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An Exploration of Trainee Practitioners' Experiences When Using Observation

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26 Abstract

27 Observation provides applied sport psychologists with a direct assessment of client behavior
 28 within the sporting environment. Despite the unique properties and the insightful information
 29 that observation allows, it has received limited literary attention within the applied sport
 30 psychology domain. The current study aimed to explore and further understand the
 31 observation practices of current trainee practitioners. All participants were enrolled on a
 32 training program towards becoming either a chartered psychologist (BPS) or an accredited
 33 sport and exercise scientist (BASES). In total, five focus groups were conducted and
 34 analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA; Smith, 1996). Four
 35 superordinate themes emerged: value of observation, type of observation, challenges of
 36 observation, and suggestions for observation training. Results demonstrate the increased
 37 value that observation brings to effective service delivery and intervention. Specifically,
 38 informal observation is commended for its propensity to build greater contextual intelligence
 39 and to develop stronger client relationships.

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41 *Keywords:* applied sport psychology, focus groups, contextual intelligence

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51 An Exploration of Trainee Practitioners' Experiences When Using Observation

52 Conducting a thorough and comprehensive needs analysis is an essential skill for an
 53 applied sport psychologist (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). Client information
 54 should be gathered both in the initial stages and throughout the consultancy period to ensure
 55 the appropriate identification of performance strengths and detriments, and changes in these
 56 (Tkachuk, Leslie-Toogood, & Martin, 2003). Traditionally, interviews, questionnaires, and
 57 observations are triangulated to afford a holistic and increasingly accurate depiction of the
 58 performer (Hemmings & Holder, 2009; Milne & Reiser, 2011). As a result, relevant
 59 information is used to develop suitable interventions to facilitate constructive client change
 60 (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002; Katz & Hemmings, 2009).

61 Interviews and questionnaires are well represented in the applied sport psychology
 62 literature, and extensive guidelines are provided for their implementation (Taylor &
 63 Schneider, 1992; Tkachuk et al., 2003). Two well established interview schedules include
 64 the sport clinical intake protocol (SCIP; Taylor & Schneider, 1992) and the BASIC-ID
 65 framework (Davies & West, 1991). The SCIP (Taylor & Schneider, 1992) is intended to
 66 collate both sport specific and clinical information across seven areas considered to be
 67 important to the athlete's life. This includes: a) the presenting problem, b) life and athletic
 68 history, c) family and social support, d) health status, e) important life events, f) changes
 69 prior to the onset of the presenting problem, and g) details of the presenting problem.
 70 Similarly, the BASIC-ID (Davies & West, 1991) gathers both general and specific insight
 71 into athletic performance across seven modalities; behavior, affect, sensations, imagery,
 72 cognitions, interpersonal relations, and biological functioning (diet/drugs). In addition,
 73 current literature has advanced discussion to the principles of effective counselling skills, i.e.,
 74 room set up, positioning, active listening, and relationship development (Katz & Hemmings,
 75 2009; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Sharp, Hodge & Danish, 2015).

76 In comparison, observation allows the applied sport psychologist to move beyond
 77 typical one-to-one consultancies and become immersed into the rich, dynamic, and
 78 naturalistic settings of the sporting environment (Watson II & Shannon, 2010). Every
 79 individual has a unique perception of their surroundings; hence it is imperative that sport
 80 psychologists observe *specific* behavioral issues within the client's *specific* sporting context
 81 (Orlick, 1989). Inevitably, observation is often criticized because of its inability to causally
 82 account for 'invisible' factors such as cognition and intention, and is therefore viewed as
 83 speculative (Gillham, 2008). However, it should also be recognized that standardized
 84 questionnaires present hypothetically fabricated scenarios, while interviews are generally
 85 conducted in an environment far removed from the client's sporting world. An explicit
 86 record of an individual's pattern of behavior (i.e. observation), is often dissimilar to an
 87 individual's perceived understanding of self-behavior and interaction (i.e. interviews;
 88 questionnaires) (Gillham, 2008). Considering this, it is essential for practitioners to be aware
 89 of the opportunities that effective observation can herald within the consultation process
 90 (Watson II & Shannon, 2010).

91 Despite the ostensive need for observation there is limited research evidence into best
 92 practice, guidelines, and application in sport psychology (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007;
 93 Holder & Winter, 2016). Typically, researchers have focussed on the implementation of
 94 formal observation via systematic instruments, aimed to count and record behavioral
 95 frequency in pre-determined categories (Gillham, 2008). To date there are two such
 96 instruments within the applied sport psychology literature, the self-talk and gestures rating
 97 scale (STAGRS; Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994), and the multidimensional
 98 motivational climate observation system (MMCOS; Smith et al., 2015). While systematic
 99 observation instruments provide useful statistical information regarding the frequency of
 100 behavior, their limitations must also be acknowledged. The sporting environment is dynamic

101 in nature and defined by contextual nuances that cannot be wholly represented by pre-defined
 102 and isolated behavioral categories (Hall, Gray, & Sproule, 2016). Reliance on the simple
 103 quantification of behavior can result in a scenario devoid of context, limited in the richness of
 104 information gathered, and create missed opportunities to record behavioral triggers impacting
 105 performance (Cushion, Harvey, Muir, & Nelson, 2012). Alternatively, informal observation
 106 considers the complexities of social interaction and requires the practitioner to become
 107 embedded within the sporting context (Gillham, 2008; Holder & Winter, 2016). Nonetheless,
 108 despite both types of observation being used within applied service delivery; there is a stark
 109 indifference in the sport psychology literature regarding guidelines for its implementation
 110 when directly compared to traditional modalities of assessment.

111 The lack of literature and guidance pertaining to observation in applied sport
 112 psychology is surprising considering it is a cornerstone of assessment triangulation. This is
 113 particularly important when acknowledging that behavior plays an integral role within a wide
 114 range of philosophical approaches that steer applied sport psychologists in their service
 115 delivery, i.e., person-centered and humanistic perspectives, and cognitive-behavioural
 116 therapy (Fifer et al., 2008; Hemmings & Holder, 2009; Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza,
 117 2004; Sharp et al., 2015). In this regard, it is of critical interest to gain a well-informed
 118 understanding of the client, which stems from a strong working relationship in which the
 119 applied sport psychologist is perceived as caring, genuine, and empathetic (Fifer et al., 2008).
 120 Observation of client behavior within the sporting environment is therefore a key avenue
 121 through which these attributes can be achieved. However, as a profession with accrediting
 122 bodies that champion evidence-based practice (Winter & Collins, 2015a; 2016), applied sport
 123 psychology is surprisingly limited in both guidance and training of observation, and instead
 124 assumes that practitioners instinctively know how to observe (Holder & Winter, 2016).

125 Observation therefore appears to be a key area requiring professional development
 126 and understanding. Holder and Winter (2016) have begun to address these concerns through
 127 their exploration of experienced practitioners perception and use of observation. They
 128 specifically highlight the need for a greater evidence base, and as a result, we considered
 129 trainee practitioners as a relevant and important population to explore. The United Kingdom
 130 offers two training pathways towards attaining either chartered psychologist status and Health
 131 and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registration with the British Psychological Society
 132 (BPS), or accredited sport and exercise scientist with the British Association of Sport and
 133 Exercise Sciences (BASES). The nature of this training requires individuals to deliver, learn,
 134 and engage with psychological techniques under the supervision of an experienced
 135 practitioner. Consequently, this study aims to initiate an exploration into the observation
 136 practices of current trainee practitioners. Specifically, we seek to understand trainees’
 137 perceptions, justifications, and experiences of using observation.

138 **Method**

139 **Methodology**

140 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) is rooted within, and
 141 combines both phenomenology (descriptive element) and hermeneutics (interpretive element;
 142 Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). IPA reflects the authors’ views of
 143 constructivism in which the individual and the world are viewed as co-constructing rather
 144 than two separate bodies, wherein the researcher plays an interpretive part (Davidsen, 2013;
 145 Palmer, DeVisser, & Fadden, 2010). IPA was chosen as the qualitative approach for this
 146 study owing to the central position placed on an individual’s lived experience and their
 147 resultant sense-making of these experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Alternative means of
 148 data collection have begun to adopt methods of IPA, namely focus groups (Palmer et al.,
 149 2010; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). Using an approach through which multiple perspectives

150 of a given phenomenon can be shared is considered to uncover both implicit thoughts and
 151 subconscious opinion (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). As a result, focus groups can build a
 152 deeper experiential understanding of a given phenomenon due to the dynamic interplay
 153 between participants (Liamputtong, 2011).

154 **Participants**

155 Supervisors associated with either the BPS or BASES, were identified via their
 156 accrediting body's website, and emailed to request permission to contact their supervisees.
 157 Primary contact with supervisors was intended for recruitment of individuals from the same
 158 supervisory group. It was considered that participants sharing the same supervisor were
 159 likely to have had previous group reflections and would not therefore be averse to sharing
 160 knowledge and experiences in a discursive environment. In some instances supervisors did
 161 not run group supervision; however this method of contact enabled greater ease when
 162 organising focus groups due to participants residing in relative proximity to each other.

163 In total 16 supervisors across England and Wales were initially contacted. Due to
 164 non-response, or difficulties organizing a suitable date and time for all individuals, the final
 165 participant sample represented eight supervisory groups. All participants were enrolled on a
 166 training program towards either chartered psychologist (BPS) or an accredited sport and
 167 exercise scientist (BASES). The final sample of participants represented a homogenous
 168 group to align with IPA guidelines (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Across the sample were minor
 169 discrepancies between participants, including group and individual supervision, as well as
 170 variation in the stage of training, i.e., at the start, middle, and end of this process. Following
 171 institutional ethical approval and informed consent, the sample included seven males (age: M
 172 $= 31.71$ years, $SD = 9.32$ years), and 12 females (age: $M = 25.33$ years, $SD = 1.37$ years),
 173 creating five focus groups, comprising between three to five participants. Liamputtong

174 (2011) and Litosseliti (2003) advise that smaller participant numbers in focus groups elicit
 175 greater contribution from each member, allowing for better articulation of opinion.

176 **Focus Group Design**

177 A natural human behavior is to discuss perceptions and opinions of specific topics in a
 178 group setting; consequently focus groups appeal to the ordinary conversation and social
 179 interaction of everyday life (Colucci, 2007; Litosseliti, 2003). Heightened interaction and
 180 sense making between participants therefore create opportunity to uncover implicit
 181 perceptions regarding observation experiences (Liamputtong, 2011; Tomkins & Eatough,
 182 2010). To align with the principles of IPA, the researcher adopted the role of a moderator
 183 and ensured that focus groups were participant-led (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Through
 184 assuming a position as moderator, the researcher can actively engage participants and
 185 encourage discussion between group members, rather than between moderator and participant
 186 (Liamputtong, 2011).

187 A pilot focus group was conducted by the first author and observed by the second
 188 author, to ensure wording and ordering of the question guide and stimulus activities were
 189 clear, unambiguous, and logical. Consequently, stimulus activities and ordering of questions
 190 were perceived to be effective in evoking a suitable and relevant depth of discussion.
 191 However, the first author's style of questioning was considered too directive, and was
 192 therefore adapted to accommodate an approach more suited as a facilitator of group
 193 discussion. This ensured the power relationship held between researcher and participants was
 194 in favour of the participants, giving them a voice when exploring phenomena, and which
 195 supports an IPA approach (Hopkins, 2007).

196 Each focus group followed a semi-structured question guide with stimulus activities
 197 integrated throughout (available upon request from the first author). The premise of stimulus
 198 activities is to provide an alternative technique in which to provoke discussion and elicit

199 answers while increasing the comfort, relaxation, and enjoyment of participants (Colucci,
 200 2007; Liamputtong, 2011). In effect, activities are aimed to maintain participant attention,
 201 and to promote the flexibility of participants to freely discuss and explore their observation
 202 practice and experiences. Three stimulus activities were included. Firstly, an ice-breaker
 203 encouraged all participants, inclusive of reserved characters, to contribute from the outset to
 204 group discussion (Liamputtong, 2011). Secondly, a free-listing task promoted participant
 205 autonomy and provided an opportunity for group members to discuss personally perceived
 206 areas of interest rather than being constrained by a listed itinerary. This facilitated the
 207 recognition of shared or common experiences between participants, which strengthens
 208 developed ideas or concepts (Palmer et al., 2010). The final stimulus activity was a problem-
 209 solving task designed to encourage innovation.

210 The question guide included an introductory question, i.e., “What are your current
 211 experiences of using observation when assessing a client?”, transition questions, i.e., “How
 212 do you know how to observe?”, and a focus question, i.e., “What are your perceptions of
 213 observation?” The last two stimulus activities were implemented at this stage of the focus
 214 group to generate further discussion. Following this was a summarising question, i.e., “If you
 215 were given the opportunity to have formal training in the application of observation, what
 216 would you like included?”, and a concluding question, i.e., “Is there anything else that you
 217 wish to discuss?” (Liamputtong, 2011). Additional probes were used to encourage
 218 participants the opportunity to expand upon responses.

219 **Procedure**

220 Participants were emailed an information sheet by the lead researcher, regarding the
 221 purpose of the study. All were made aware of their rights to abstain from the study at any
 222 point, and were asked that all information shared within the focus group be held confidential
 223 (Willis, Green, Daly, Williamson, & Bandyopadhyay, 2009). Following informed consent,

224 participants were emailed as a collective to decide on the most convenient time and location
 225 for their respective focus group. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes ($M =$
 226 76.25 min, $SD = 14.08$ min).

227 **Data Analysis**

228 Analysis of data was based on IPA guidelines published by Palmer et al. (2010).
 229 Focus groups were videoed, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms to
 230 protect the identity of participants. The use of video is recommended in the transcription
 231 process to identify the speaker, as often an audiotape can be unclear if multiple individuals
 232 are speaking simultaneously (Hopkins, 2007). Raw data was comprised of 203 pages and
 233 6,543 lines of verbatim transcript. Transcripts were line numbered to help with the location
 234 of specific contributions at a later date. In the left hand margin notes were made regarding
 235 reflective questioning of the contribution. Reflective questioning and resultant interpretation
 236 of data referred to notions such as participant positionality, which specifies the participant's
 237 relationship with the matter of concern, therefore contextualising the data. In the right hand
 238 margin contributions were labelled and later organized into emergent patterns. Data was
 239 analyzed by the lead researcher on two separate accounts, firstly at a group level, with
 240 resultant superordinate and subordinate themes, and secondly re-analyzed and interpreted
 241 from each individual's perspective. This ensured that data was not occluded at either the
 242 group or participant level and provided a holistic interpretation of deeper experiential
 243 accounts (Palmer et al., 2010). An IPA approach stipulates that results are strongly
 244 associated with the dialogue of participants (Pringle et al., 2011). Quotes were thus selected
 245 based on how successfully they represented the group discussion and resultant emergent
 246 themes.

247 **Establishing Quality and Rigour**

248 IPA recognizes the researcher as integral to the collection of data and its resultant
 249 interpretation; therefore the subjectivity of the researcher's own experiences and
 250 understanding of the world has the potential to affect the research process (Pringle et al.,
 251 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To help identify any implicit bias and to focus the
 252 researcher's understanding of their own impact on the developing content, a reflexive journal
 253 was kept (Etherington, 2004). This acted as a learning tool for the lead researcher and
 254 enabled the double hermeneutic (i.e., making sense of the researchers own interpretation,
 255 whilst also making sense of the participants interpretation) of an IPA approach to be
 256 addressed (Vicary, Young, & Hicks, 2016). Transparency was integral to ensuring the rigour
 257 and quality of data. To achieve transparency the lead researcher kept a clear audit trail of
 258 steps taken towards data collection, annotation of transcripts, and its resultant interpretation
 259 which was shared and discussed with the secondary researcher (Palmer et al., 2010; Vicary et
 260 al., 2016). Keeping a reflexive journal was also considered as a form of bracketing, due to its
 261 nature of reflective practice and resultant questioning of both the participants, and researchers
 262 positionality relative to the topic in discussion (Palmer et al., 2010; Vicary et al., 2016).
 263 Together, these processes ensured constant monitoring and mindfulness of the researcher's
 264 unintentional impact upon the research process (Patton, 2002).

265 **Results**

266 Trainee practitioners' experiences of observation in applied practice elicited
 267 numerous subordinate themes resulting in four superordinate themes: value of observation,
 268 type of observation, challenges of observation, and suggestions for observation training.

269 **Value of Observation**

270 Observation was identified to positively enhance client understanding and knowledge of
 271 the sporting environment. As a result four subordinate themes emerged: triangulation,
 272 confirmatory evidence, contextual intelligence, and development of relationships.

273 **Triangulation.** The traditional approach of triangulating data across all assessment
 274 types (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, observations) was stated as a valuable technique
 275 towards developing suitable and effective client intervention. However, an alternative means
 276 of triangulation was also identified:

277 **Kate:** ...so ask the coach how they think the player is and what their behaviors are...are
 278 there any issues or anything like that...Ask the client; obviously you've then got your
 279 observation and if you can ask the parents as well because I can guarantee all three or all
 280 four are going to be different in some way.

281 **Faye:** Yea...because if you go and watch one session you don't know if that's a typical
 282 session...or whether actually that's a really abnormal session...so asking other people
 283 helps like you say to triangulate. (FG3)

284 Faye recognizes that sole reliance on one representation of the client may not characterize
 285 typical client behavior. Comparison of judgements from significant others was perceived as
 286 important in generating a fair depiction of behavioral tendencies.

287 **Confirmatory evidence.** Observation can verify the extent to which the client's
 288 perceived account compares to the explicit record of behavior demonstrated:

289 **Faye:** And do you think it gave you more information because the anger thing had come
 290 up in one to one conversations but...actually you hadn't maybe realized how bad it was?

291 **Kate:** Yea you can see it clearly. So they talk about it and you think ok well how are they
 292 getting it into perspective? Because it never reached that level in our conversations. So to
 293 actually see it at one of the highest intensities...where he was physically going to start a
 294 fight...

295 **George:** And I guess it's allowed you to pinpoint a little bit about what the triggers are
 296 more specifically by observing that situation. (FG3)

297 Sense making between participants demonstrates that observation is perceived as an
 298 exclusive means of attaining first-hand evidence otherwise inaccessible if reliant on only
 299 primary assessments (i.e., interview). Terms such as, ‘hadn’t...realized’, ‘getting it into
 300 perspective’, and ‘it never reached that level in our conversations’ suggests the intensity of
 301 emotion can only be witnessed through observing in the sporting environment. Further,
 302 observation has the capacity to inform and alter an existing perception assigned to a client:

303 ...my opinions and perceptions I guess were flipped in a lot of cases...I couldn’t
 304 believe...all the inaccurate judgements and perceptions that I had made, because yea ok
 305 that’s how they are in a classroom but that isn’t where they play football. (Ashleigh, FG1)

306 Interpretation suggests that it was only through observation that Ashleigh was able to
 307 become more critically aware of initial judgements to confirm or disconfirm original client
 308 perceptions. Without observing there is significant opportunity to be misguided.

309 **Contextual intelligence.** Presence in the sporting environment was considered to be of
 310 invaluable reward:

311 **Faye:** I think that’s a really good point, learning about the sport...So actually yes you’re
 312 there to observe the athlete, but you’re also there to get to know more about the sport.
 313 Especially if it’s one that you don’t know much about already...

314 **Kate:** It’s about culture isn’t it?

315 **George:** Yea I don’t think I learnt anything about the athlete per se really apart from it
 316 looked quite good because I didn’t really know what I was looking for...you learnt about
 317 the setup of it, where they go, when they get there, what the behaviors are...maladaptive
 318 behaviors are, as well from the crowd...I probably learnt quite a lot here. (FG3)

319 Continual reference to the word ‘learning’ indicates that observation creates a unique
 320 opportunity to gather information and create a greater implicit understanding of the
 321 mechanisms and intricacies of the sporting culture. It can be interpreted that observation in

322 this sense is informal, and subliminally builds cultural knowledge to overcome many
 323 challenges associated with working in a new sport, or with a new client.

324 **Development of relationships.** Observation is largely reported to help build and
 325 develop relationships with the client, coaches, and team:

326 **Lee:** ... it was about minus four and I was stood there on the side-line and I didn't really
 327 have anything in particular that I was going there with a view to observing...it was more
 328 just being around and if they needed to speak to me or anything...about four or five girls
 329 came over and said God you must be bloody freezing, you know are you alright? But that
 330 showed me obviously they had noticed that I'd bothered, just to show them that I cared
 331 was a big factor as well. That made me feel pretty good that they'd noticed it...So that
 332 carries a lot of weight as well when you're working with people.

333 **Aoife:** Yea I've had that as well...that kind of shock from an athlete...you want to
 334 come...are you looking for anything? No I just want to see...what you go through within
 335 your training sessions...your interactions with your coach, different things like that, but
 336 massively thinking that oh she cares what I'm doing. (FG 5)

337 Lee and Aoife demonstrate the significant impact that 'just being around' has on the
 338 development of client relationships. Both described how their presence as trainees in the
 339 coaching/performance environment came as a shock to their clients, suggesting that such
 340 behavior was unexpected and outside of the more evident role of traditional consultancy.
 341 Interpretation suggests that a practitioner's explicit display of will, enthusiasm, and interest
 342 was linked to gaining client rapport and respect, facilitating integration and acceptance into
 343 the sporting environment.

344 **Type of Observation**

345 Two subordinate themes emerged from the data: formal observation and informal
 346 observation. It is suggested both types of observation serve distinctly different purposes for
 347 the trainee practitioner when gathering information.

348 **Formal observation.** Information gathered from previous client assessments (i.e.,
 349 interviews) was perceived to better structure observation due to the pre-identification of
 350 target behaviors: "...you're going in because you've spoken about something and you're
 351 looking to observe certain behaviors" (Aoife, FG5). When targeting specific behaviors, an
 352 observation instrument was deemed desirable:

353 **Janine:** You've got the questions and a guidance there and you can sit down and work
 354 through it afterwards without having to necessarily take the notes during.

355 **Charlotte:** Yea, and having the sheet might make it easier to know what exactly you are
 356 looking for, or easier to stay on task, so if you are watching a match...you've got a sheet
 357 to make the notes on, you'll be more likely to watch for specific things if you knew what
 358 you were looking for.

359 **Natalie:** Then you can always look back at it as well further down the line something
 360 comes up again...then you'd still have it. (FG4)

361 Positive attributes of an observation instrument were indicated as a safety net, a
 362 document of written evidence, and guidance to stimulate thinking. It can be inferred that
 363 formal documentation provides tangible evidence for the client and employer, showing
 364 observation to be a meaningful and productive use of time. From this it could be suggested
 365 that observation is more challenging without the aid of an instrument to facilitate, document,
 366 and direct its intention.

367 Contrastingly, systematic observation instruments with frequency counts of pre-
 368 determined behaviors were perceived by some, as detrimental to effective observation:
 369 "...by the end of it I have so many random tally's everywhere...I didn't even really know what

370 to do with it all, like what the point was at the end. I...sort of just abandoned it.” (Anita,
 371 FG5). From this is can be inferred that keeping a frequency count of behavior becomes
 372 meaningless data which does not detail enough of the client’s story. Supporting this
 373 perception, it was recognized that an observation instrument within a team setting of multiple
 374 variables is largely more complex than using it with an individual client:

375 **Lee:** I think it would be a hell of a task if it was a different sport, more fluid
 376 situation...you just wouldn’t be able to do it.

377 **Anita:** Would you be able to do it even in a team situation, because that’s a lot
 378 of...there’s so much that you need to do it sounds like.

379 **Lee:** You’d struggle yea.

380 **Hannah:** You’d need about ten different people!

381 This excerpt suggests the success of using an observation instrument to formally observe
 382 is largely dependent on the situation and context in which it is used. The tone and humour of
 383 this last claim insinuates the group’s belief that using a systematic observation instrument
 384 would be cognitively arduous when observing multiple individuals simultaneously.

385 **Informal observation.** This type of observation is characterised by being there, hanging
 386 around, being in the background, and face time (to be visibly seen), and forms an increased
 387 presence in the client’s sporting environment:

388 ...you’re there and you’re observing but you forget that you are observing but you are
 389 because you’re consciously thinking about things, you’re deliberately watching
 390 certain players, certain behavior, certain interactions, yet you forget that you’re doing
 391 a form of psychological assessment... (Ashleigh, FG1)

392 Ashleigh recognizes that observation can be forgotten as an assessment, despite it being a
 393 deliberate and conscious process. Alternatively, it could be interpreted that for Ashleigh,
 394 informal observation is becoming implicit and continual in her role as a trainee practitioner,

395 and therefore she is not always aware of the valuable information it can elicit. The following
 396 conversational excerpt supports the notion that informal observation can be forgotten as a
 397 valued assessment:

398 **Janine:** ...you have to find that purpose as to why you're sat there and watching. Is it for
 399 observations or are you just sitting there and just because you're in the environment
 400 you're just watching it. So it's the difference between observations...

401 **Charlotte:** and just watching.

402 **Janine:** ...and actually structured or just...

403 **Natalie:** ...just there. (FG4)

404 Interestingly, sense-making between participants uncovers the concept of there being a
 405 difference between 'just' watching and observing. The use of 'just' as a prefix to watching
 406 suggests it is not a skilled process, as opposed to observation which is considered a structured
 407 and skilled practice. This advocates that, if used effectively, informal observation is a
 408 purposeful and valued opportunity to collate information through an increased presence in the
 409 client's sporting environment:

410 **Aoife:** ...that's an example of how just being there as well...you're not directly observing
 411 them having a conversation, but by being there and overhearing something then you have
 412 a bit more insight into the context for when you do have to sit down and have a one-to-
 413 one with someone.

414 **Lee:** And you get some random things that pop up out of nowhere that you're not
 415 expecting...you're just stood there and someone will come over and just mention
 416 something off the cuff. (FG5)

417 As a result it is inferred that informal observation facilitates the value of observation via
 418 building both contextual intelligence and developing relationships.

419 **Challenges of Observation**

420 Engagement in observation presented associated challenges. As a result four subordinate
 421 themes emerged: lack of observation guidelines, trainee preconceptions and perceptions of
 422 others, logistics of observation, and distraction during observation.

423 **Lack of observation guidelines.** The majority of participants stated to have received no
 424 formal observation training:

425 **Natalie:** I think everyone just assumes that because it's called observation you just
 426 watch...and they think it's self-explanatory but it's probably not.

427 **Janine:** Yea. No in terms of skills wise I've never had anything...

428 **Charlotte:** No I don't think we have.

429 **Janine:** ...any guidance at all.

430 **Charlotte:** I think you probably, like you said, you think it's just simple, you're just
 431 watching someone. (FG4)

432 As conversation unfolded, participants began to re-evaluate initial assumptions of
 433 observation and speculated these as inaccurate, indicating an area warranting further
 434 consideration. As a profession advocating that applied work be underpinned by an evidence-
 435 base, it is expected there should be sufficient reading material regarding observation practice:
 436 ...we're doing evidence-based practice and that your practice should be underpinned by
 437 what research is saying. So then for me I was like ok, surely there's some applied practice
 438 research around the use of observation as a sport psychologist and I was quite shocked
 439 that there wasn't as much as I wanted there to be. (Ashleigh, FG1)

440 The surprise elicited at discovering insufficient observation guidance in the literature
 441 could be interpreted that as a valued assessment there is an expectation that observation
 442 practice should be grounded in an evidence-base. Without it our understanding and resultant
 443 effectiveness is limited:

444 ...for us that have been on it [supervised experience], for a couple of years to somebody
 445 that now's coming into it. We're probably pretty much at the same level in terms of...real
 446 structure and knowledge of observation. I can pretty much safely say that I've not had
 447 any, even with my supervisor; we hadn't really discussed observations in any way at all.
 448 (Janine, FG4)

449 It is considered perturbing that early career professional development is severely hindered
 450 without the opportunity to access training or guidelines. Janine may not have made this
 451 association without the sense-making and interactive interplay of participants sharing lived
 452 experiences.

453 **Trainee preconceptions and perceptions of others.** Trainees noted caution regarding
 454 potential preconceptions when interpreting client behaviors:

455 **Ashleigh:** Do you think that interferes with your observations from an applied sport
 456 psychologist's point of view because sometimes I feel that I have that in my advantage
 457 with the sports I'm working in because I haven't coached in them. But then I think if I
 458 was doing an observation of a track or field athlete which is my sport, which I'm a
 459 qualified coach in, then I probably would have a bit more of a coaching head on...

460 **Alex:** I think I would be able to draw the line and say right, no I shouldn't be thinking
 461 about that, that's tactics, that's technical stuff, focus on something else. However, I think
 462 that there will be a fuzzy line in between the two at some point that would say right,
 463 which skill set am I tapping into. (FG1)

464 This excerpt highlights trainees challenging and critically questioning each other's
 465 potential preconceptions. It is essential to engage in such practice to ensure preconceptions
 466 do not influence the interpretation of client behavior.

467 Analysis of data reveals a pre-occupation of trainees to project a positive impression of
 468 themselves to the client:

469 **Janine:** ...coaches observe that all the time so it's not like it's a process that players
 470 aren't used to, it's almost a connotation with psychologists that can cause more barriers
 471 with the observations for us than it necessarily would with a coach...

472 **Charlotte:** I think that might actually be one of the reasons that I don't use it as much, is
 473 that inability to explain it to the player's, because a lot of my research has been on
 474 people's perceptions in sport psychology so I know how easily affected people's
 475 perceptions can be. If they've had one bad experience then that's it, they never think sport
 476 psychology can help them. So I'm very conscious to give people a good impression of
 477 sport psychology. (FG4)

478 It can therefore be suggested that trainees' fear of negative client perceptions stem from
 479 their own hesitancy and lack of ability to appreciate and advice on the value of assessments
 480 such as observation.

481 **Logistics of observation.** Observing in circumstances where there are multiple variables
 482 occurring simultaneously, typically a team environment, proves difficult, as Eric (FG2) states:
 483 "...just that physical process of capturing the data...could be overwhelming." The realism of
 484 observing in such an environment is that it is not always possible to watch the entire team
 485 training in one location:

486 **Matthew:** ...you might have a team in another team. You have the front row doing a
 487 completely different job to the second row...and then you might find that backs go
 488 somewhere else and forwards go somewhere else and suddenly...

489 **Louise:** You can't be in two places at once.

490 **Matthew:** You've got to decide. It's about decision making as well. (FG2)

491 Both examples magnify the complexity of observing a team. As a result it could be
 492 inferred that observation is a skilled practice that requires professional judgement and
 493 effective decision making. Similarly, positioning oneself effectively within a sporting

494 environment was often cited as problematic due to acoustic and visual challenges creating
 495 potential for missed information. Some sports were considered more challenging than others
 496 (i.e., road cycling), in which it was suggested that observation take place pre or post
 497 performance. Likewise, access to the competitive environment may alter the typical layout
 498 and rules of engagement the practitioner is familiar with, i.e., sitting with the spectators some
 499 distance away from performers, or not having access to a team during half time.

500 A final logistical challenge to emerge from the data was the prospect of charging for
 501 observation:

502 ...even though it's part of my work I don't know how I would feel comfortable to say
 503 right I'm coming to observe you for this training session and I'm going to charge you an
 504 hour's rate or whatever. I just think I would feel really uncomfortable but it is part of
 505 your job and if you value it then should you feel uncomfortable? (Ashleigh, FG1)

506 Prospective charging is met with caution and anxiety despite advocating its centrality to
 507 the job.

508 However, trainees associated working for an organization as an enabler for frequent
 509 observation, as evidenced by Ashleigh (FG1): "...it facilitates and encourages...the use of
 510 observation...a lot more just because of the nature of the organization of the much more
 511 scheduled sessions." It was suggested across focus groups that prospective charging for
 512 observation becomes easier when employed by an organization due to the capacity to block
 513 consultancy work into x amount of hours as opposed to charging by the hour. Charging for
 514 blocks of time was perceived to empower the practitioner to use this time as they see
 515 appropriate.

516 **Distraction during observation.** Distraction emerged as a challenge towards staying
 517 focused for the entirety of an observation:

518 **George:** ...because I like sport so much, particularly certain sports...becoming
 519 preoccupied by events of what actually happens during a game...you just think...oh the
 520 passing in this game is really good or, their skill levels really good. You find that you've
 521 been watching for minutes and you're not really looking for what you're looking for...

522 **Faye:** ...no I find that for hockey and the rapport is good, but I think almost the more
 523 rapport you get...with someone or a team in my case...you really want them to win...and
 524 then you get really caught up in the game and, like you say then you're not actually doing
 525 your job and observing. (FG3)

526 Enjoyment of the sport has the potential to lead to spectatorship as opposed to
 527 observation as a practitioner, which is suggested to become particularly difficult when a
 528 relationship has been developed with the client. This excerpt implies the difficulty in
 529 maintaining professional boundaries when developing a rapport with clients, and being aware
 530 that presence in the sporting environment requires focused attention.

531 Alternatively, the realism of observing is such that being attentive over long periods of
 532 time is cognitively strenuous:

533 **Eric:** ...you might go somewhere and watch something and it's just, you find it's not
 534 interesting. It's boring...Committing to do the job properly as much as anything else...

535 **Ben:** It's taxing on the mind. It definitely is.

536 **Louise:** Especially if not a sport that you're completely and utterly interested in. (FG2)

537 Reference to being 'committed to do the job properly' implies the demanding nature of
 538 observation, and the need to approach it in a dedicated and proficient manner.

539 **Suggestions for Observation Training**

540 Trainees were receptive to proposed formal training in observation, resulting in two
 541 subordinate themes: shared experiences of observation, and proposed content for observation
 542 training.

543 **Shared experiences of observation.** Consensus across focus groups stated that
 544 experiences of observation from individuals currently on an accreditation training pathway,
 545 be shared with skilled practitioners with a number of years' experience:

546 **Anita:** ...people who have just started out they sometimes have a different perspective on
 547 those that have been doing it for years. So you can see the differences as well and it's
 548 sometimes a bit more reassuring to see what people at your level are doing.

549 **Aoife:** That's why I think workshops are good because you'll get a range of people doing
 550 it and if the practitioners that run them are working in the field and are engaged in
 551 observation you get their input but then also as a group you can share experiences. (FG5)

552 Numerous suggestions were posited regarding the range of experienced practitioners;
 553 including those that have worked in a number of sports, both individual and team,
 554 performance analysts, coaches, and coach educators. Alternatively an insightful suggestion
 555 was to include practitioners' from a range of philosophical backgrounds: "...if you were from
 556 a humanistic point of view you might have a different observation than someone from CBT or
 557 positive psychology..." (Matthew, FG2)

558 Open enthusiasm to hear from a range of individuals with differing levels of experience
 559 and philosophical background indicates the receptive nature of the group of participants to
 560 share experiences, and create a co-constructed learning environment.

561 **Proposed content for observation training.** The primary suggestion of training content
 562 was unanimous across all focus groups and is reflected below:

563 **Lee:** ...you'll hear people talk constantly about the benefits of this or theoretically why
 564 that's underpinned with this but they don't actually talk about the tangible evidence or
 565 examples of why...Or how, this is what I actually do.

566 **Hannah:** That's the hard bit isn't it?

567 **Lee:** ...that's the bit we need isn't it? Because we're loaded up with theoretical...but we
 568 want to know in the real world what you actually do...and that's where the anxiety is for
 569 me. It's the fear of the unknown.

570 **Anita:** Especially when you're just starting out as well because...you have no
 571 experience... (FG5)

572 It was suggested that proposed training be directed towards how observation can be
 573 applied in practice rather than an emphasis on theoretical underpinning. The tone of this
 574 conversation can be interpreted as frustration caused by limited availability of practical
 575 recommendation to aid effectiveness of service delivery.

576 Overall, the results depict an interesting overview of the trainee population and their
 577 understanding and use of observation practices. As indicated throughout, there appears to be
 578 overlap between subordinate themes, namely the facilitative effects that informal observation
 579 has on enhancing contextual intelligence and the development of relationships. The sense-
 580 making of group members has been portrayed through the representation of conversations
 581 where most appropriate. From this, the reader can gather an understanding of group
 582 members' supportive claims, implicit opinions, and critical challenges of each super and
 583 subordinate theme.

584 **Discussion**

585 The current study aimed to explore and ultimately contribute towards an increased
 586 understanding of the observation experiences of trainee practitioners. Findings have provided
 587 an insightful perspective of individuals' observation practices within their early career. It
 588 must be noted however, that experiential claims and resultant themes are relative to the
 589 trainee population, and therefore those practitioners with greater experience are likely to face
 590 different challenges. It is also important to recognize that although results are segmented into
 591 separate superordinate themes, when representative of applied practice these are interwoven.

592 Specifically, the underpinning superordinate theme, type of observation (i.e., formal or
 593 informal), has an associative impact upon the themes, value of observation, and challenges of
 594 observation. It is encouraging that current findings support existing understanding that
 595 formal observation plays an essential role within triangulation and confirmatory evidence
 596 (Milne & Reiser, 2011). However, perhaps the most significant finding to have emerged is
 597 the perceived beneficial role that informal observation has for effective service delivery,
 598 characterized by ‘hanging around’, ‘just being there’, and ‘face time’.

599 Traditionally practitioners spend significant time building extensive application-based
 600 knowledge regarding psychological skills and techniques (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005;
 601 Hays & Brown, 2004). Although it is important to be sufficiently knowledgeable in this way,
 602 it only provides a myopic understanding of the client, which poorly reflects the reality of the
 603 performance environment (Kutz & Bamford-Wade, 2013). The environment in which an
 604 individual operates (i.e., the client), offers a landscape that is continually shifting and volatile
 605 due to the dynamics and interactions of agents (i.e., performers, coaches, values, culture)
 606 constituting a socially multifaceted setting (Kutz & Bamford-Wade, 2013). Considering the
 607 unpredictable nature of the sporting environment it is imperative to build operational
 608 knowledge (i.e., contextual intelligence) via immersing oneself into the environment (i.e.,
 609 informal observation), which facilitates an intricate understanding of the context and resultant
 610 culture in which the client operates (Brown et al., 2005; Winter & Collins, 2015b).

611 Trainee concerns of gaining entry within an organization, lack of sport specific
 612 knowledge, and apprehension of stigma attached to sport psychology could be successfully
 613 addressed through building contextual intelligence. Immersion into a team’s environment via
 614 increased informal observation enables the trainee practitioner to identify sporting rules while
 615 gaining familiarization of its language (Holder & Winter, 2016). Hays and Brown (2004)
 616 compare learning a sporting language to entering a foreign country for the first time. In this

617 context it does not matter how intelligent one is, if they do not possess an awareness of the
 618 contexts custom, culture, local language, and history there will be an issue with transference
 619 of said intelligence and its effectiveness. Hence, the combination of contextual intelligence
 620 and immersion create a powerful formula towards a practitioner becoming co-lingual and
 621 responding to the client's reality in their cultural context to ensure successful intervention
 622 (Brown et al., 2005; Kutz & Bamford-Wade, 2013). Only through spending considerable
 623 time informally observing in the clients environment across multiple settings are practitioners
 624 afforded the opportunity to develop such intelligence.

625 As a consequence of contextual intelligence and immersion, the practitioner is in an
 626 optimal position to target and interact with relevant individuals (i.e., client, coach, manager)
 627 to develop and strengthen relationships. Practitioner immersion via shadowing the coach,
 628 attending training camps, and travelling to competitions both home and away are deemed to
 629 gain greater respect and trust from both the client and organization hierarchy (Brown et al.,
 630 2005; Fifer et al., 2008; Partington & Orlick, 1987). As such, developing relationships is
 631 deemed inherently influential in attaining a collaborative and effective working partnership
 632 (Lubker, Videk, Geer, & Watson, 2008).

633 First impressions of a practitioner are considered crucial in influencing an individual's
 634 perception of the sport psychologist's professional capabilities and resultant motivation to
 635 collaborate and seek help (Lubker et al., 2008). Given this, it is not surprising that client and
 636 coach's perception of the sport psychologist emerged as a consistent concern for trainees.
 637 Fear of being perceived negatively caused anxiety and adaptive behavior from trainees during
 638 formal documentation of observation. As one trainee described they did not want to be
 639 perceived as 'the weirdo in the background' while observing. Others also state they changed
 640 their behaviors in an attempt to conceal they were observing, by hiding note taking, or

641 standing in a position where they are less noticeable. Causes for such behavior were stated to
 642 avoid negative client perception of being watched, and its resultant impact on client behavior.

643 However, the question that must be considered is whether the extent of this
 644 associated anxiety is a result of an outdated belief. Historically, the perception of sport
 645 psychologists' has been blanketed with a stigma declaring practitioners' as either 'shrinks'
 646 due to a misconception that sport psychology is deemed the same as psychotherapy, or as
 647 'ivory tower' consultants whose concern is with science as opposed to applied work (Barker
 648 & Winter, 2014; Partington & Orlick, 1987). Encouragingly, there appears to be a shift
 649 within the literature that acknowledges an emerging positive perception of sport psychology
 650 from athletes (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Observation particularly has been stated as a highly
 651 valued experience that develops empowerment and satisfaction for both the client and
 652 practitioner (Madan, Conn, Dubo, Voore, & Wiesenfeld, 2012). Despite this, there are still
 653 negative attachments to the term sport psychology creating barriers for practitioners' capacity
 654 to fully integrate within a team (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Often this negative perception does
 655 not originate from the client, but rather from a concern of what others (i.e., teammates) would
 656 think if they were to seek help (Blom, Hardy, Burke, & Joyner, 2003). It is believed that
 657 negative perceptions are a result of poor education about the services offered by applied sport
 658 psychologists', therefore it is encouraged to ensure clients are appropriately educated in the
 659 positives of consultation, i.e., observation (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Alternatively, 'hanging
 660 around' via informal observation in the early stages of a collaboration may informally
 661 educate coaches and performers in understanding the role of the sport psychologist and
 662 challenge any negative stigma attached to the profession.

663 Although informal observation has the potential to be influential in alleviating some
 664 challenges of observation (i.e., perceptions), it is important to recognize that other challenges
 665 are inherent within observation and are difficult to overcome. Namely these are logistical

666 barriers such as, positioning, environmental access, financial and time costs. Predominantly
 667 it must be stressed that observation is acutely demanding on time, particularly if practitioners
 668 have other working roles, as trainees have alluded to (Madan et al., 2012). In such scenarios,
 669 although informal observation can be deemed defunct due to its costly nature in time, it must
 670 be argued that such an assessment should be encouraged where possible due to the valuable
 671 information and opportunities that ‘hanging around’ can provide the practitioner and their
 672 resultant service delivery. Alternatively, when time becomes a challenge practitioners may
 673 benefit from using formal observation. It can be argued that formal observation is a more
 674 efficient use of time due to being a direct assessment that provides tangible evidence of client
 675 behavior.

676 Observation is regarded as a technique that requires training to develop skill that
 677 allows the practitioner to monitor, acknowledge, and respond to behavioral changes within a
 678 continually shifting environment (McMorris, 2015). Interestingly, focus group four
 679 distinguished between watching and observing. Observation was labelled as a pro-active,
 680 structured and purposeful activity. Current findings imply that formal observation is
 681 purported to gather tangible evidence and documentation, while informal observation is used
 682 to attain contextual intelligence via immersion into a sporting culture, leading to relationship
 683 development. Watching however is considered a reactive activity and is therefore not skilled.
 684 Insightfully Matthew (FG2) claims practitioners should be: “...view[ing] something that’s
 685 not just seen by other people” suggesting observation is a skilled practice that should be
 686 learnt and deliberately applied.

687 Considering observation is a skilled practice it is alarming to find trainees have
 688 received minimal to no formal training in it. Evidence from trainees suggests they are
 689 implementing observation; however there is resounding indication this is founded on instinct
 690 and trial and error learning, rather than evidence-based practice as is endorsed by governing

691 accreditation bodies (i.e., BPS and BASES). It is fair to assume that at this stage of a
 692 trainees' career, observation skill is relatively low, therefore training in this much valued
 693 assessment should be essential. Proposed formal observation training was met with
 694 unanimous consensus across all trainee participants, explicitly showcasing the merit in
 695 providing such a platform of education. Most salient was the suggestion from trainees to
 696 focus on the how of observation as opposed to what and why. This conviction is supported
 697 through Brown et al. (2005) claiming current applied sport psychology training as being
 698 proficient in the development of individual techniques (i.e., what and why), but which is not
 699 adept at educating practitioners in navigating the complexities of an ever-changing sporting
 700 context (i.e., how). It is anticipated the sharing of experiences and knowledge from a varied
 701 range of practitioners, will enable reflective discussion and take home messages regarding
 702 associated challenges such as, coping with the demand of multiple variables (i.e., teams),
 703 distraction, documentation, and perception. Attention should also be given to developing an
 704 understanding of contextual intelligence and its propensity to open doors to generate greater
 705 effectiveness in applied delivery.

706 Practical recommendations for enhancing observation practice have been interspersed
 707 throughout this discussion. We feel it is critical that our clients are educated on the purpose
 708 and intention of observation in an attempt to dispel any negative association or discomfort
 709 linked to being observed. By selling its positive implications, it is anticipated that applied
 710 practitioners will be less inclined to conceal observation, and instead confidently observe and
 711 integrate themselves into the sporting environment. Resultant immersion into the client's
 712 environment is recommended to help build a contextually intelligent practitioner. An
 713 increased presence, via informal observation, facilitates a deeper understanding of the
 714 complexities of a specific sporting culture, allowing practitioners to more effectively design
 715 and implement intervention. Furthermore, it is recommended to be seen in the sporting

716 environment outside of ‘normal’ working hours in an outward display of enthusiasm and
 717 interest. Both the client and key stakeholders within the sporting organization are likely to be
 718 recognisant of this which is suggested to increase acceptance and strengthen relationships.

719 It is important to reflect on possible limitations of the study. Consideration is given to
 720 the combined participant sample of individuals supervised from two different accreditation
 721 systems with differing outcomes and training structures (i.e., BPS and BASES), and the
 722 potential impact this may have had on individual experiences. Reflecting on each focus
 723 group and their responses to questions regarding previous observation training, it was
 724 considered that all participants, regardless of background or training pathway produced
 725 similar answers. Thus authors felt that all participants had similar foundations in observation
 726 knowledge irrespective of which accreditation system they were affiliated with, and therefore
 727 the differences in supervision across both training pathways would be minimal. Secondly, it
 728 is recognized that a wider group of trainees from a bigger sample of supervisors across the
 729 United Kingdom may provide a better representation than drawing from a small cluster of
 730 supervisors. Lastly, it is important to consider the impact of researcher bias on the
 731 interpretation of data. Due to the relatively small community of trainee practitioners’ within
 732 the United Kingdom, the lead researcher had professional connections with some of the
 733 participants used in focus groups. However, to minimize the effects of potential researcher
 734 bias, a reflexive journal was kept in which the lead researcher acknowledged any bias and
 735 unintentional influence upon data collection and interpretation.

736 **Conclusion**

737 The most influential message to have emerged from this study is that observation is
 738 perceived to add substantial value to service delivery, which is currently vastly under
 739 acknowledged. Positive properties already associated with observation, such as triangulation
 740 and confirmatory evidence (Watson II & Shannon, 2010) has been largely reinforced,

741 however findings have uncovered other significantly valued traits of observation. A running
 742 undercurrent throughout this discussion has been the role of contextual intelligence as an
 743 avenue worthy of much greater exploration due its potential for unlocking many of the
 744 perceived challenges already attached to observation. Exposure and raised awareness of
 745 these associated challenges (i.e., trainee preconceptions and perceptions of others) is
 746 imperative for the advancement of our profession. Future research should be directed
 747 towards the development of observation training if the profession of applied sport psychology
 748 is to aspire and develop towards an ever effective and successful discipline.

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