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An Exploration of the Experiences of Elite Youth Footballers:

The Impact of Organisational Culture

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Abstract

The present study explored how the organisational cultural experiences of elite youth footballers shaped their identity development and behaviour. The first author occupied the position of sport psychology practitioner-researcher within one professional football club over a 3-year duration. Traditional ethnographic research methods were employed, including; observations, field notes, reflections, and informal interviews. A Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) perspective on identity as a social construction, and research on the cultural characteristics of professional football were used as frameworks to make sense of the data. Despite the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012, the traditional masculine culture of professional football dominated the studied club. Creative non-fiction vignettes revealed that youth players were encouraged to develop their self-stories focused on a single-minded dedication to professional football. The limited identity-related resources offered at both club, and cultural level is detrimental for players in terms of their well-being, and long term psychological development. From the results of this study, we suggest that future sports psychology practice within professional football may best be delivered at an organisational level. However, in order for a sport psychologist to be effective in this role they must develop an understanding of the sub-cultural features and characteristics of the organisation. In line with this, there would be great value in introducing a focus on organisational culture within sport psychology professional training and education routes.

Keywords: cultural sport psychology, identity, psychological development, youth, football

46 An Exploration of the Experiences of Elite Youth Footballers:

47 The Impact of Organisational Culture

48 A number of researchers (e.g., Cushion & Jones 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006;
49 Nesti, 2010; Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006) have highlighted the highly competitive and
50 masculine culture of professional football, and it's potential to influence the experiences of
51 players who operate within this social context. [In this paper, we define organisational culture](#)
52 [as a 'glue' \(Dowling, 1993\) that binds together organisational members, history, and material](#)
53 [artefacts \(e.g. logo, artefacts\), and brings them towards a common purpose \(Hatch & Sultz,](#)
54 [1997\).](#) The dominance of hegemonic constructions of masculinity within the organisational
55 culture of professional football (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006) is demonstrated by players'
56 displays of rigid hierarchical narratives of what constitutes a "real man" in terms of who can
57 withstand the most physical and emotional pain, and who can best keep their personal feelings
58 to themselves (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

59 Sport psychology scholars have noted that these environmental characteristics might
60 not be conducive to the healthy psychological development and identity formation of youth
61 players as they progress in their developmental pathway within a professional football club
62 (e.g., Knapp, 2014; Mitchell *et al.*, 2014). Each year, over 1000 boys are contracted to a
63 professional football academy between the ages of 9 and 16 in England. In spite of this, very
64 few boys will succeed in ever attaining a professional contract. In fact, Anderson and Miller
65 (2011) stated that only 10% of academy players who receive a youth scholarship aged 16 will
66 be successful in attaining a professional contract at the age of 18. Despite such low statistical
67 chances of success, most of these boys are constructing their lives solely within professional
68 football (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Such foreclosure at this formative time when adolescents
69 should be engaging in developmental tasks of exploring their identities and possibilities in life

70 has the potential to bring long-standing consequences to their development and well-being. A
71 number of studies exploring athlete identity and career transitions have showcased the
72 processes of identity narrowing, and its negative consequences for athlete well-being if they
73 get deselected or injured (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Gordon & Lavalley, 2011;
74 Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Cote, 2009; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2007).

75 Sports psychology researchers have used traditional research methods (e.g., semi-
76 structured interviews, questionnaires) to explore some of the psychological challenges that
77 young players may face as they progress within a football academy (Mills *et al.*, 2012; Reeves
78 *et al.*, 2009). Although these have certain merits (e.g. interactive, allow for probing, controlled
79 answering order (Weiss, 1994)), and have been useful in identifying a range of potential
80 stressors, researchers have not yet explored the impact of the professional football culture on
81 the psychological development of youth players from the position of an insider (Maitland *et*
82 *al.*, 2015). Insider research is conducted within an organisation where the researcher is also a
83 member (Greene, 2014), and can be beneficial in deepening our understanding of the
84 experiential realities of youth players embedded in these environments by allowing us to
85 “understand the cognitive, emotional and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as
86 possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field”
87 (Chavez, 2008, p.481).

88 To summarise, the psychological development and identity formation of elite youth
89 footballers has largely been unexplored over a longitudinal time frame. Furthermore, there is
90 limited research from sports psychology practitioners who have actually explored this social
91 context from the position of an insider (Nesti, 2010). The longitudinal observation of the
92 participating organisation in their natural setting will allow for a deeper understanding of key
93 stakeholders natural actions and behaviours (Patton, 2005).

94 The current paper addresses this specific gap in the literature, and employed insider
95 ethnographic research principles across three footballing seasons to attain a more holistic
96 understanding of the challenges faced by youth footballers. Unlike cross-sectional studies, and
97 one off interviews, this study has the potential to provide insight into the processes of identity
98 development over a long period of time (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). The in-depth analysis
99 of extensive fieldwork can allow for developing a deeper understanding of the daily
100 experiences of youth players and their potential implications for identity development. This
101 kind of holistic understanding of players lived realities is necessary for developing culturally
102 informed and effective applied sport psychology services. Secondly, it will enhance sports
103 psychology practitioners awareness of the unique socio-cultural challenges that players must
104 successfully navigate if they are to ‘make it’ as a professional footballer. Our aim is to address
105 the following research objectives:

- 106 1. To examine the organisational cultural experiences of elite youth footballers as they
107 progress within one professional football club over three full seasons
- 108 2. To gain an understanding of how elite youth footballers’ experiences within the
109 professional football culture influences their identity development and behaviour

110 ***Theoretical approach***

111 One way to extend understandings of youth player identity development within professional
112 football is to use a cultural sport psychology (CSP) lens (Ryba *et al.*, 2010). In the last decade,
113 sport psychology researchers have focussed attention onto the topic of culture with the aim of
114 developing a more contextualised understanding of marginalised voices and identities (see
115 McGannon *et al.*, 2012). More specifically, CSP highlights the self-identity as *simultaneously*
116 social and cultural, rather than reducing them to isolated mechanisms within the mind, as with
117 mainstream approaches in sport psychology (see McGannon & Smith, 2015). Grounded in

118 social constructionism, CSP centralises language, narrative, and discourse in the construction
119 of self-identities (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McGannon & Smith, 2015). In this paper, we
120 define identity as particular form of social representation that represents the relationship
121 between the individual and others (Chrysochoou, 2003). Using cultural sport psychology
122 allows us to advocate for an exploration of youth player identity as a socio-cultural construction
123 (McGannon *et al.*, 2012). Within this framework, youth player identity is regarded as the
124 product of individual, social, and cultural narratives intertwined (McGannon *et al.*, 2012).
125 Conceptualising youth player identity in this way allows for novel insights into the influence
126 of the professional football culture on player identity and behaviour.

127 **Method**

128 In the last decade, ethnography has been increasingly used as a research method in sport
129 (Cushion & Jones, 2006; DeRond, 2008). We adopted this approach because it was the most
130 appropriate method to answer the research questions. Tedlock (2000) suggested that “by
131 entering into close and relatively prolonged interactions with people... in their everyday lives,
132 ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects
133 than they can by using any other approach” (p.456). Closely aligned with this is the notion that
134 ethnography is inductive, accepts that there are multiple ways of both seeing and interpreting
135 things, and acknowledges the influence of the researcher on the research process (Atkinson &
136 Hammersley, 1994). In this way, ethnography aligns with the cultural tenets of CSP in
137 advocating a view of knowledge as situated and theory-laden, and open to alternative
138 interpretations (McGannon & Smith, 2015). The use of ethnography in this study by an applied
139 practitioner provides an emic view (i.e., that of a cultural insider) on the experiences of elite
140 youth footballers, and opens up new avenues for consideration (Krane & Baird, 2005). More
141 specifically, I (first author) used ethnographic methods to contextualise a series of highly
142 personalised stories, and convey lived experiences relating to the tellers’ personal and cultural

143 understandings (Richardson, 2000). In the following sections, the plural (we) is used to signify
144 the research team whereas the singular form (I) relates to the first author. The aim of using first
145 person voice is to evoke an emotional response from the reader by creating an intimate
146 connection between themselves and the authors.

147 *Philosophical underpinning*

148 This research is situated within CSP genre and thus within a social constructionist,
149 interpretive paradigm. Within a social constructionist perspective (Atkinson & Hammersley,
150 1994), meaning is derived from interpretation, and knowledge is only considered significant in
151 so far as it is meaningful (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Furthermore, the methodological
152 perspective was underpinned by a relativist ontology (a belief that there are multiple social
153 realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knowledge is created through social interaction) and a
154 naturalistic set of methodological procedures (data collection occurs in the world of the
155 participants) (Cornbleth, 1990).

156 *Biographical positioning*

157 I did not purport to approach the field setting as a blank slate, or from an objective
158 position, instead I brought a number of identities to the field. More specifically, these ‘selves’
159 were a researcher based self, a self who was a sport psychology practitioner, a self who was a
160 female, a student, an early career practitioner, and a passionate football fan. Furthermore, I
161 come from a footballing family; some of whom were successful in having a professional
162 football career, and others fell at the final hurdle before attaining a professional contract. I
163 acknowledge that these identities will have influenced what I observed within the professional
164 football club, how I felt about what I experienced in the club, and what I have reported in this
165 study (Cornbleth, 1990). For example, observing the long-term impact of the professional
166 football culture on the psychological development of close family members left me with a

167 number of pre-determined beliefs and ideas before I entered the organisation (e.g. ruthless
168 approach to players deemed not good enough). Because of this, I was drawn to those
169 individuals who I observed to be isolated from their teammates, and categorised by staff as
170 'psychologically weak'.

171 *Participants*

172 For the purposes of the study, we have chosen to represent the participating organisation
173 using the pseudonym 'Burrington City FC'. Burrington City FC is a medium sized club that
174 has been in existence for over 100 years. In excess of 50 support staff (aged 22-60) are
175 contracted to work with academy players in the U9-U23 age groups occupying a range of roles
176 (e.g. coaching staff, education team, scouting team). I interacted with a number of these
177 individuals on a daily basis, for example the coaching department, the department of science
178 and medicine, and the education officers. However, other than the club chef, I was the only
179 female employed by Burrington City FC based at the training ground. Like many other clubs,
180 Burrington City FC has seen better days financially and remains reliant on the successful
181 development, and subsequent sale of academy players to survive. Despite this, the club is still
182 one of the 92 UK teams currently in the English Football League, and takes great pride in the
183 academy set up and its record of producing players that go on to play at the highest professional
184 level.

185 *Developing the ethnography*

186 Once access is gained, ethnography enables the researcher to embed himself or herself
187 within the cultural practice as an insider, and observe the daily working practices of an
188 organisation over a prolonged period of time (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). This
189 engagement often lasts for several months, but can take place over a number of years (Krane
190 & Baird, 2005). In this study, I occupied a dual role as a practitioner-researcher embedded

191 within the culture of study over a 3-year duration. More specifically, I was responsible for the
192 delivery of psychological support to academy footballers and support staff within one
193 professional football club 3 days per week. Methods of support included; individual support
194 sessions, group workshops, stakeholder education, and pitch based delivery. My philosophy of
195 practice was embedded within a holistic humanistic consulting approach (Friesen & Orlick,
196 2010). I felt that this approach was appropriate for the individuals that I was working with, as
197 they ranged from 12 to 23 years of age, and many were yet to attain a senior professional
198 contract. Therefore, these young athletes were in a vulnerable position in that their youth
199 contract could have been terminated at any time, and their affiliation with the club would in
200 that case be terminated. I felt that adopting a humanistic consulting philosophy over a
201 longitudinal period helped me to develop strong and trusting relationships with these youth
202 players. My role within the organisation changed and progressed over time. The organisational
203 chaos (Galbraith, 2004) experienced by the organisation as a function of staff turnover meant
204 that I was required to deliver aspects of organisational psychology. For example, I was required
205 to manage delicate and challenging relationships between different stakeholders, and
206 departments.

207 Occupying a dual role as a practitioner-researcher was a key feature of the research.
208 Krane and Baird (2005) highlighted the benefits of a research method where the researcher is
209 embedded within an organisation. They suggested that doing ethnography allows us to truly
210 hear the voices of coaches, athletes, and practitioners, and therefore will deepen our
211 understanding of their experiences. However, the challenge for the researcher here is how to
212 make sense of, and create meaning in this world. Wittgenstein (1953) believed that we cannot
213 learn a language or understand how a social group communicates unless we take part in the
214 form of life in which the language is used. Therefore, by spending a prolonged period of time
215 within an organisation the researcher becomes “saturated with first-hand knowledge of the

216 setting” (Morrill & Fine, 1997, p.435). This has particular relevance for the present research
217 given the culturally endemic feature of language and banter in professional football, which
218 often outsiders may fail to understand or recognise (Parker, 1995).

219 *Data Collection*

220 I collected the data using a variety of methods often employed in ethnographic research
221 including; observations, reflections, informal interviews, and field notes (Kahan, 1999). I
222 observed players and staff within the academy set up of Burrington City FC from September
223 2014 to May 2017; during this time, three full playing seasons and three preseasons were
224 completed. In total, I spent over 3000 hours within the professional football club, and
225 accumulated over 300 pages of field notes. The purpose of the observations was to develop an
226 understanding of the setting and culture, interactions and activities that took place within the
227 setting, the people who took part in the activities, and the meaning of what was observed from
228 the perspective of those who were being observed (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Initially, the
229 data collection phase had a broad focus on deepening our knowledge and understanding of the
230 world that I was embedded within. However, as the doctoral project progressed it became clear
231 that the professional football culture had a significant impact on the development and behaviour
232 of individuals within the organisation, consequently the impact of this on the psychological
233 development of players became a focal point.

234 Based on the events that I had observed within Burrington City FC, I completed field
235 notes in a reflective journal after each occasion I was present in the club (Atkinson &
236 Hammersley, 1994). We chose not use a separate research log and reflective journal, rather we
237 used the reflective journal to document both the field notes, and personal reflections (Ortlipp,
238 2008). The purpose of combining both the field notes, and the researcher’s reflections was to
239 use the field notes to facilitate critical reflection (Maharaj, 2015). By having these situated

240 together, I could return to particular events, and reflect on the continued impact. In line with
241 Bogdan and Birken (1982) my reflexive journal was both descriptive, and reflective. The field
242 notes were descriptive, dated, and recorded key details. Following each field note entry, I added
243 my own reflections using the connotation RC (Reflective Comments); these contained my
244 interpretations of the day's events from the perspective of both a sport psychology practitioner,
245 and a doctoral researcher. Engaging in this reflective process forced me to think about each
246 aspect of the day, and to explore how I understood their meaning. Furthermore, taking the time
247 to write about these events further engrained them into my memory, and provided an initial
248 outlet for recording impressions and ideas before a more systematic analysis.

249 *Data analysis and Representation*

250 The first step of the data analysis was to extract the data documented in the field notes
251 and the reflective log. From the raw data, I conducted a social constructionist thematic analysis
252 (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial grouping of the themes was inductive (Javadi & Zarea,
253 2016). More specifically, we used a subjective judgement of those events that related to the
254 impact of the professional football culture on the experiences of youth players (Schinke *et al.*,
255 2016). These events were plotted chronologically on a timeline that represented the 3-year
256 duration of the study (Kolar *et al.*, 2017). The purpose of the timeline was to create a visual
257 representation of the data, and allow us to more clearly depict patterns in the data. Sheridan,
258 Chamberlain, and Dupuis (2011) suggested that timelines have particular value for narrative
259 forms of research in documenting, recording, and deepening our understanding of our
260 participant's experiences over time. In addition to this, the timeline was used as a method to
261 identify evolutions in the research over the 3-year study duration. Following this, I then
262 discussed the themes with my research team members, and re-read the notes pertaining to each
263 event to further engrain the data in my memory. Based on critical discussion, I added notes to
264 the timeline with the aim of identifying parallels and recurring events. We then used a CSP

265 perspective on identity as a social construction (McGannon & Smith, 2015), and research on
266 the cultural characteristics of professional football as frameworks to make sense of the data.

267 In the final step, we developed a series of creative vignettes to illustrate key issues in
268 relation to identity development in youth players. Creative non fiction uses “storytelling to
269 deliver facts in a way that moves the reader towards a deeper understanding of a topic”
270 (Cheney, 2001, p.1). The vignettes that are presented in the following section each encompass
271 the narrative of a different individual within Burrington City FC. Blodgett *et al.* (2015)
272 advocated the use of vignettes as a research strategy that supports cultural praxis, that is
273 research that aims to increase cross-cultural understandings and deliver culturally informed
274 services (Schinke *et al.*, 2012, p.34). Hill (1997) defined vignettes as short stories written about
275 individuals, situations, and structures intended to elicit perceptions, opinions, and beliefs. The
276 aim of using creative non-fiction as a method of data representation was to deepen our
277 understanding of the holistic challenges faced by elite youth footballers in the professional
278 football culture. More specifically, representations of the players, and coaches are presented
279 together to provide a narrative that attempts to capture the vividness of a scene and the unique
280 voices and lives of individuals in ways that normal social science texts often cannot (Tierney,
281 2002).

282 ***Research Quality and Methodological Rigour***

283 Our approach to research quality was guided by Smith and McGannon (2017) who argued that
284 research quality is ground in member reflections, critical dialogue, and its contribution to
285 knowledge. More specifically, the researcher engaged in member reflections throughout the
286 research project. Member reflections involved sharing the research findings, and engaging in
287 dialogue with the members of the professional football club (Tracy, 2010) on appropriate
288 occasions during data collection. The aim of this was to explore gaps in the results, and

289 similarities shared concerning interpretations of the findings (Schinke *et al.*, 2016). These
290 member reflections enhanced the credibility of the research by offering an opportunity for
291 collaboration, and reflexive elaboration, and allowed us (research team) to establish a greater
292 understanding of the meaning that participants attached to events (Bloor, 2001). In addition to
293 this, the member reflections informed the data analysis as they provided dialogue to add further
294 interpretation to the events that I had observed. This is reflected in the vignettes, where direct
295 quotations from individuals at the centre of the events are presented to demonstrate their
296 thoughts and feelings. Secondly, I engaged in a process of dialogue with ‘critical friends’
297 (Morrow, 2005) following each season of my involvement with Burrington City FC. I
298 presented the raw data that had been collected during the season, and my interpretations of this
299 data. Following each presentation, we had a round table discussion, here research team
300 members challenged some of my interpretations, and encouraged me to examine the data
301 through multiple lenses (e.g. the perspective of different stakeholders within the organisation).
302 Finally, in line with Smith, McGannon, and Williams (2015), we hope that our research is
303 judged on whether it makes a meaningful contribution to the field of sport psychology. We aim
304 to show that this study deepens our knowledge and understanding of how professional football
305 cultures influence youth player psychological development.

306 *Ethical considerations*

307 Ethnographic researchers have highlighted some of the ethical challenges that arise as
308 a result of using ethnographic research methods (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Brewer,
309 2000). For example, declaration of research intent, informed consent, and ensuring participant
310 confidentiality are some of the specific challenges for those occupying the position of insider
311 practitioner-researcher. In this study, ethical approval was sought from the relevant University
312 ethics board, and the concept of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) was considered. The basic
313 premise of relational ethics is that ethical decisions are made within the context of the

314 researcher's relationship with the participant/s (Pollard, 2015). Confidentiality was assured for
315 all individuals within the study as no real names were included, and no information that may
316 lead to the identification of any individual has been used (Brewer, 2000). However, occupying
317 a dual role as a practitioner-researcher within the organisation raised ambiguity regarding the
318 organisation's anonymity, as it may be possible for readers to identify the organisation of study
319 via other means. Although the issue of confidentiality was not raised by the participating
320 organisation, we decided that all information would be anonymized as far as possible, and I
321 understood my responsibility to act in the best interests of the participants at all times. More
322 specifically, I strived to act in a humane manner that aligned with the respect and connectedness
323 that I had developed for those in the organisation (Bergum, 1998; Ellis, 2007; Slattery & Rap,
324 2003), whilst also adhering to my role as a sport psychology researcher (Guillemin & Gillam,
325 2004). For example, we considered the participants circumstances (Bergum, 1998), and the
326 potential implications of the published data on the organisation, and those at the centre of each
327 narrative. As a result of this, I ensured that the research objectives were made clear to the
328 participants, and I consulted with stakeholders (players and support staff) at different stages of
329 the study (member reflections).

330 *Methodological Reflections*

331 The occupation of a dual role as an insider practitioner-researcher within Burrington City FC
332 presented a number of challenges. Firstly, I had to manage the time consuming and often
333 conflicting roles of a sport psychology practitioner, and a doctoral researcher. For example,
334 Burrington City FC placed a clear focus on my responsibility to provide psychological support
335 to the youth players. They argued that this was the role that would have a direct and 'immediate'
336 impact on the performance of the players. Consequently, I felt that my role as a researcher was
337 overlooked. In an attempt to overcome this challenge, I reminded the participants of the nature
338 of the study and the research objectives at appropriate stages of the data collection. Secondly,

339 being embedded within Burrington City FC for a longitudinal period meant that I had
340 developed deep connections with, and an emotional tie to some of the individuals within the
341 organisation. Therefore, I found it challenging to ensure that I took a step back from the
342 organisation and explored the data from different lenses. It was through continual reflection
343 and discussions with the research team members that I learnt to manage my positioning on the
344 insider vs outsider continuum (Linbeck, 2001). Each of these challenges demonstrate the
345 importance of appropriate support networks (e.g. peers, critical friends, supervisory support)
346 in questioning, challenging, and ultimately supporting practitioner-researchers during data
347 collection and beyond.

348 **Results and Discussion**

349 What follows are a series of three separate, but interrelated narratives that aim to
350 illuminate the daily experiences of academy footballers within one professional football club
351 over a 3-year time period of practitioner-researcher engagement. These narratives are
352 connected in that they all explore the influence of the professional football culture on the
353 identity, development, and/or the consequent behavior of a youth player contracted to
354 Burrington City FC.

355 *'This lad hasn't got what it takes'*

356 Burrington City FC is renowned for giving young players a chance at senior level. The
357 following narrative explores the experiences of a second year scholar (Nathan) during his
358 transition from the academy to the 1st team environment. Nathan was the stand out player for
359 the U18 age group, and as a result of the 1st team's recent results and performances he had been
360 granted his first ever senior (1st team) start for Burrington City FC.

361 *It didn't go to plan. Nathan was substituted at half time after making a mistake that led to the*
362 *opposition scoring. He was replaced by an experienced professional, nearly twice his age.*

363 *On the Monday morning, Nathan reported to the training ground along with the rest of the 1st*
364 *team squad. Ryan had called off training, instead they were going to watch the DVD from the*
365 *weekend's game. Nathan took some hefty criticism during the DVD session, afterwards he left*
366 *the video room head down. Two days later Nathan approached me, he mentioned what had*
367 *happened in the DVD room, how embarrassed he was by the criticism he received, and how*
368 *humiliated he felt. Nathan suggested that he trained worse than ever before today, his*
369 *confidence was shattered, and he was terrified of making a mistake.*

370 *He didn't start the next game, or the game after, and the week after that he was dropped from*
371 *the squad completely. Nathan hadn't played a game of football in nearly a month, and was*
372 *struggling to understand whether this was a punishment for his mistake, or if it was because*
373 *he wasn't needed anymore. In an individual support session with Nathan he commented,*
374 *"Everyone thinks it's all this cause your now with the 1st team, the coaches say it's such an*
375 *amazing experience and how good it is for your career. But the truth is, I'm not playing any*
376 *games. I get that I made the mistake, but they did not even give me time to make up for it, they*
377 *brought me off at half time and I've not had a chance since. If they don't think I'm good enough*
378 *they should just tell me, I'd accept that. But I'm in no man's land right now". Nathan felt*
379 *rejected. He went on to explain that his transition to the 1st team environment was not only*
380 *hindering his footballing development; it was ruining his relationship with the other players in*
381 *his own age group... "The lads don't sit with me anymore, they always give me the 'Ohh your*
382 *too big time (important) for us now', or 'shouldn't you sit with the pros'. I never asked for any*
383 *of this, and they don't seem to get that. The 1st team don't socialize with me, they think I'm a*
384 *kid, and now the U18s aren't the same with me. I'm not wanted by any age group, I wish I*
385 *could just go back to the U18s and be normal like the rest of them". It was clear that Nathan*
386 *was affected by the comments of the others in his age group. Nathan's experiences continued*
387 *in this manner, and over the next couple of months he was in and out of the 1st team squad.*

388 *Although he was still training with the 1st team he had been playing some games back with the*
389 *U18 age group. I sat with Nathan each week to discuss his experiences, his negativity was*
390 *overwhelming. Nathan could no longer see any positives in the situation he found himself in.*
391 *He was experiencing a number of psychological stressors, such as low self-belief, isolation, a*
392 *dip in form, and career transition. Eventually, Ryan and Paul had decided that Nathan would*
393 *be better off transitioning back to the U18s full time. His reputation was tarnished amongst the*
394 *staff, and he now carried the label “that lad hasn’t got what it takes”.*

395 *Analysis*

396 As a result of Nathan’s transition to the 1st team, and eventually back down to the U18’s
397 again, he encountered a range of deep and negative emotions that resulted in him questioning
398 his identity within Burrington City FC. The transition from youth to senior level has been
399 highlighted within sport psychology as one that may pose a number of psychological challenges
400 for the athlete to overcome, inclusive of the threat to an individual’s identity (Cacjja, 2008;
401 Morris et al., 2016; Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017). Pummel, Harwood, and Lavallee
402 (2008) argued that the commitment and sacrifice required by athletes during the transition from
403 youth to senior level might lead to narrowing of identity development which could have
404 adverse effects on their well-being later. Nathan’s movement to the 1st team was unpredicted,
405 involuntary, and as a consequence of the environment that he found himself within. The
406 cultural discourse used by staff at Burrington City FC about, and towards Nathan, demonstrated
407 their perceptions on the psychological characteristics (e.g. resilience, toughness, leadership,
408 masculinity) that youth players need in order to be successful. Given the cultural characteristics
409 of professional football (e.g., working class traditions, short-term contracts, and punishments
410 for failure), it is suggested that the challenges individuals face during the transition from youth
411 to senior level within this particular social context may be greater than in some other sports
412 (Nesti et al., 2012). Although Nathan had not yet completed his scholarship, the story he

413 constructed about moving up to the 1st team environment was signified by a lack of social
414 support, and losing his sense of self-worth.

415 It has been suggested by Nesti and Littlewood (2011) that if a player is to successfully
416 navigate their way through the volatile, and ruthless football culture, they must possess a clear
417 sense of self, and be flexible to respond to the situations that they are exposed to. The
418 professional football culture had a significant and negative impact on Nathan's youth to senior
419 transition. For example, coaches were ruthless when criticizing his performance in the video
420 room, and did not grant him a second opportunity to showcase his ability. The cultural
421 narratives and discourses surrounding 'the right kind of a character' acted as confirmation that
422 he was not yet equipped with the psychological attributes to succeed at 1st team level (Blodgett
423 *et al.*, 2015). Unable to align his personal experiences with the dominant narrative Nathan's
424 grew isolated within the organization, and his performance level and self-confidence dropped.

425 ***Here today, gone tomorrow: The experience of being sent on loan***

426 Since the replacement of reserve teams with the U23 age group in football academies,
427 it has become increasingly common for clubs to loan out players either before, or once they
428 attain a professional contract. The aim of this is to expose young individuals to senior football,
429 and explore whether they are ready for the transition from academy football to the so-called
430 'men's' game. Burrington City FC sent a number of U18 players on loan to local clubs for the
431 final few months of each season. The following story describes a second year scholar's
432 (Connor) loan experience, how he made sense of this experience. Connor signed for the club
433 when he was 10 years old, and based on my own observations, and discussions with other
434 stakeholders at Burrington City FC he was a confident, well liked and professional individual
435 who had good relationships with both the players and coaches.

436 *Connor was called into the U18 manager's office before the scholars were dismissed. Tony*
437 *(U18 manager) and Harry (U18 assistant manager) informed him that he was going on a 3-*
438 *month loan to Shackleton Town FC until the end of the football season. Connor was further*
439 *informed that his loan would begin the next day. However, as his loan club was non-league*
440 *(semi-professional), he would still be based at Burrington City FC on the days that he did not*
441 *train with Shackleton Town. In the first instance Connor didn't respond well, he couldn't*
442 *understand why he had been sent out on loan, and why he had been given less than a day's*
443 *notice. In an individual support session, Connor commented, "I play for the 23s nearly every*
444 *week, that's where I'll be next season if I get a pro. So shouldn't I be judged on how well I play*
445 *for them, not some dodgy non-league outfit?". I asked him to go away and think further about*
446 *the situation that he found himself in, and how he could turn it into a positive. A couple of days*
447 *later he returned to the club, with a more optimistic outlook on what lay ahead... "I spoke to*
448 *my dad about it last night, he said it's a good opportunity, they already know I've got the talent,*
449 *it's just proving myself physically. The U18s games are too easy for me now, and I don't always*
450 *start for the U23s so I'll take it as it comes, and show em what I've got". In his first game,*
451 *Connor did exactly that and was rewarded with man of the match. On the Monday morning,*
452 *he reported to Burrington City FC. He walked tall, his shoulders broad; Connor was full of*
453 *energy, and enthusiastic to talk about his first game. In an individual support session, he spoke*
454 *about how welcoming the players were, and the positive praise he received from the manager.*
455 *Connor had enjoyed the game and spoke as though Shackleton Town FC now meant something*
456 *to him. Before he left he asked if I knew why he wasn't involved in the U23 squad for their*
457 *game that afternoon, but before I had chance to answer he spoke again "It's probably because*
458 *they want me to rest up after Saturday, maybe they thought the physical side of the game would*
459 *take it out of me". Connor then left the room and high fived one of the other scholars in the*
460 *gym.*

461 *Despite Connor's 'man of the match' winning performance in his first game for Shackleton*
462 *Town FC, he failed to start any of their next three games. In addition to this, he had not been*
463 *a part of any of the U23 squads since his loan spell began. Concerned about what the staff at*
464 *Burrington City's thoughts were, Connor approached Shackleton Town FC's manager to*
465 *better understand why he had lost his starting position. He was informed that the club's other*
466 *right back; an old experienced professional had threatened to leave if "a young kid" started*
467 *in his position. The Shackleton Town FC manager explained to Connor that unless this player*
468 *had a 'howler' (very poor game) Connor would not be granted a start. Connor was angry, he*
469 *decided to speak to Tony and explain the situation he found himself in. Tony's response only*
470 *served to increase the anger further "That's men's football for you, it's a good learning*
471 *experience, you've got to wait for your chance, and then take it". Connor didn't agree with*
472 *this, although he didn't dare say that to the manager. He believed that the writing was on the*
473 *wall, his time at Burrington City FC was coming to an end, and without game time he couldn't*
474 *influence their decision. He continued "the other lads laugh at me; they think it's a joke that*
475 *I'm not starting. The other day Bruiser (youth team scholar) threw all my kit in the pool before*
476 *training, when I asked him why, he said, "well you won't be needing it much longer". This is*
477 *my career, and I've only got 3 weeks left. If I get released I will be fuming, no one has even*
478 *been to watch me, and the U23s gaffer (manager) ignores me. This isn't teaching me a lesson,*
479 *or helping me learn the game. I come here training and give 100%, I go and train with*
480 *Shackleton town FC and do the same, but when it gets to the weekend no one cares. I doubt*
481 *they would even be bothered if I didn't turn up". In my consequent meetings with Connor, we*
482 *spoke very little about Burrington City FC and his loan experience. He mentioned a potential*
483 *move to Scotland or America to continue pursuing his dream of becoming a professional*
484 *footballer. His focus was no longer on Burrington City FC, and by his own admission he was*
485 *becoming more isolated from both his teammates and the rest of the organisation. His body*

486 *language had changed, he was slumped, he looked worn out, and carried himself as though he*
487 *had the weight of the world on his shoulders. A week later, an injury to one of the 1st team*
488 *players opened the door for him to start the last two U23 games of the season. Although lacking*
489 *in motivation, Connor noted that this was a nice way to finish, and looking back on his*
490 *experiences over the last 8 years he didn't want his time at the club to end on a sour note.*

491 *Decision day arrived, the boys gathered in the changing rooms waiting to be called to their*
492 *fate. This was one of the biggest days of their lives; the last 10 years had all built up to this.*
493 *Today was the day that they would either achieve their dream and be given a professional*
494 *contract, or the day their world would come crashing down. The atmosphere in all areas of the*
495 *club was different. The players were quiet, nobody joked, and it was tense. The staff spoke*
496 *about this being the worst day of the season, seeing the lads you have worked with for a number*
497 *of years leave the club in tears, their hopes and dreams crushed was not easy. Connor was*
498 *second to be told the news, and he was one of three players in his age group to be offered a*
499 *professional contract. He now had a decision to make. Did he re-identify with the club, and*
500 *spend the next 12 months fighting for an extension to his contract despite the organisational*
501 *challenges that he had faced since being sent on loan, or did he leave, and explore his options*
502 *elsewhere.*

503 ***Analysis***

504 Given the time that Connor had spent as a part of Burrington City FC, I believed that
505 the club had a long standing and deep meaning to his self-concept (Kelman, 1958). Over his 8-
506 year involvement with the club, Burrington City FC had grown to have a significant impact on
507 how Connor thought about, evaluated, and perceived himself (Baumeister, 1999).
508 Subsequently, it was evident that Connor had developed his identity within the dominant
509 narratives surrounding professional sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009). This was demonstrated

510 in an individual support session about his contract when he commented, “football is all I have
511 ever known, it is all I want to do”. Given his tie with Burrington City FC over a significant
512 period of his life, and based on his self-stories we suggest that Connor was relying on a self-
513 identity constructed within the dominant narratives of this cultural context (Smith &
514 McGannon, 2017). As a result of this, the experience of a career transition posed a significant
515 threat to his sense of self. In an attempt to cope with the transition, Connor started to look for
516 ways in which he could identify with his new club (Shackleton Town FC). Connor began to
517 emphasise the importance of other avenues (e.g. university, other clubs); he spoke about his
518 time at Burrington City FC in the past tense, as though he believed it was over. This alternative
519 discourse might demonstrate that he was exploring his possibilities where to realise his football
520 career path outside this club (McGannon *et al.*, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

521 Those individuals who are enrolled on a youth scholarship within a professional
522 football club have not yet secured a professional contract, and therefore have very little control
523 over their career development both on a short-term and long-term basis (Roderick, 2006).
524 Parker (1995) suggested that football managers hold all power over their players, and often use
525 the short-term nature of contracts to scare players into listening to any instructions that are
526 given. When individuals fail to align their experiences with culturally dominant and desirable
527 identity positions, they may experience isolation, loneliness, and a lack of self-belief (Mitchell
528 *et al.*, 2014). Nesti and Littlewood (2011) supported this suggestion, and noted that prior to
529 attaining a professional contract individuals may engage in a range of measures to regain
530 control of their fate, and deal with the feelings of existential anxiety. Balancing these tensions,
531 and dealing with some of the other challenges that occur within the professional football culture
532 may have a detrimental effect on the identity formation and development of a youth player.
533 The lack of social support, and ‘banter’ (Parker, 1995) directed at or about individuals within
534 the professional football club may also serve to increase the impact of culture on youth player

535 experiences. This is an example of the hegemonic masculinity scripts that young players use to
536 construct their identities within narrow cultural ideas of what it means to be a ‘real man’ (Smith
537 & Sparkes, 2009). Gearing (1999) would suggest that this is not uncommon within professional
538 football clubs, where those who hold positions of power and influence use intimidating
539 methods of communication to highlight who is no longer valuable within the organization
540 (Parker, 1995). Collinson (1988) supported this, and noted that the brutal jokes and direct
541 comments may signify rejection from the organization. Despite being subjected to discourses
542 that threatened the athletic identities that youth athletes have constructed, the cultural
543 environment also generally expects the players to mask over their true feelings and put on a
544 brave face (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). This illustrates how athletes need to continually
545 perform an athletic identity, which aligns with notions of mental toughness and resilience
546 (Schinke *et al.*, 2016). Youth players may behave, or act in a certain way to fit in with the
547 football narrative, and discourse as opposed to being authentic to their own values and beliefs
548 (Tibbert *et al.*, 2015).

549 Finally, being offered a contract demonstrated how quickly fate can change in
550 professional football. Nesti *et al.* (2012) supported this, and noted that players often experience
551 a number of positive and negative emotions during a season. Connor had experienced extremes
552 of emotion over a period of only three months. The challenges that he faced were both personal,
553 and interpersonal, and had influenced his personal and professional development and identity
554 (Richardson *et al.*, 2004).

555 ***Power and influence: “You may as well go and sit in the stands mate”***

556 At Burrington City FC it is common practice for first, and second year scholars to be
557 involved in the U23 squad during the football season. Primarily, this is for the coaches to attain
558 an understanding of those players who they believe will be capable of playing for the 1st team

559 in the future. Generally, the U23 fixtures are scheduled for a Monday, as this provides fringe
560 first team players and talented U18 players with the opportunity to attain extra game time
561 without interrupting the weekend schedule. At Burrington City FC, the players who were
562 involved in the U23 squad would be informed by text following the 1st team match on a
563 Saturday. The following story describes an event that occurred between a second year scholar
564 (Josh), and the U23 manager (Aiden) prior to kick off.

565 *Monday morning arrived, and those players who were not involved in the U23 squad reported*
566 *for training. However, all of the second years were absent. They had each received a text from*
567 *Aiden, and were in the squad for the U23 game. Josh, and the rest of the second year scholars*
568 *were asked to report to the match stadium at 11.30am for a 1.00pm kick off. It is club policy*
569 *that staff, and U18 players watch all U23 home games. Therefore, half an hour before kickoff,*
570 *I set off from the training ground to head to the stadium with Alex, the youth team sports*
571 *scientist. The players were out on the pitch warming up, but as I entered the stands to take a*
572 *seat I saw Josh sat there, head in his hands. "Josh, what you doing up there?" I asked. From*
573 *looking at his body language, I assumed he was ill. Josh quickly moved his hands, sat upright*
574 *and responded "Come up here a min and I'll explain". As I got closer to him, I noticed that*
575 *his face was a burning red; he spoke quietly to prevent anyone else from hearing. "I can't*
576 *believe what Aiden's just done, this place calls itself a football club, pfft" Josh was one of the*
577 *quieter members of the group, but he spoke with anger and passion. He explained that he*
578 *arrived at the ground as usual, and the squad had watched a pre-match video (DVD of the*
579 *oppositions last game) in the club lounge before entering the changing rooms. It was here that*
580 *his ordeal began. As the players changed into their shorts and socks it became apparent that*
581 *there was one player too many. The U23 captain (Baldy) counted the players, there were 19.*
582 *Match day squads should be made up of no more than 18, and therefore one player was going*
583 *to miss out. As Aiden entered the changing room, some of the more confident, older boys led*

584 *by Baldy informed Aiden of his mistake. Josh noted that the players were laughing and made*
585 *a rumbling noise as Aiden looked at each of the boys. In front of everyone, Aiden's eyes fixated*
586 *on Josh, "Josh, you may as well go and sit in the stands mate! There's no point you being in*
587 *here if you're not in the squad anymore". Josh was left to pack away his boots to the sound of*
588 *laughter and cheering from the other players. He stated that he had been sat in the stands ever*
589 *since. As I was talking to Josh one of the head coaches, Jim turned up. He shouted over to Josh,*
590 *"OI, I thought you were in the squad", Josh replied, "No, Aiden got the numbers wrong". Jim*
591 *didn't comment, he just turned his head and continued his conversation. Josh moved to sit with*
592 *the rest of the U18 players. He never received an apology from Aiden, and the event was not*
593 *mentioned again. The next month, Josh was released from Burrington City FC.*

594 ***Analysis***

595 Individuals signed to a professional football academy have been described as having to
596 navigate their way through a 'school of tough knocks' (Roderick, 2006). Informing Josh in
597 front of the rest of the players, and as bluntly as he did was a demonstration of the power
598 hierarchy that exists within this culture (Roderick, 2006), and influenced his self-identity. This
599 is supported by a social constructionist approach to self-identity, which centralizes the
600 influence of language in the construction of identity. This language clearly depicted whether
601 an individual was accepted, or rejected from the organization. In order to present himself as a
602 'footballer', Josh needed to perform an identity of someone who was not affected by the
603 situation he found himself in. This could be achieved by displaying behaviors that are
604 associated with that role (e.g. confirmation to those in positions of power, refusal to
605 demonstrate emotion). Josh had no option but to swallow his pride and listen to Aiden's
606 instructions.

607 The behavior of the other players further served to heighten the negativity of the
608 experience, and had a significant impact on how Josh constructed his identity. In line with the
609 suggestions of Kelly and Waddington (2006), Baldy and the other individuals were
610 highlighting their position within the organisation, and used the situation as a psychological
611 test for Josh to see whether he would ‘lose his head’. Further to this, such behaviors have been
612 highlighted as the traditional way within professional football for the older players to assess
613 whether younger players would be able to cope with the relentless and brutal 1st team
614 environment (Parker, 1995; Roderick, 2006). Professional football clubs are described by
615 Gearing (1999) as total institutions, and therefore the other players in the age group may have
616 behaved in the way they did as a result of their own experiences and socialization (Goffman,
617 1959). However, the implications of this are concerning, in that they may prevent the healthy
618 psychological transition from adolescence to adulthood (Gearing, 1999). In line with the
619 previous two vignettes, Josh had developed a narrow identity narrative that had been
620 constructed within the social context of Burrington City FC. Therefore, when he faced threats
621 to this identity he found it difficult to find alternative narrative resources that could have helped
622 him in sustaining psychological well-being and navigating his way through these challenges.
623 However, we suggest that being excluded, or pushed out from a particular social group may
624 have a significant influence on a person’s self-belief, and more importantly their perception of
625 ‘who they are’ (Broughton & Meyer, 2001; Sparkes, 1998). Moments such as those experienced
626 by Josh often have a visible impact on an individual’s identity, development, and consequent
627 behavior.

628 Josh was left questioning his self-worth and role within the organisation. He attempted
629 to find an explanation for the situation. However, those who Josh identified with (manger and
630 players) had demonstrated a lack of care towards his thoughts and feelings. This was a critical
631 moment for Josh, and invoked emotions of anger and rejection, demonstrated when I spoke to

632 him in the stands. For Josh, this narrative was a demonstration that he was not accepted at the
633 club (Tibbert *et al.*, 2015). As noted in the previous analysis, de-selection is one of the most
634 commonly reported stressors within professional football (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Nesti &
635 Littlewood, 2011; Nesti *et al.*, 2012), and therefore Josh needed to appraise the situation and
636 figure out how he would cope going forward. Tibbert *et al.* (2015) suggested that the only way
637 to be successful would be to embrace the cultural norms and traditions of the club. Josh's
638 experience occurred only a small period before his contract was terminated, and therefore it
639 could be suggested that his experience on this day served as an indicator for what his future
640 held with Burrington City FC.

641 **General Discussion**

642 We explored player identity as a socio-cultural construction, and illustrated ways in
643 which the dominant cultural narratives/ discourses shape how players understand themselves.
644 Much of the previous research exploring the identity of young athletes (e.g., Grove, Lavallee,
645 & Gordon, 1997; Lally, 2007; Mitchell *et al.*, 2014; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Pummell,
646 Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008) has used single semi-structured interviews, and relied on
647 retrospective recall for the data collection. This is limited in that the researcher has not observed
648 the individual within the culture they exist, nor had the chance to develop a trusting relationship
649 with them to the same extent as can be achieved when using participant observation. Further
650 to this, a range of data collection methods (observation, field notes, and informal interviews)
651 allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the psychological challenges faced by youth
652 players, resulting in the conclusion that youth players tend to construct their identities, and see
653 their future possibilities solely within the professional football context. This is concerning
654 given the high number of players who will eventually be released. Our suggestion supports
655 previous findings (e.g. Mitchell *et al.*, 2015; Morris *et al.*, 2016) and highlights the need for
656 appropriate sport psychology support to be delivered at youth levels. Methodologically, this

657 study contributes a longitudinal perspective, where I was positioned within the professional
658 football club, and therefore understood the participants prior to, during, and following the
659 events that they were exposed to. The use of ethnography as a research method allowed us to
660 attain a deeper understanding of the impact of the professional football culture on the identity
661 development, and consequent behaviors of youth players than has been attained previously.

662 From the findings that emerged we suggest that despite considerable changes in
663 professional football over recent years (e.g., introduction of the EPPP, global growth,
664 increasing finances), the traditional masculine culture of professional football dominated in the
665 club studied. This culture was demonstrated through the everyday interactions of individuals
666 (Maitland *et al.*, 2015) e.g displays of authority, banter, isolation of individuals, language. In
667 2012, the Premier League introduced the EPPP as a new youth development framework. The
668 EPPP provided guidance on all aspects of practice, and formalized the delivery of
669 psychological support. However, the findings from this study regarding the professional
670 football culture supported those of Cushion and Jones (2006) who explored coaching practice,
671 and Roderick (2006) who explored the lived experiences of youth apprentices. More
672 specifically, the authoritarian management style, demonstration of power, dominance, and
673 control, and punishments for not adhering to orders were all dominant cultural features that
674 influenced the identity and development of youth players. In particular, it was the behaviour of
675 coaches employed within Burrington City FC that aligned with these cultural features. Thus,
676 we have more confidence in confirming this understanding. Despite research conducted by
677 Cushion, Roderick, and others (e.g. Gearing, 1999; Parker, 1995) suggesting that this is not
678 beneficial for player development, the introduction of the EPPP appeared to have little to no
679 impact on changing the beliefs and behaviours of these individuals. In summary, the EPPP does
680 not appear to have addressed what it set out to do. There are a number of potential reasons to
681 explain this, based on both my observations, and previous literature.

682 Firstly, a number of the coaches employed at Burrington City FC had progressed
683 through the club's youth system before either having a successful playing career or being
684 released. It was suggested by Gearing (1999) that professional football clubs are total
685 institutions (closed social systems that require permission to enter and leave (Goffman, 1957),
686 and that the members within it are often socialized into a certain way of thinking and acting
687 that is in line with the dominant beliefs and values of the organisation. Having been involved
688 in professional football for a significant proportion of their lives, it may be suggested that the
689 coaches have developed hegemonic beliefs that are reluctant to change. In turn, these
690 individuals act as key socialising agents. In addition to this, the coaches also want to survive
691 within this social context, and therefore most need to embody the cultural norms and
692 demonstrate successful performance outcomes. The final explanation is a lack of understanding
693 of sports psychology topics, and its value in youth player development. Pain and Harwood
694 (2004) who noted that coaches were reluctant to integrate sports psychology within their clubs,
695 due to a perceived lack of importance, and lack of understanding of topics that fall outside the
696 general coaching domain, support this suggestion.

697 Our study extends the use of CSP as a theoretical approach to exploring culture in an
698 organizational setting (e.g., Tibbert et al., 2014). Although identity has been explored
699 previously using athletic identity and Erikson's (1968) identity framework (Brown & Potrac,
700 2009; Mitchell et al., 2016) CSP as a theoretical framework has not been used to help us
701 understand player identity development within the cultural context of professional football. In
702 line with the CSP perspective, we explored identity as a fluid concept that is performed in
703 particular ways depending on the cultural context that an individual exists (Schinke et al.,
704 2016). However, the findings from this study indicate that the professional football culture,
705 which is all encompassing and offers limited identity-related resources at both club, and
706 cultural level is detrimental to the psychological development of youth players. This supports

707 previous work such as Tibbert et al., (2015) who conducted a longitudinal case study of a youth
708 footballer within the specific sport subculture, and found that in order to be successful at the
709 club the participant needed to embrace the norms and traditions of the hypermasculine football
710 culture. The manner in which individuals are encouraged to 'act' to be labelled with the tag
711 'footballer' may not be coherent with their more authentic sense of self, thoughts, feelings,
712 attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, when an individual is faced with a psychological challenge
713 they might not have the resources to be able to successfully navigate their way through
714 challenging experiences.

715 *Applied implications*

716 If granted the opportunity, future sports psychology delivery within professional
717 football may include an initial period of observation to explore the best approach to applied
718 practice. More specifically, we suggest that future sports psychology practice within
719 professional football may best be delivered at an organisational level with the primary focus of
720 creating an optimal environment for psychological development, and in turn performance (e.g.
721 challenging, and supporting players in equal measure). Research has supported this, and
722 suggested that professional football is a performance-driven, high-pressure environment that
723 places a short-term focus on achieving immediate results (Nesti, 2010). Chandler *et al.* (2016)
724 noted that this level of pressure often leads to conflict, and it can be the sports psychologist
725 who is allocated the organisational role of managing the consequences (e.g. re-building
726 relationships, establishing roles and responsibilities). In line with this, it is believed that by
727 creating an optimal development environment, players may have a smoother development
728 journey within professional football clubs.

729 However, without an understanding of the sub-cultural features and characteristics of
730 an organisational culture, a sports psychologist may not be effective in this role. The results

731 and discussion sections of this paper demonstrated the need for applied sports psychology
732 practitioners to be aware of, and able to deliver organisational psychology support. In line with
733 this, there would be great value in introducing a focus on organisational culture within
734 professional training and education routes. More specifically, this may include education on
735 the realities of working in professional and elite sport organisations (Eubank *et al.* 2014). At
736 undergraduate and postgraduate levels, this might incorporate sociological literature from those
737 with experience in elite sport contexts, such as Parker (1995), and Roderick (2006). This would
738 be beneficial in helping students to better understand the social context of sporting
739 environments that they one day may work within. During professional training, this may be
740 delivered through a series of workshops presented by guest speakers from within a specific
741 sport culture, and placements where practitioners are given the opportunity to observe and
742 practice in these settings. In addition to greater education through practitioner education and
743 training, it is suggested that trainee's supervisors may also play a significant role in increasing
744 their student's awareness of organisational psychology, particularly if they possess appropriate
745 theoretical knowledge (e.g., the work of Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) on organisational
746 psychology in elite sport, and more recently Eubank and colleagues (2014) on understanding
747 high performance sport environments). The sports psychologist may face a number of
748 challenges when attempting this in practice (e.g., stakeholder attitudes and beliefs). Without
749 the support of key stakeholders, we suggest that the sports psychologist may find it close to
750 impossible to create a positive culture change. Secondly, influencing a football club on an
751 organisational level may be a difficult and time-consuming process for any sport psychologist,
752 and may not be realistic given the short-term nature of many contracts, and lack of focus placed
753 on the discipline by many clubs. Furthermore, the suspicion demonstrated by professional
754 football clubs towards academics, and addition of a new member of staff attempting to change
755 tradition may not be well received.

756 **Limitations**

757 Sport researchers (e.g. Hayhurst, 2016; Smith, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) identify
758 generalisability as an issue that cannot be ignored in qualitative research. However, Lewis *et*
759 *al.*, (2014) argued that we should not sacrifice such a rich and detailed understanding of human
760 beings within a social context based on traditional notions of generalisability, rather we should
761 explore alternative forms of generalisation (e.g. representational, naturalistic). In this study, the
762 findings resonate with my own experiences of the professional football culture and its impact
763 on close family members. In addition to this, the findings are similar to previous studies (e.g.
764 Parker, 1996; Roderick, 2006), and thus are likely to be generalisable to individuals embedded
765 in a similar cultural and discursive contexts. Each researcher highlighted the masculine,
766 authoritarian, and challenging culture that exists for staff and players within professional
767 football. Finally, we do not know where those players who were unsuccessful in progressing
768 through the academy are now, and therefore we don't really understand the long term
769 consequences of being immersed in this world to their personal development, identity and well-
770 being. This could be addressed by studies that look into former player's life trajectories a
771 number of years after they were released.

772 **Conclusions**

773 Through the current study, we sought to extend understandings of the cultural
774 experiences of elite youth footballers over three competitive playing seasons, and explore how
775 these experiences influenced player identity development and behaviour. From a social
776 constructionist view the narrative/discursive context of the football club encouraged the players
777 to develop self-stories focused on single-minded dedication to sport, which is likely to narrow
778 their life design and have detrimental effects on their well-being if they get de-selected. Further
779 studies conducted within other professional football clubs since the introduction of the EPPP

780 would help us to better understand whether the findings from this study lie in isolation, or if
781 they are generalizable across clubs in the UK (and Europe). In addition to this, it would deepen
782 our understanding of the conditioning effect of long-term exposure to professional football
783 environments (Gearing, 1999). The results of studies such as this may serve to inform the future
784 development of the EPPP framework, and consequently influence the daily working practices
785 of professional football clubs. Finally, a holistic and longitudinal examination of the challenges
786 that are faced by players within the specific development phases in isolation (e.g., FP, YDP,
787 PDP, Senior level) may allow for a more in-depth understanding of how player challenges
788 change as a function of age, and stage of development. This would build upon the research
789 findings from this study. To date, only Nesti et al. (2012), and Nesti (2013) have used case
790 studies to explore the experiences of elite senior level professional footballers. A clearer
791 understanding of the challenges that players face across their football careers may inform more
792 effective sports psychology practice.

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