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

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

19 **Abstract**

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

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

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

77 Recently, McEwan and Tod (2015) highlighted the similarities between the training
78 and development of counselling psychologists and sport and exercise psychologists. Theories
79 of counsellor development (Carlsson, 2012; Carlsson et al., 2011; Ronnestad & Skovholt,
80 2013; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2009; Worthington, 1987) could provide a framework to help
81 us better understand the symbiotic relationship between the person and their role and how
82 this differs in practitioners at distinct stages of development. For example, Ronnestad and
83 Skovholt (2013), who adopted a life-span perspective on counsellor development, found that
84 optimal practitioner development involves the integration of the personal self with the
85 professional self. This integration means there is an increasing consistency between
86 practitioners' values and beliefs (and development of a congruent philosophy of practice) and
87 their behaviour. Furthermore, with experience, practitioners are more likely to engage in
88 professional roles where they can act freely and naturally; demonstrating an enhanced
89 alignment between themselves and their environment where professional and personal beliefs
90 align, and congruence is reached. This alignment between practitioner (core values and
91 beliefs, behaviour) and the context (the roles they choose to engage in) has been described as
92 practitioner individuation (McEwan et al., 2019).

93 McEwan, Tod, and Eubank (2019) explored practitioner individuation in trainee and
94 experienced sport psychology practitioners. They found that the trainee practitioners were
95 still attempting to identify a method of working that aligned with their own view of the world
96 and were more likely to change their approach to fit the role. Experienced practitioners
97 seemed to approach their work without feeling the need to separate who they were from their
98 approach in an applied setting and were more likely to choose a role that fit with their own
99 values and beliefs. As they gain experience, practitioners are more likely to develop a
100 philosophy of practice that is congruent with their own values and beliefs (Tod et al., 2009).
101 There then becomes an alignment between the practitioners' beliefs, behaviours, and the
102 environment they choose to work in. This alignment has been found to occur in a number of
103 practitioners immediately following formal training and education (Lindsay et al. 2007; Tod
104 & Bond, 2010), where the practitioner begins to practice in a way that represents their core
105 self. As practitioner individuation occurs, practitioners start to develop an enhanced sense of
106 confidence and learn to trust their own professional approach to practice (Tod et al., 2011).
107 This process occurs over time with experience and reflection, during which the practitioner
108 experiences a variety of personal and professional critical moments (Ronnestad & Skovholt,
109 2013) and attempts to find meaning and purpose in their professional lives (Tod et al., 2017).

110 Whilst the collection of studies exploring the development of sport psychologists has
111 grown in recent years (e.g., Fogaca et al., 2018; Johnson & Andersen, 2019), there remains a
112 lack of research that focuses on the critical moments experienced by practitioners and how
113 these critical moments contribute towards practitioner development. Practitioner development
114 literature has typically explored the characteristics of applied sport psychology practitioners
115 (Woolway & Harwood, 2018) or has focused on the skills required of applied practitioners
116 (Hutter et al., 2017). Furthermore, a lot of the practitioner development literature to date has
117 focused on trainees or experienced practitioners (Tod et al., 2011). There is a lack of research

118 that has explored the development of newly qualified practitioners (Fortin-Guichard,
 119 Boudreault et al., 2018). By including practitioners in different stages of their development
 120 (trainee, neophyte, and experienced) we will be better positioned to identify the critical
 121 moments experienced by practitioners at distinct stages throughout their career (McEwan et
 122 al., 2019; Tod et al., 2011) and provide a more in-depth insight into the optimal development
 123 of sport psychology practitioners. Understanding the critical moments experienced by
 124 practitioners at distinct stages of development could also help inform and improve the
 125 learning and education pathways for applied sport psychology practitioners (Hutter et al.,
 126 2017) by providing support and supervision tailored to practitioners' unique experiences and
 127 challenges. Improving the training and development of applied sport psychology practitioners
 128 could; enhance trainees' learning experiences, contribute towards the optimal development of
 129 competent practitioners, improve client outcomes, and grow the reputation of the discipline
 130 as a whole (McEwan & Tod, 2015).

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

140 **Method**

141 **Philosophical Assumptions**

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

161 **Participants**

162 A total of 13 participants (eight male and five female) took part in the research (five
163 trainee, five neophyte, and three experienced practitioners). To be included in the study,
164 participants needed to be enrolled on, or have completed, the British Psychological Society
165 (BPS) Stage Two pathway or the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences
166 (BASES) training pathway and have a full-time or part-time role working within professional

167 sport. The participants belonged in three distinct categories based on their differing
168 development stages. These stages were designed to allow the primary author to identify
169 narratives features that were unique to each stage of practitioner development and to align
170 with the development stages identified by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2013) (Table 1).

171 The trainee practitioners ranged between 24 and 32 years of age ($M = 28.6$ years).
172 Four of the participants were enrolled on the BPS Stage Two pathway. Two of the
173 participants were undertaking this training by means of a Professional Doctorate in Sport and
174 Exercise Psychology. One of the trainee participants was enrolled on the BASES training
175 pathway. The trainee practitioners had been enrolled on their respective training pathways
176 between three and 20 months ($M = 15$ months). The neophyte practitioners ranged between
177 27 and 37 years of age ($M = 30.4$ years) and had been qualified for between 12 and 42
178 months ($M = 24$ months). Three of the neophyte participants were BPS chartered
179 Psychologists and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Registered Sport and
180 Exercise Psychologists and two were BASES chartered Scientists and BASES accredited
181 Sport and Exercise Scientists (Psychology). The trainee and neophyte practitioners adopted a
182 range of applied roles at the time of the interview, including; working in professional youth
183 football, supporting Olympic athletes, and owning their own private practices. The
184 experienced practitioners ranged from 36 to 52 years of age ($M = 44.0$ years) and had been
185 consulting in an applied capacity for an average of 14 years. One of the participants was BPS
186 chartered and HCPC registered, one was BASES accredited, and one participant held dual
187 accreditation. All of the experienced practitioners worked at a higher education institute, as
188 well as engaging in applied practice with sports such as gymnastics, swimming, and football.

189 **Information Power**

190 The primary author used the concept of information power to determine the sample
191 size for the current study (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power can be determined by

192 five overlapping factors: 1.) study aim (is the aim of the study broad or narrow?), 2.) sample
193 specificity (do the participants possess extensive experience and knowledge of the
194 phenomenon under investigation?), 3.) use of established theory (is the study underpinned by
195 relevant theoretical knowledge?), 4.) quality of dialogue (is the communication between the
196 participant and researcher strong?), and 5.) analysis strategy (how in-depth is the analysis of
197 the data collected?).

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

217 communication), and had his own experiences of the phenomenon being discussed. This
218 contributed towards the quality of the dialogue and the length of the interviews. Finally, the
219 choice to conduct narrative analysis (through use of literacy theory (Bell, 2004; Booker,
220 2004) ensured that the analysis strategy was detailed and in-depth. These five factors
221 combined contribute towards a high information power for the study. When information
222 power is perceived to be high, a study needs a small number of participants (Malterud et al.,
223 2016). 13 participants were chosen to take part in this study because it allowed the primary
224 researcher to recruit; (a) enough practitioners to represent the experiences of the distinct
225 stages of development (trainee, neophyte, and experienced), (b) practitioners on both BPS
226 and BASES accreditation routes, and (c) enough practitioners to collect data on a variety of
227 stories and experiences to meet the purpose and aim of the study.

228 **Procedure**

229 The study received ethical approval from an institutional review board. The
230 participants were then recruited using a purposeful sampling technique (Sparkes & Smith,
231 2013) to identify individuals who had applied sport psychology experience and fit the
232 inclusion criteria for the study. The primary researcher emailed all potential participants and
233 arranged the interviews at a time and place that suited each participant. The participants who
234 agreed to take part in the study participated in one interview, during which they were asked to
235 tell the primary author one story of a critical moment (professional or personal) they had
236 experienced throughout their life. Each participant was provided with an outline of the
237 interview process in advance of the interview to allow them time to reflect on their histories.
238 Only the primary author and the participant were present at the interview. The interviews
239 lasted between 36 and 66 minutes ($M = 48$ minutes), were audio recorded using a dictaphone,
240 and transcribed verbatim. The transcription of the interviews included the dialogue between
241 interviewer and interviewee, including the participants' extended pauses, laughter, partial

242 utterances, and speech repairs (Emerson & Frosch, 2004). The opening question (“can you
243 tell me a story about a critical moment in your career that you feel has contributed towards
244 your development as a practitioner?”) was purposefully broad to allow the participant to
245 direct the interview and tell a story about their development that was significant and
246 meaningful to them (Smith, 2010). The primary researcher had no pre-planned prompts and
247 adopted the position of active listener throughout the interview, encouraging the participants
248 to tell their story and on occasion prompting to ensure clarity of meaning (Carless &
249 Douglas, 2009). Transcriptions were returned to each participant upon request for use as a
250 reflective prompt and personal development (not for each participant to verify the
251 information in the transcriptions (Smith & McGannon, 2018)).

252 **Data Analysis**

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

260 *Narrative Structure*

261 The structural narrative analysis of the data began by identifying the beginning,
262 middle, and end of each story within the dataset to ensure each participant had told a
263 complete story. The primary author then drew on literacy theorists’ (Bell, 2004, Booker,
264 2004) discussion of plot to better understand the structure of the participants’ stories. All
265 participants’ stories followed a similar generic structure; a) the participant was working
266 towards a goal, b) they experienced an obstacle or a threat, c) they experienced growth and/or

267 change in attempting to overcome this obstacle, and d) there was an outcome or ending to the
268 story. Finally, to review any distinctions between the participants' narratives, the primary
269 author re-read all the transcriptions again and explored how the stories paralleled common
270 storytelling plots (Booker, 2004).

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

280 *Narrative Features*

281 The final stage of the narrative analysis involved the primary author looking for
282 narrative features that underpinned the identified plots. This involved looking for the key
283 aspects (themes) within the stories that focused on the participants' views relating to their
284 critical moments and how it contributed towards their development as both people and
285 applied practitioners. This part of the analysis allowed the primary author to understand *what*
286 was being said. This process was similar to that of thematic content analysis (Braun &
287 Clarke, 2006). The primary author re-read the transcripts and noted any emerging areas of
288 interest in relation to the focus of the research. The primary author then built upon these
289 emerging areas of interest by creating initial codes and themes that represented patterned
290 responses from the interview transcripts. The dominant narrative feature present in all of the
291 13 stories was; *critical moments contribute towards an alignment between a practitioner's*

292 *beliefs and behaviour, which supports the development of a congruent philosophy of practice*
293 Hence, the primary author also explored connections (and differences based on experience
294 level) between the participants' stories that would allow for meaning to be constructed across
295 participants' experiences and a more in-depth perspective to be provided. Throughout this
296 stage of the structural narrative analysis process the primary author adopted the stance of
297 story analyst; identifying narrative features within the stories being told and making initial
298 links between these segments and the existing practitioner development literature (Sparkes,
299 2005). This allowed the primary researcher to add an extra layer of analysis to the stories
300 under investigation and further acknowledged the ontological and epistemological stance
301 adopted throughout this study (Smith & Sparkes, 2006).

302 **Quality Criteria**

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

310 We designed the study to meet these values/criteria in a number of ways. Engagement
311 of the reader was achieved by representing all participants' stories in a novel and creative
312 way. The use of detailed quotes and description surrounding each participants' context
313 provides the reader with an opportunity to relate to and understand each participants' story.
314 Transparency and rich description have been achieved by providing quotes directly from the
315 interviews to highlight the narrative structure and key narrative features and by providing
316 detail about the methods used throughout the study. Rich description was also improved by

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

328 **Results**

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

332 **Narrative Structure**

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

335 ***Re-Birth***

336 Nine of the 13 stories told followed a narrative structure best represented by the *Re-*
337 *birth* plot. Four out of five of the trainee practitioners, three out of five of the neophyte
338 practitioners, and two out of three of the experienced practitioners told their stories in this
339 way. For example, *Neophyte 1's* story began with them working for an organisation where
340 they had very little freedom over their practice philosophy. They experienced a sense of
341 inauthenticity within this environment (they fell under a dark shadow) and the tension

342 between their approach to practice and the approach of the organisation continued to grow.
343 They then decided to quit their role within the organisation and set up their own private
344 practice:

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

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

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

364 Another good example of the *Re-birth* plot was demonstrated by *Trainee 4's* story. They
365 began their story by reflecting on their personal traits and characteristics as a person. They

366 felt as though others perceived them to be ‘awkward’, ‘cold’, and ‘uncaring’; traits that do
367 not transfer well into a career as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist:

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

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

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

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

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

389 These professional and personal critical moments experienced by the practitioners in the
390 examples above, perfectly highlight the opportunity these moments provide practitioners to

391 reflect and consider their values, beliefs, and behaviours (Nesti et al., 2012). In both of these
392 examples, the practitioners' beliefs and values were challenged, causing them to reflect on
393 their current practice, resulting in a more authentic and congruent applied practitioner.

394 ***Rags to Riches***

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

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

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

410 I was always in a rush, there was never a time where, I was chilled...I'm still like that
411 now, because I'm terrible, because what happens is, you end up spending more time
412 at work, because I live closer, you end up spending more time here [the club], which
413 is not always great, but, erm, yeah I did always feel like I was constantly in a rush,
414 erm, and I felt like I was under pressure all the time, because it was like, I need to get
415 away before the traffic starts or wait to the traffic finishes, but then you're knackered

416 and you want to get home and you're not getting in while, 8:30, 9 O'clock and then
417 pfft... so that type of work-life balance, I don't think is good and definitely not
418 productive, or doesn't help you to be productive.

419 With time, they were able to find a better balance between their studies, applied work, and
420 personal lives and become more authentic as a practitioner:

421 I guess as a function of maybe being here for a period of time, I think you can be,
422 maybe more, authentic, more yourself maybe, because your position is, again,
423 whether it is ever secure is questionable, but you are a little bit... I personally feel like
424 my role at the minute is, erm... has grown and developed and is well embedded into
425 what the academy does, I think part of that I guess, helps you to feel a little bit more
426 secure about what you do and enables you to be yourself, more and I think, yeah
427 that's probably a learning thing as well, where you become a little bit more
428 comfortable in who you are, what you can do and what you can't do

429 ***Tragedy***

430 Two of the neophyte practitioners told a story that was best represented by the
431 *Tragedy* plot. For example, *Neophyte 3* became aware of a safeguarding issue at the
432 organisation in which they worked and as a result, found themselves experiencing a
433 progressive misalignment between their beliefs, values, and behaviour. This experience
434 prevented them being the practitioner they wanted to be in an applied capacity:

435 I think before all this happened...I think me as a practitioner was me as a person,
436 whereas I think now no, I engage in role play and I act, to be seen as the professional
437 practitioner as opposed to me as a person and I actually think me as a person is a
438 better practitioner than me the practitioner. I've think I've gone from somebody
439 who's quite care free, quite open, had a laugh and find it really easy to get good
440 relationships with people, to someone who is quite distant and takes time and doesn't

441 trust very easy and it takes me a while to figure things out. I am rigid and I am more
442 intense... I try to stick to the book a lot more

443 Having experienced this challenging critical moment, they began to purposefully disassociate
444 themselves from their professional role in an attempt to protect themselves. They clearly
445 wanted to be able to demonstrate more authenticity in their applied role, but had not been
446 able to achieve this at the time of the interview:

447 I hope it changes in time...with more and more experience and interactions and
448 confidence and understanding that people want me to behave in a way like I always
449 have behaved... and there was nothing wrong with that... but, you're just conscious
450 of what you do and how you conduct yourself and I think the person I was in that
451 environment at that time, I always feel associated with it and may have taken some
452 element of blame, although it wasn't going on when I was there, so I don't know if
453 I'll take it with me or not...I don't know...

454 *Neophyte 5* also told a story that was best represented by the *Tragedy* plot. Just like
455 *Neophyte 3*, they began to disassociate themselves from the organisation at which they
456 worked, because of an incident with one of the younger players at the club. This critical
457 moment made them question whether their own values and beliefs were aligned with the
458 culture of the sport itself:

459 What really got to me was... how normal this was for him, he was sick, got himself
460 together, and went and played at the age of eight... and I came home and rang my
461 mum and said...what industry are we working in when kids the age of eight are sick
462 and feeling like that's just what they have to do to be a [sport] and I just thought, god,
463 can I continue to work in this industry? I just thought, what are we doing? What are
464 we actually doing?

465 *The Quest*

466 One of the experienced practitioners told a story that was best represented by *The*
467 *Quest* plot. They were diagnosed with a chronic and debilitating health issue a number of
468 years prior to the interview, which made it challenging for them to engage in the applied
469 settings that they normally would. As a result of this, they decided to go on their own journey
470 as a client, by engaging in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This journey allowed them
471 to experience what it was like to be “on the other side” of the consultancy process and
472 allowed them to empathise more with their own clients:

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

483 **Narrative Features**

484 Once the structure of each story had been established, the primary author identified
485 narrative features from each participants’ stories that underpinned and reinforced the four
486 plots identified. One prominent narrative feature was evident throughout the transcripts
487 (regardless of the way the participants’ told their stories); *critical moments contribute*
488 *towards an alignment between a practitioner’s beliefs and behaviour, which supports the*
489 *development of a congruent philosophy of practice and the environment they choose to work*
490 *within*. This narrative feature, which represents the on-going practitioner individuation

491 process and the participants' search for a professional identity, was discussed by practitioners
492 regardless of experience. However, practitioners in different stages of development were
493 clearly at unique and distinct points of this practitioner individuation process.

494 *Trainee Practitioners*

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

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

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

510 There have been times, particularly earlier on in my role, where I was maybe playing
511 more of a role and when you're doing that, you're being inauthentic and it's like
512 wearing clothes that don't fit, it just doesn't feel right, it can cause you to experience
513 a lot of anxiety (**Trainee 1**)

514 The trainee practitioners were beginning to explore how they, as both people and
515 practitioners, fitted into their environment. Without fully understanding how their values and

516 beliefs influenced their philosophy of practice, individuals at this stage of development were
517 experiencing a level of inauthenticity and anxiety around their applied practice. However, as
518 the trainees progressed with their training, there was an acknowledgement that this distinction
519 between person and practitioner was beginning to recede. In an attempt to reduce the
520 distinction between person and practitioner, the trainee practitioners seemed to first reflect
521 upon their core belief system and then on how their values influenced their applied practice
522 and the development of a congruent philosophy of practice:

523 Know yourself, so actually know yourself, know your values, so in the sport
524 psychology world, get to know that core values level of the philosophy and know who
525 you are, because having that means you can develop a clear philosophy of practice
526 and that has been the biggest thing that has contributed towards my development,
527 because, it's not actually my development as a practitioner that I'm talking about, it's
528 me as a person (**Trainee 2**)

529 By reflecting on their core belief systems, the trainee practitioners were beginning to
530 develop a congruent philosophy of practice, which was positively influencing the practitioner
531 individuation process by helping them understand how their approach translated into practice.
532 One of the trainee practitioners, whilst discussing a critical moment, reflected on their
533 transition out of sport as an athlete, which resulted in a loss of identity. This experience
534 demonstrated that this particular individual had already experienced challenges to their
535 identity as an athlete; contributing towards the development of a more coherent and authentic
536 professional self:

537 You can't separate them and I think that's what I learnt, when I reflect back on
538 gaining that knowledge of what I went through as an athlete I'm quite sure of the
539 person who I am, who I want to be, who I aspire to be on a daily basis and what's
540 interesting is, I feel I could go into any sporting environment, any academic

541 environment and not necessarily change who I am, you know, be confident with who
542 I am and just be content with that environment (**Trainee 5**)

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

551 *Neophyte Practitioners*

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

562 Practicing psychology is an expression of myself, it's an expression of myself and I
563 think the practitioner has to be sown into who I am as a person. I think if you try and
564 split the two, I wonder if others will see you as fraudulent and if you start splitting

565 them out it can eat into your values and what you think is important in life (**Neophyte**
566 **2)**

567 By discussing their applied practice as an expression of themselves, the neophyte
568 practitioners were demonstrating a closer alignment between their values and their approach
569 to applied practice. This alignment between values, beliefs, and behaviour seem to enhance
570 the neophyte practitioners' confidence in their abilities as applied practitioners and was also
571 beginning to make each individual question how their own approach to practice fitted with
572 the environment (and the role) they were currently in. One participant decided to stop
573 working in their current applied role and set up their own private practice. This allowed them
574 to demonstrate congruence and authenticity in their professional practice:

575 You feel more confident and you feel much more congruent, because they [*clients*]
576 are just expecting you, they're not expecting a business or something that they've
577 seen someone else do... so you're not having to live up to the expectations of the
578 style and the approach of someone else, you're just being you, you have no choice,
579 but to be authentic really and if people are going to buy-in to it, they're going to buy
580 into what I do... if I'm genuine and I come out of a meeting and was very honest and
581 true to myself, whether you get the work or not, it's easier to accept (**Neophyte 1)**

582 Similar to the trainee practitioners, the neophyte practitioners were attempting to
583 negotiate a fit between their values and beliefs and the values of the environment they were
584 situated within. However, instead of changing their approach to practice to fit the role, they
585 were more likely to find a role that allowed them to be more authentic as a practitioner. This
586 demonstrates the vital interaction that occurs between the individual and their context. As
587 practitioners, we are able to act on the environment to suit our needs, but the environment
588 and context also acts upon us. Based on the stories told, neophyte practitioners were able to

589 negotiate a better fit with the contexts in which they were situated in comparison to the
590 trainee practitioners.

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

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

613 relationship with my wife now does come first, I do believe that, but it's taken me a
614 long time to get there (**Neophyte 2**)
615 It got to the point where I would be leaving the house at 5 o'clock in the morning and
616 not getting home until 10 o'clock at night and that was six days a week, so obviously
617 that has a major impact on you and your relationship... eventually we got divorced
618 and it makes you question everything...is this really all worth it? With time I came to
619 understand that the personal stuff was more important, and it actually doesn't have to
620 come at the detriment of your career, it actually makes you a better practitioner if
621 anything (**Neophyte 4**)

622 Both of these neophyte practitioners' stories provide strong support for the *Re-birth*
623 plot. It was evident that their values and beliefs had been challenged and consequently
624 changed whilst experiencing very personal critical moments. Both practitioners seemed to
625 possess a strong professional identity that was having a significantly negative impact on their
626 broader life. This highlights how vital it is for applied practitioners to develop self-awareness,
627 so they can prioritise self-care and the care of their significant others.

628 *Experienced Practitioners*

629 Those in the experienced category, continued to demonstrate progression throughout the
630 practitioner individuation process. Each participant in this stage of development was able to
631 reflect on an increasing alignment between their beliefs, values, and behaviours as they
632 progressed throughout their careers:

633 I remember saying to someone years and years ago, you've got to be a chameleon to
634 be effective and I don't know how they interpreted that [*laughter*], but what I was
635 trying to communicate is the fact that you have to flex to the client, but I think the
636 way I would describe it now, compared to then, is that...whilst maintaining your own
637 personal qualities and preferences, you have to flex to meet you clients' needs, but the

638 amount of flex you need to give can take you too far away from who you are... so
639 that shift over time...I think I'm more aware of the connectiveness between me as a
640 person and me as a professional... (**Experienced 1**)

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

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

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

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

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

661 I mean philosophy, you can very quickly be taught philosophy and I think we
662 probably do it the wrong way round actually, we teach philosophy, but I actually

663 don't know if teaching philosophy is the right thing...people need to discover
664 philosophy...what I mean by that is, based upon your experiences, you have an
665 understanding of the world and what it is and what you know and then you should
666 start to think about how that then informs what you do (**Experienced 2**)

667 I feel that that is a great contribution you can make to any industry, any profession, to
668 train the next generation...and I hope that that's what I can do, I hope I am part of
669 doing that anyway, already, but, that's really the heart of what I do now (**Experienced**
670 **1**)

671 Given their roles with higher education institutes, the experienced practitioners seemed to be
672 experiencing a second re-birth. The first saw the merging of the person and practitioner
673 earlier in their careers, and the second, was beginning to see them transition from applied
674 practitioners to supervisors and mentors.

675 **Discussion**

676 The present study explored stories of critical moments that contributed towards the
677 development of applied sport psychology practitioners. After analysing the narrative
678 structure, four plots were evident; *Re-birth*, *Rags to Riches*, *Tragedy*, and *The Quest*. Nine of
679 the 13 stories were best represented by the *Re-birth* plot. Furthermore, the consistent
680 narrative feature underpinning all plots, highlighted an alignment between values, beliefs,
681 and behaviours that was facilitated by the critical moments experienced. The results add to
682 existing knowledge in a number of ways.

683 The first way this research adds to knowledge, is by providing an insight into what the
684 practitioner individuation pathway might involve and how this might change depending on
685 the experience level of the practitioner and the critical moments they experience. By
686 including practitioners of differing developmental stages, the research team were able to
687 identify the different critical moments experienced at different stages of development and

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

706 The second way these results add to our knowledge, is by demonstrating how
707 development theories can apply to sport psychology practitioners' development. For
708 example, the first of Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2013) themes highlights that optimal
709 practitioner development involves the merging of the person and the practitioner. The
710 similarities between their findings and the findings of the current study further strengthens
711 the parallels between the development of counselling psychologists and the development of
712 sport psychologists (McEwan & Tod, 2015) and provides us with more confidence that the

713 counselling literature can provide a framework, within the unique culture and context of
714 applied sport psychology, to understand the optimal development of applied sport psychology
715 practitioners.

716 Another way these findings add to existing knowledge is through the use of narrative
717 analysis. By using narrative analysis, the primary researcher was able to explore and
718 understand each of the participants' subjective experiences and how experiencing these
719 critical moments throughout their personal and professional lives, changed their view of the
720 world (Jowett & Frost, 2007). Furthermore, this approach to the data analysis process placed
721 practitioner identity development as a central focus of the study. This was achieved in the
722 knowledge that the stories people tell, provide meaning to their lived experiences (Smith &
723 Sparkes, 2009a). Furthermore, human beings lead storied lives (Sarbin, 1986) and these
724 stories provide a lens into our identities as individuals (Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). Moreover,
725 stories help individuals understand themselves (Smith, 2010) and reveal how we are
726 influenced through our social and cultural settings (Frank, 1995). Therefore, by
727 understanding what practitioners experience and how they tell their stories, we are in a better
728 position to understand how our dominant narrative contributes towards who we are and how
729 we develop as applied sport psychology practitioners. For example, the dominant and most
730 consistent narrative from the participants' stories was that of the *Re-birth* plot. This suggests
731 that, as practitioners experience critical moments in both a professional and personal
732 capacity, they are forced to consider who they are and who they want to be (Nesti et al.,
733 2012). Hence, these critical moments are integral to the development of a coherent and
734 authentic practitioner identity (Tod et al., 2017).

735 Narrative analysis was chosen as the method of data analysis for this study as it
736 provided the primary author with an insight into how critical moments influenced the
737 participants' development. Whilst one narrative plot seemed to define the majority of the

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

746 Future research should continue with the use of narrative analysis, in an attempt to
747 investigate and explore some of these alternative narratives. Furthermore, more attention
748 could be dedicated to understanding how the context and culture surrounding the
749 development of practitioners, influences the stories that are told. Understanding the cultural
750 construction of these stories, would not only allow for more individualised practitioner
751 support, but would also allow education providers to reflect on the environments they are
752 creating when educating and developing applied sport psychology practitioners. For example,
753 the sample of the current study overcomes flaws in previous studies by including
754 practitioners from both the BPS and BASES accreditation routines. However, the sample still
755 only includes participants from the United Kingdom (UK). Future research should include
756 participants from an international sample to identify if these alternative practitioner
757 development pathways are comparable to the UK routes investigated in this study.

758 Future research could also use narrative analysis to explore other aspects of practitioner
759 development, such as; stories of supervision, stories of successful/unsuccessful consultancy
760 experiences, and stories of non-optimal practitioner development. Moreover, if a longitudinal
761 approach to the research design was adopted, we would be able to observe how these stories
762 change over time and the impact this had on practitioner development. Finally, there may be

763 value in measuring the frequency at which applied sport psychology practitioners experience
764 critical moments in their careers. This may allow researchers to establish a connection
765 between the quantity of critical moments experienced and the perceived effectiveness of
766 practitioners in an applied setting.

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

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