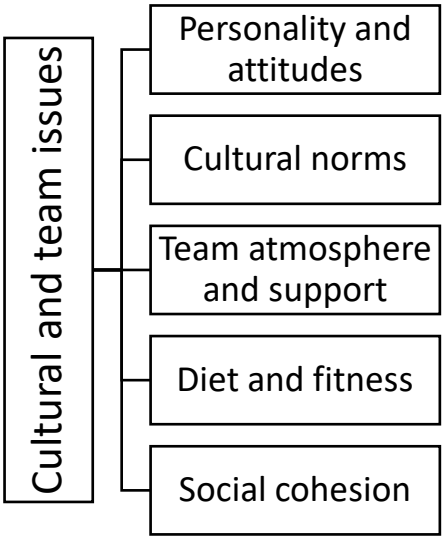

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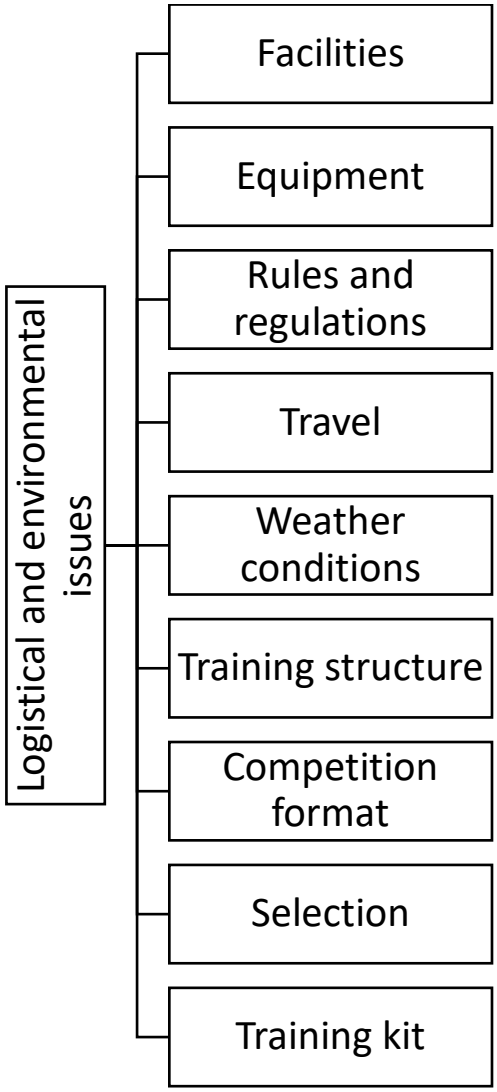
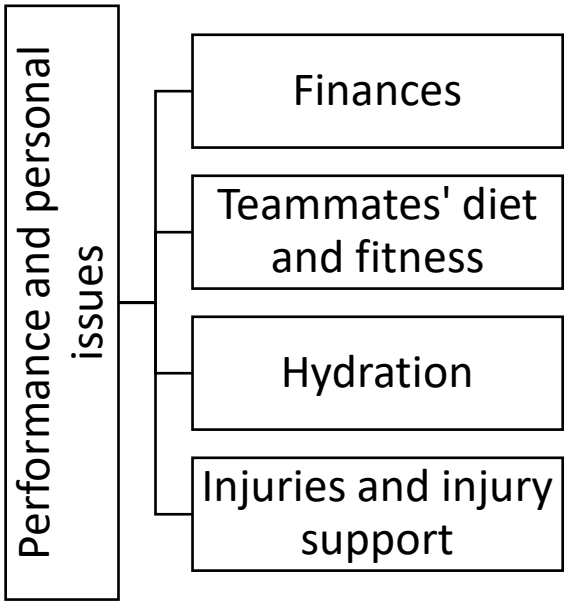

Logistical and environmental issues
Facilities
Equipment
Rules and regulations
Travel
Weather conditions
Training structure
Competition format
Selection
Training kit

798


Performance and personal issues
Finances
Teammates' diet and fitness
Hydration
Injuries and injury support

799

800 |* Relates to managing expectations of the NGB to what ‘success looks like’ for the
801 team comparative to what other nations are able to draw upon pre- and during
802 competition.
803 ** Relates to the experience of playing for the relevant international squad under the
804 management of Head Coach pre- and during competition