‘Through the Lens of Ethnography’: Perceptions, Challenges, and Experiences of an Early Career Practitioner-Researcher in Professional Football

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Abstract

The present study critically explores the use of practitioner-researcher ethnography in professional football, and illustrates some of the challenges that the first author experienced as a result of the dual-role occupation. The first author occupied the position of insider sport psychology practitioner-researcher within one professional football club over a 3-year duration. Traditional ethnographic research methods were employed, including; observations, field notes, and reflections. Following thematic analysis, research on the potential for conflict and tension in ethnography, and ethical guidelines from caring professions (e.g. sport psychology, health, and nursing) were used to make sense of the data. A series of reflective extracts highlight moral, ethical, and personal challenges of occupying a dual role, including threats to identity, acceptance of academics in elite sport, and confidentiality. For those individuals whose livelihood is dependent on their successes as a practitioner-researcher an understanding of how to overcome methodological challenges will be beneficial in improving their organisational status. From the results of this study, we suggest that a range of support mechanisms (e.g. ethnographers club, regional support hubs, supervisor/researcher training and education), and the development of a clear sense of self are essential for the ethnographic practitioner-researcher.

Keywords: Qualitative, Ethnography, Practitioner-Research, Sport Psychology, Longitudinal, Dilemmas

Introduction

Qualitative researchers in sport, exercise, and health have increasingly started to look for ways to expand and diversify the methodological landscape of these fields (e.g. Champ et al., 2018; Devaney *et al.,* 2018; Spracklen *et al.,* 2010). Although quantitative, mixed methods, and structured qualitative methods (e.g. questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups) have been beneficial in developing our understanding of the relationship between psychological characteristics/variables/interventions on sports performance (see Scott-Hamilton et al., 2016), there are several limitations to these methods. For example, questionnaires and structured interviews provide us with a limited contextual understanding of the lived experiences of athletes and their support staff in their everyday life. This is due to the inability of the researcher to embed themselves within the subculture across time (Champ et al., 2018; Gough, 2016). Furthermore, these methods often rely on participant's retrospective recall of an event or situation, and responses are constrained by the questions being asked of them (Ragin, 2014).

Ethnography has been offered as one promising approach for studying experiences in sport, exercise, and health contexts (or more specifically, sport psychology) because it enables researchers to immerse themselves within a setting to develop a more in-depth understanding of specific subcultures and their social interactions, language practices and behaviours (Maitland, 2012). Secondly, ethnography offers the opportunity for researchers to create new forms of knowledge and understanding (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, despite its promises, this method also brings several challenges especially for those who want to study organisations (Lillis, 2008; Arber, 2006; Coy, 2006). For example, Arber (2006) described feelings of betrayal and frustration when making difficult decisions that might influence a stakeholder's position within the organisation. Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017) built upon this work and

identified the challenges of negotiating working practices, and developing a shared understanding of language. Sociological work conducted by Cushion (2001) and Parker (1995) highlighted gaining access, developing relationships, and establishing the participants' trust as barriers to this type of research in professional football. Therefore, this paper will provide a more focused exploration of the use and application of practitioner-researcher ethnography specific to applied sport psychology.

Ethnography has its roots in the social anthropologies of the early 20th century. More recently, ethnography has been used in education (Corrigan, 1979; Fleming, 1995; Lacey, 1970; Willis, 2000), nursing (Henderson & Vesperi, 1995; Roper & Shapira, 1999; Smyth & Holmes, 2005), and sport (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bowles, 2014; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Parker, 1996). As a research approach, ethnography aims to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller and more meaningful context (Tedlock, 2000). Culver et al. (2012) argued that there is no simple way of conducting ethnography. Rather ethnographer's experiences are highly variable, and approaches have to be adapted to the particular research problem and setting. Consequently, the ethnographer might operate from a number of different positions during the data collection phase (e.g. insider vs outsider). An insider is situated within the participants' natural setting, and therefore shares some of the participants' experiences (see Atkinson, 2016; Spracklen *et al.* 2010). In contrast, outsider researchers are not positioned within a specific subculture. For example, Hoeber and Kerwin (2013) described themselves as "outsiders looking in" on the experiences of female sports fans.

In this study, we explore ethnographic work from the position of insider practitioner-researcher. Practitioner-research is defined as a research method carried out by applied practitioners with the aim of further developing our understanding of the social world in which the research was conducted (McLeod, 1999). Over the last decade, insider

practitioner-research has emerged and established itself as a way of understanding and changing organisations (Coghlan, 2007). In health settings (e.g., hospitals, care homes) practitioner-researcher ethnography has advanced knowledge and understanding in relation to managing dual role conflicts (Abdulrehman, 2017; Dixon-Woods, 2018), the insider vs outsider paradoxes (Yeo & Dopson, 2018), and developing relationships (Holloway & Galvin, 2016; Ledger, 2010). In sport psychology, practitioner-research has extended our understanding of sports injury and disabilities (Howe, 2003; Shipway & Holloway, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), coach-athlete relationships (Maitland et al., 2015), and the influence of organisational culture on athlete development (Champ et al., 2018; Devaney et al., 2018). Practitioner-research is perhaps the most appropriate method of reducing the gap between research and practice in sport psychology as it encourages applied practitioners to maintain their links with academia, and allows for the publication of models of best practice. Ethnographic practitioner-research can be described as an art form and provides a new angle to organisational culture and identity studies, inclusive of how a sport psychologist might best operate in elite sport (Ryba et al., 2010). However, to date, there have been limited publications from practitioner-researcher ethnographers operating in elite sport environments, particularly professional football. Consequently, there is currently a significant distance between research that is being disseminated academically and applied practice (Devaney et al., 2018; Lillis, 2008).

A more focused exploration of practitioner-researcher ethnography specific to applied sport psychology is important given the significant increase in opportunities for sport psychology practitioners to enter and operate within sports organisations (Nesti et al., 2012). For example, in 2012 the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) formalised the delivery of sport psychology within professional football academies in the UK (Premier

126 League, 2012). The current paper answers the calls for greater methodological diversity
127 in sport psychology research (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), and employed insider practitioner-
128 researcher ethnographic methods across three football seasons. The present study
129 emerged in the midst of data collection for my doctoral research project, titled
130 'Psychological Development in Professional Youth Football: An Ethnography of Sports
131 Psychology Practice'. Prior to the official data collection period, I had already worked
132 within this professional football academy as part of an MSc internship and familiarised
133 myself with the working practices of the club. As I transitioned into the practitioner-
134 researcher role, the overriding objective was to explore the impact of organisational
135 culture on the lived experiences of elite youth footballers (see Champ *et al.,* 2018). During
136 the data collection phase, professional and personal issues became a central part of the
137 research, and therefore feature as the focus of this paper. Unlike previous ethnographies
138 in sport psychology, this study reflects on the primary researcher's experiences of
139 occupying a dual position as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher. The in-depth
140 analysis of the extensive period spent as a practitioner-researcher can allow for a deeper
141 understanding of the personal, moral, and ethical challenges that may occur because of
142 this dual role, and inform the career development pathways of other early career
143 ethnographers to enter the field. We aim to critically reflect on the challenges of
144 practitioner-research within professional football

145 **Methodology**

146 ***Research Paradigm***

147 This research is situated in a social constructionist, interpretive paradigm. Within
148 a social constructionist perspective (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), meaning is derived from
149 interpretation, and knowledge is only considered significant in so far as it is meaningful
150 to stakeholders (e.g. reader, researcher, participants) (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Furthermore, the methodological perspective was underpinned by a relativist ontology (a belief that there are multiple social realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knowledge is created through social interaction) and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (data collection occurs in the world of the participants) (Cornbleth, 1990). Ethnographic researchers working within a social constructionist perspective do not approach field settings from an objective position; rather they emphasise that the researchers' own cultural assumptions, personal experiences, and moral stance will shape the research process and outcome (Keane, 2014). Here, we believe that it is important to make the reader aware of the researchers biographical positioning and dual role within the organisation of study.

Biographical Positioning

In the present study, the first author (from here onwards, "I"), brought a number of identities to the field. In this paper, identity is defined as "a particular form of social representation that represents the relationship between the individual and others" (Champ et al., 2018, p.13). These 'identities' were a research-based self, a sport psychology practitioner, a young woman, and an avid football fan. My role as a doctoral researcher was hugely important to me as I believed that this was a true test of whether I possessed the skill set to develop a career as an academic. Each of the aforementioned identities were integral in understanding what I observed within the professional football club (e.g. developing relationships, perceptions of academics), how I felt about what I experienced in the club (e.g. moral and ethical conflict), and what is reported on in this study (Cornbleth, 1990).

My role as a doctoral researcher became more important to my identity when I considered the academic experiences of players and staff employed by the organisation under study, which we represent with the pseudonym Tainton Town FC. In comparison

with my university peers and supervisory team, I was an early career academic and novice researcher. In contrast to this, very few members of staff at Tainton Town FC had attended University, and I was the only member of staff to hold a postgraduate degree. Prior to my employment by the club, its organisational members had no previous experiences of academic research, and many commented that they had not heard of the term 'practitioner-researcher'. This had a significant impact on my identity within the organisation. For example, I was more conscious of the research ethics (e.g. confidentiality, overt vs covert). We consider this in detail in the results and discussion section of the paper. Furthermore, I was the only female member of staff based at the training ground other than the club chef. This added to the novelty of my position, especially for those who had been at the club for a significant period of their lives (e.g. started out as a youth player aged 9, and progressed into a coaching role upon the termination of their playing career). Because of each of the factors noted above, I believed that I stood out from the other stakeholders at Tainton Town FC.

Participants

Tainton Town FC is currently one of the 92 UK teams in the English Football League, and consists of over 150 male players, and 50 male support staff. The club takes great pride in the academy set up and its record of producing players that go on to play at the highest level. The focus of Tainton Town FC on the identification and development of young talent is demonstrated by the award of category 2 status by the Premier League (PL) as part of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).

Data collection

Data collection took place between September 2014, and May 2017. The occupation of a dual role was a key feature of the study, as I was an insider in the

organisation rather than on the periphery. Across the duration of the research project, I occupied a dual role as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher within the professional football club. In my role as a sport psychology practitioner, I was responsible for the delivery of sport psychology support to academy players (U9 – U23) and support staff 3-4 days per week. Methods of support included individual support sessions, group workshops, stakeholder education, and pitch based delivery. I was required to balance this role with conducting the PhD research project.

In order to address the doctoral research objectives, the data were collected using ethnographic methods, including; observations, reflections, informal interviews, focus groups, and field notes (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). However, in the present study, we draw on the participant observation, reflections, and field notes as these data were directly related to the occupation of a dual role as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher. The purpose of the participant observation was to describe the setting and culture, interactions and activities that took place within the setting, the people that took part in the activities, and meaning of what was observed from the perspective of those who were being observed (Cushion, 2001). I completed the field notes after each occasion I was present in the club, these were descriptive, dated, and recorded key details (location, who was present, activities that took place) (Bryman, 2016). In addition to this, the field notes were a further method of documenting my observations (Spradley, 2016). More specifically, the field notes included events such as confidentiality, interactions with players and support staff, and observations of people's reactions to my research role. Finally, reflexology is the process of critically reflecting on the self as a researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Self-reflective writing offers the perspective through which the practitioner-researcher can make sense of their world, and the so-called facts and ideological assumptions that are attached to the position of insider (Denzin, 2002). I

completed a reflective log (see Smith, 2006) during the data collection, write up, and representation phases of the PhD research. This was my opportunity to make sense of the situations that I found myself in, but also an opportunity to step back from the data and consider the bigger picture. Here, I documented the influence of the research on me as a practitioner, as a researcher, and a human being (Mulhall, 2003).

Data analysis and representation

The first step of the data analysis was to extract the data documented in the field notes and reflective log (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). I re-read the field notes and the reflective log and separated the data that related to the process of occupying a dual role as a practitioner-researcher or engaging in the ethnographic research methods. I then conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2016). During this process, data collected from the participant observations are also analysed, as I noted down the observation and my interpretation of it within the field notes. The aim of this was to group the data into themes that were related to the research objective of critically reflecting on the challenges of practitioner-research within professional football. These themes were discussed with research team members, and critical friends, with the aim of increasing data familiarisation (Smith & McGannon 2018). Following this, themes were refined and those moments that provided the most evocative representation of the theme were chosen. Previous research on the dual role conflict of practitioner-research (Judkins Cohn *et al.,* 2014; Fan, 2018), and ethical guidelines for the delivery of sport psychology support were used to make sense of the data (British Psychological Society Code of Conduct, 2009; Coghlan, 2007; Gabriel, 2005). In the final step, we presented a series of reflections and field note extracts to illuminate the challenges, and potential use of practitioner-researcher ethnography in elite sport environments. These extracts were selected based on the findings from the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2016).

Research quality and methodological rigour

A relativist perspective (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) guided our approach to research quality. More specifically, throughout the data collection phase, I engaged in member reflections. I discussed critical moments with those at the centre of the event and explored any contradictions or differences in knowing (see Smith & McGannon, 2018). Secondly, I engaged in a process of dialogue with 'critical friends', and research team members following each season of my involvement with Tainton Town FC. These individuals challenged and questioned my interpretation of the data. We hope that our research is judged on whether it makes a meaningful contribution to the field of sport psychology. We aim to demonstrate that the reflective narratives represented in this study deepens our understanding of how practitioner-researcher ethnography might be experienced in elite sport cultures, particularly professional football. Although these checks like any other validity procedures do not provide access to objective reality, they do add dimensionality and reflexivity to the interpretive work.

Ethical considerations

The ethical and moral dilemmas of practitioner-researcher ethnography are explained further in the results and discussion section of this paper. Ethnographic researchers have highlighted some of the potential ethical issues that may arise as a result of using ethnographic research methods (Blomberg *et al.,* 2017; Brewer, 2000; Jokinen *et al.,* 2002; Lareau, 2018; Wright & Schneider, 2010). These include, for example, declaration of research intent, informed consent, and ensuring participant confidentiality. In this study, ethical approval was sought from the relevant University ethics board. Confidentiality was assured for all individuals within the study as no real names were included, and no information that may lead to the identification of any individual has been

used (Silverman, 2016). In line with Reeves (2010), we attained gatekeeper consent for access to the organisation and the individuals within it. Further consent was attained for the separate elements of the data collection (e.g. interviews, focus groups). In addition to this, parental consent, and informed assent was attained for players under the age of 16. If either a parent or a child did not consent, they were excluded from the study (Hein *et al.,* 2015). However, occupying a dual role as a practitioner-researcher within the organisation raised ambiguity regarding the organisation's anonymity, as it may be possible for readers to identify the organisation of study via other means (MacColl *et al.,* 2005). It was decided that all information would be anonymized as far as possible, and I understood my responsibility to act in the best interests of the participants at all times.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents a series of separate but interrelated extracts from the reflective log. These field notes and reflective extracts that aim to illuminate my experiences of using ethnographic research methods in professional football. More specifically, the presented narratives are all connected in that they consider the moral, ethical, and personal challenges of occupying a dual role as an early career sport psychology practitioner-researcher within professional football.

Performing an Identity

Occupying a dual role as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher required me to perform the traditional roles associated with insider ethnography (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). For example, I was required to attend to and report on those events that had a significant impact on stakeholders within the organisation, subtly embed myself within the organisation of study and develop an in-depth understanding of the culture within Tainton Town FC. Managing the balance between my roles and responsibilities as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher, and tolerating the stress of being embedded

within the professional football culture left me feeling conflicted. The following reflection aims to illuminate the frustrations that I experienced in balancing these dual role tensions.

December 2015

I am psychologically exhausted, we are only 12 months into the practitioner-researcher journey but it feels like a lifetime. Fortunately, today was the last session before the Christmas break, it couldn't come quick enough. Embracing the festive spirit, and following a tough season so far, a group of coaches had arranged for a friendly 11 vs 11 combined of staff and players to take place after lunch. Those individuals who were not in one of the teams were invited to sit in the stands. This was a great opportunity for everyone to let their hair down, and take their minds off the upcoming fixtures. That was, apart from me. Staff and players were interacting in a manner that I had not previously witnessed, meaningful conversations kept emerging, and all individuals seemed relaxed. I was enjoying the different dynamic, and the focus on enjoyment as opposed to results. However, I was conscious of my responsibility to 'wear the researcher hat' and keep subtly eavesdropping on the little bursts of conversation. Therefore, I performed the role of practitioner-researcher and refrained from offering my full self to the organisation. In contrast, I was taking mental notes to later add to my data collection. This did not feel right, as a practitioner I believed that I deserved to enjoy the occasion in the same way as the rest of the staff. However, in reality, I was not the same as everyone else, I carried an extra tag, that of the researcher. On this particular day, the researcher tag prevented me from being free.

The above reflection is a general representation of how the occupation of a dual role required me to perform particular actions/behaviours associated with the position of a practitioner-researcher (e.g. continual observation). However, these did not always

align with the identity that I felt most comfortable in performing within the social context. For example, the all-consuming data collection methods prevented me from exposing a more relaxed and less attentive side to my personality. Ethnographers (e.g. Fleming, 1995; Parker, 1995) have identified the potential for role conflict at different stages of this kind of research, for example negotiating roles and establishing relationships. Judkins-Cohn et al., (2014) suggested that practitioner-researchers need to maintain a balance between their practice and research responsibilities, and establish clear boundaries to reduce the potential for conflict and tension. However, it was not managing the dual role conflict and associated responsibilities that I found most challenging. In contrast, during the three-year data collection phase, my duties as a researcher were at the forefront of my mind and left me feeling constrained. Baillie (1995) noted that being present within an organisation is often a challenge in itself for the researcher and that balancing the occupation of a dual role is complex and multifaceted. We argue that these tensions might be exaggerated in practitioner-research due to the need to prove valuable to the organisation under study, and manage potential conflicts of interest (Parker 1995; McCullough *et al.,* 2015; MacLean and Poole, 2010). My experiences as a practitioner-researcher in this context left me questioning both my identity and sense of belonging as an organisational insider. My lack of experience as an insider practitioner-researcher might have exaggerated these feelings further, as the conflict between my desired and required actions occurred at a time when I was trying to form my own identity as a researcher and applied practitioner (Coffey, 1999). In addition to this, I had limited prior experience of utilising ethnographic research methods, and it was only recently that I was introduced to the concept of ethnographic research by my supervisory team. Ethnographic researchers (e.g. Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Raheim *et al.* 2016) have argued that the position of an ethnographer (e.g. insider vs outsider) will influence their feelings of

acceptance within the organisation of study. Originally, these debates considered what it means to be an insider or an outsider in a particular research setting (e.g. Allen, 2004). More recently, researchers have started to consider the potential benefits and challenges surrounding researcher positionality (Dean, 2016). Coghlan and Brannick (2005) suggested that for the insider practitioner-researcher there are often three interlocking challenges, a) the need to develop a closeness to the setting, whilst also being able to create a distance which allows them to view events/situations critically, b) occupying a dual role and managing the ambiguities and conflicts that exist between these, and c) managing organisational politics and developing a future career. Across this research project, I felt that although physically I was present as an insider within the organisation, psychologically I experienced a shifting to and from the different positions. Therefore, in line with Naples (1996), we believe that the distinction between an insider and an outsider is not black and white; rather an individual operates on an insider-outsider continuum. In some cases, this might leave the researcher feeling like an outsider in both roles (Coghlan, 2007). Where each ethnographer is positioned on this continuum will develop and change over time based on their own experiences within and external to the organisation. Coghlan (2007) argued that trying to manage the boundaries of formal and informal hierarchical roles (e.g., roles of colleagueship and friendship) requires total involvement and active commitment. My experiences within the professional football club deeply resonated with this. This was disadvantageous when the research role required the opposite, the ability to be more detached and critically reflective. Re-adjusting my expectations from the research project, reflecting on each experience as a 'learning moment', and learning to accept that in some form ethnography always requires the researcher to engage in role-playing helped to combat some of the frustrations I experienced in not feeling authentic.

The Forgotten Me

The second theme explores the moral, ethical, and personal challenges that I experienced when Tainton Town FC continued to overlook my role as a researcher within the professional football club. Prior to the start of the research project, I did not anticipate that there would be a downside to my previous time spent within Tainton Town FC as a sport psychology practitioner. Firstly, it had reduced any barriers surrounding my entrance to the organisation, and access to key stakeholders (Cushion, 2001). In addition to this, my value as a sport psychology practitioner helped to reduce some of the organisation's concerns with regards to the research taking place (e.g. contact time with players, interference with normal schedule) (Arber, 2006). However, the contrasting roles of the practitioner-researcher and the reluctance of the professional football club to identify with my role as an academic meant that I faced a series of challenging experiences across the duration of the research. Each of these resulted in me questioning my own values and beliefs. The first extract is taken from the reflective log, and documents an interaction with the U18 manager. Following this, we present a field note extract written six months on from the first encounter, this explores how the U23 manager demonstrated the little value he placed on my role as a researcher.

November 2016

What is it going to take for them (the coaches) to take notice of me, the practitioner-researcher? Not just the practitioner, but also the 'other half' of me, the one that gets pushed to one side, the researcher. No matter how hard I try, I just cannot seem to get through to the coaches. Initially, my own insecurities regarding the research project were a hindrance, but I am no longer scared of facing up to challenging questions, bring them on… at least then it would show Tainton Town FC's consideration of my dual role. Literature suggests that it is beneficial for the researcher if the participant 'forgets' that they are the subject of a scientific study, as it demonstrates that their behaviour is

not influenced by the research. In this case, I didn't believe that the participant's had forgotten that I occupied a dual-role as a researcher, rather than my role was categorised as "not important" because it did not have a direct influence on player development. This lack of willingness to develop an understanding of the research objectives and its associated requirements challenged me from an ethical and personal perspective. Today was just another example of this… I have worked with the U18's manager now for two years as a researcher, and three years as a sport psychology practitioner. On the face of it, our relationship is good, until it comes to my role as a researcher. I was sat in the office typing up field notes on my laptop when he approached me and asked, "so what's this thing you're doing at uni again?". I was a little embarrassed at the nature of his question, but saw this as an opportunity to turn a corner. Firstly, I reminded him of previous conversations about the research and continued to explain what the purpose of this was in relation to the club. At this point he interrupted, "yeah yeah, all that stuff is beyond me, as long as you keep doing what you do with the lads that's all that matters". This reinforced my previous perception of their lack of interest, and ignorance of the research project. I felt deflated, and was on the brink of giving up. I didn't know what else I could do to change their perceptions."

As noted previously, the following extract occurred six months later and describes an interaction with the head coach from a different age group. It is hoped that this field note extract demonstrates that the attitudes/perceptions of coaches were consistent across the age groups and over time.

Field note extract (May 2017)

I had arranged with the U23 manager a number of weeks ago that I would use today's session to conduct end of season interviews with the U23 players. This aligned with one of the broader research objectives (to explore the efficacy of a psychological

development program that had been designed, implemented, and delivered within Tainton Town FC). However, only minutes before I was supposed to conduct my first interview, the U23 manager approached me and mentioned that if it was only interviews for my research project then he wanted them for an extra fitness session instead. He explained that this was because they had performed poorly and displayed a poor professional approach in the last few games of the season. The manager stated, "Your stuff can wait can't it, it's only for your uni course it isn't the proper psychology stuff is it?"

The above extracts are representative of the staff within Tainton Town FC's disinterest of my role as a researcher. This pattern of events continued across the longitudinal duration of the research despite continued attempts to alter perceptions and gain acknowledgement of my dual role. For example, feeding back on the findings of the research at the end of each season to the full-time members of staff within the organisation, and questioning the efficacy of the research process with key stakeholders. As an early career researcher, experiences such as the above posed a significant threat to my researcher identity, and resulted in me questioning my own moral and ethical principles. In the first instance the reaction of Tainton Town FC to the research resulted in me loathing this aspect of my role (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). For example, I was reluctant to be seen on a computer, or making notes during a training session/ around the training ground. In addition to this, I believed that I was not capable of conducting this kind of research, and was concerned about how the participants truly felt about taking part in the study. However, over time I grew frustrated by and eventually desensitized to their comments. I was also concerned by the lack of acknowledgement of the research by key stakeholders, and believed that it raised a number of ethical questions. During the university ethics procedure there was a clear focus from the ethics board on the need to ensure that all participants were explicitly aware of the nature of the research project.

Judkins-Cohn et al. (2014) argued that the relationship between the researcher and the participants is imperative in relation to informed consent. For example, the power dynamic between the practitioner and research must be considered to ensure that the participants make their decisions based on free will as opposed to feeling obliged. The ignorance of my research role increased my anxiety during the data collection phase, and often resulted in me feeling that there was a tension between what I was experiencing and what I 'should' be experiencing, and the challenges that I was facing (See Dixon-Woods *et al.,* 2007) Furthermore, I was conscious of the potential implications for the write up and dissemination of the findings. In the hope of maintaining high ethical standards, I made a conscious effort to remind the participants of the research process on appropriate occasions during the data collection and write up phases. However, I was also careful not to over-remind the participants to the extent that it influenced their behaviour in the research setting (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The American Nurses Association (ANA, 2001) identifies that dual role practitioners need to demonstrate respect for the participant's inherent dignity and worth; and protection for their health and safety. During this time, I sought the support of my research team, and advice of a university-based ethnographers club to ensure that I acted in the best interests of the participants. Bjorkman (2005) described the personal struggles and identity questioning that he faced as a consequence of being a practitioner first and then adopting the secondary role of the researcher at a later stage. On reflection, we would suggest that I found this deeply problematic because of my level of experience in using ethnographic research methods, and anxieties in ensuring I adhered to the university research ethics guidelines (Dixon-Woods *et al.,* 2007). As a young female practitioner I was positioned as 'naturally' less competent in sport-related matters (see Kilty, 2006) and these discursive practices were reproduced within the organisation, leaving me feeling unconfident and reliant on my

academic supervisors. However, as practitioners become more experienced they become more flexible in their approach, are able to constructively critique their practice, and become less reliant on their supervisor. Schon (1995) supported this viewpoint and suggested that any insider research is messy, and problems can arise. However, as the insider researcher gains fieldwork experience and has to make challenging decisions they become more capable of handling the difficulties associated with ethnographic practitioner-research.

One potential explanation for the behaviour of the coaches within Tainton Town FC is the organisational culture within professional football. Sport researchers (e.g. Cushion, 2001; Kelly & Waddington, 2006) have noted that professional football clubs are often sceptical of those with a university background, and closed to 'outsiders'. Tainton Town FC had not previously collaborated with a university researcher, and therefore, it might be suggested that the ignorance shown to my research project could be due to scepticism towards academics, and a lack of understanding of research. Given my reliance on Tainton Town FC for the successful completion of the research project, I was conscious of the need to protect my status within the organisation. Similar to what was reported by Parker (1995), I was careful about how I portrayed myself in the football club. For example, I would spend limited time on my laptop in order to avoid being viewed as an academic. Here lay the conflict between wanting to remind the participants of the research project, and needing to align my own actions/behaviours with the dominant behaviours of the organisation in order to maintain my position in the club. Secondly, it might be suggested that Tainton Town FC were disinterested in my role, as it did not have an immediate impact on the development of players. Professional football is a results-oriented business (Nesti & Sulley, 2014). Kelly and Waddington (2006) noted that any individual who does not demonstrate their value is likely to be frozen out and eventually

rejected from the organisation. In line with this, it might be argued that although stakeholders situated within Tainton Town FC were aware of the research they chose to direct their effort and attention towards my role as a practitioner, as it was this that had a direct impact on the daily lives of academy players. Given the hegemonic culture of professional football (e.g. dominance of masculinity, displays of power, the requirement to conform to authority, ruthlessness) (Gearing, 1999), and its reluctance to change we suggest that early career practitioner-researchers who enter this social context in the upcoming years are likely to share a similar research experience.

Confidentiality

The final reflective narratives illuminate the issue of practitioner-researcher confidentiality within Tainton Town FC. Confidentiality first arose as a potential issue during the ethics application, at this stage my concerns related to maintaining the anonymity of both the organisation, and the participants within the club. Following in-depth discussions with my research team, and the university ethics board we concluded that although we could not guarantee the anonymity of Tainton Town FC, the anonymity of individuals within the club could be ensured with pseudonyms and the alteration of any identifying details. Despite this, I had to make a number of challenging decisions during the write-up phase of the study, which often left me feeling a sense of betrayal to individuals that I had developed meaningful relationships with. Within this subsection, we present two reflective extracts. The first reflection details an event that occurred as I was nearing the end of my time with Tainton Town FC and relates specifically to the anxieties that I faced when writing up my experiences. The second reflection explores the challenges that I faced in introducing confidentiality as an important aspect of my practitioner-researcher role within Tainton Town FC.

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As I entered Tainton Town FC this morning, I was approached by Ted (youth team scholar). He was clearly in a state of panic and proceeded to tell me that his father was in intensive care after suffering a heart attack the previous evening. The player had made the choice to get the bus into training as usual despite his dad's condition. He explained that he didn't want the event or an absence to affect the coach's decision on whether his contract would be renewed or terminated later that month. I felt proud that the player had approached me, and believed that this signified the strength of our relationship. Although Ted had made me aware of the situation, he was reluctant for any other member of staff in the club to know of his circumstances. To me, this was deeply concerning in that it further demonstrated the negative impact of the professional football culture that I had been exposed to during the data collection. This event had clear implications for future applied practice in sport psychology, for example the importance of a holistic approach to player support inclusive of counselling skills. However, this was a pivotal moment in Ted's life, and it had taken a lot of trust for him to choose to share this event with me. Therefore, I was now grappling with an incredibly difficult decision. If I choose to include this player's narrative within my thesis am I betraying his trust. I doubt in the moment that he approached me he considered my role as a researcher. He found himself in a crisis situation, and sought my advice as a sport psychology practitioner. Anonymity is considered central in both practitioner and researcher ethics. However, if I choose not to publish the data due to the highly personal and unpredicted nature of the event am I adhering to my role as a researcher to meet a number of research objectives? I feel conflicted, torn, and unsure where my loyalties lie.

The following reflection offers a more holistic consideration of how coaches viewed confidentiality within Tainton Town FC.

Confidentiality

I am stood in the education suite about to deliver a presentation to around 15 members of full-time staff. These included; physios, sports scientists, coaches (U11-U21), assistant manager, 1st team manager, and academy director. The aim of the presentation was to educate coaches on the importance of confidentiality in sport psychology. Although nervous, I spoke confidently, fully believing that the staff would understand the importance of the workshop. I finished the slide and just as I was about to move onto the next, Joe (U21 manager) spoke: "I don't agree with all this confidentiality malarkey, that's not the way it is around here"… I gulped and slowly lifted my head to look at the reaction of the other staff. To my dismay, they nodded in agreement. In an attempt to take the pressure off myself, I asked Joe what he meant. However, his response only confirmed that his opinion was strong. He stated, "The staff here have worked with each other long enough to know that everyone needs to be kept in the loop about everything, you do your job, but if we don't know how players are mentally, we can't pick the strongest team"

My heart rate rose again. I could not cave in and agree, it would be morally, and ethically wrong. Nevertheless, this guy is important, he's been at the club nearly 15 years, and what he says goes. I stepped back, took a breath and went for it… I asked the staff to remember the days they played, or put themselves into the players' shoes. I gave them a scenario and asked them to discuss and decide whether I should take the issue to the coach. Small-scale conversations started to emerge. For now, I could recompose myself, reign in my emotions, and aim to take back control of the discussion. In a bid for some positivity, I asked if anyone thought the example issue should be kept confidential. The U16 coach spoke, he was an ex-player and reinforced my belief that confidentiality would be important if I was to be effective. More confident in my stance, I rounded up the conversation and asked what the thoughts were moving forward, although Joe started with "Even though I don't agree" he finished with "you make a judgement on what needs

to be kept confidential, we will leave it up to you, as long as your job gets done". This was not positive, but it was a lot less negative than his previous answers.

The above events had a significant impact on me from a personal and professional perspective. Throughout the duration of the doctoral research, the conflict between my role as a researcher and sport psychology practitioner was evident. Alongside the completion of the research project, I was engaging in professional training with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), where the importance of maintaining confidentiality was emphasised on a number of occasions. Furthermore, both BASES and the British Psychological Society (BPS) have association codes on the importance of confidentiality, with the BPS stating that practitioners have a moral duty and obligation to adhere to this code (BPS Code of Conduct, 2009, p.10). Confidentiality was also highlighted during the university ethics process from a research perspective; therefore, situations such as the above required me to question my own stance on the role of a practitioner-researcher. Davis (1997) explored a similar conflict in ethnographic nursing research. His findings highlighted that nursing practice is primarily dedicated to patient care and is governed by a strict ethical code of practice. However, at times this code was at odds with the requirements of ethnographic research methods. This runs parallel with sport psychology which is primarily about empathy and client care, and the BPS, BASES, AASP have codes of conduct on ethical conduct. However, these are at odds with daily practices within professional football (e.g. results-oriented, volatile, ruthless), and the use of ethnographic research methods (e.g. confidentiality, the publication of data). I was writing about highly personal case studies that were critical moments for those at the centre of the experience. Professionally I questioned whether this was ethical, but also personally I often wondered how I would have reacted if I was one of the participants whom a researcher had 'told the story' of. Despite these doubts,

599 ethnographic researchers have identified the importance of the researcher making 'good'
600 decisions regarding the write-up and publication of the data. Fleming (1995) suggested
601 that the responsibility lies with the researcher to ensure that the best interests of the
602 participants are taken into consideration when disseminating the data. Furthermore,
603 Coghlan (2007) noted that gaining access, using data, and disseminating and publishing
604 data are intensely political acts that need to be attentively, intelligently, reasonably, and
605 responsibly managed. However, there is a lack of specific information regarding what
606 this actually means in practice.

607 Norris (1993) identified three options for dealing with data that might result in
608 unpleasant memories for the participants (in this case the players and staff within the
609 organisation). The first option is to report the data to an appropriate body or lodge a
610 complaint. However, we rejected this as it breaches confidentiality, and might spoil the
611 field for future enquiry. Secondly, Norris (1993) suggested that the research could be
612 abandoned, or at least the data not included. At times, this was the option that my feelings
613 about the research most closely resonated with. As a research team, we rejected this
614 approach as it encourages the manipulation of data, and might even force the researcher
615 to leave the field of enquiry. The final approach is to treat it like any other data and publish
616 accordingly. The final choice was deemed most appropriate as it allowed me to keep the
617 promises of the research bargains and maintain the integrity of the data, whilst continuing
618 in the field. With more experience of conducting ethnographic practitioner-research, I
619 might have been more comfortable with some of the conflicts and tensions that arose
620 during the data collection and write-up, and better able to make difficult decisions as
621 opposed to relying on the guidance of my supervisory team.

622 Finally, we argue that I would not have experienced events such as the above if it
623 were not for the three-year duration of the research. It was through a longitudinal

engagement with the organisation and its key stakeholders that I developed an understanding of the subtle changes in participant's actions and behaviours, and the meaning that was attached to these. Furthermore, developing a trusting relationship with individuals took a significant time-period due to the closed nature of the professional football club, and my expertise in a discipline that the club had not previously been exposed to. We believe that being embedded within Tainton Town FC for over 1500 hours per season meant that those within the organisation developed an in-depth understanding of my personal characteristics and motives in the organisation, and behaved more naturally.

General Discussion

In this article, we explored the use of practitioner-researcher ethnography in one professional football club and illustrated some of the methodological challenges that might be experienced as a result of this dual role occupation. Although previous research has explored the potential for ethnography in applied sport psychology (e.g. Krane & Baird, 2005; Smith & McGannon, 2018), there has been a lack of published practitioner-researcher ethnographies conducted in sport, especially professional football. This is limited in that ethnographic researchers have not considered how best to conduct practitioner-research in a sporting context, especially from the perspective of an early career practitioner-researcher.

In this paper, we have highlighted the challenges faced by a novice practitioner-researcher (e.g. emotional impact, identity development, moral and ethical questioning). Furthermore, our study extends current understandings of the challenges (personal, ethical) that might be experienced as a function of occupying a dual role, and aims to enhance other practitioner's awareness prior to entering the field. This is important when we consider the increasing opportunities for sports psychologists to gain entrance to and

operate within professional football clubs, and future potential to diminish the gap between academic research and applied practice (Lillis, 2008). In addition to the above, many current ethnographies in sport were conducted across the duration of one season (e.g. Cushion, 2001; Parker, 1995). In comparison, our research was conducted across a three-year period where I was positioned as an 'insider' within Tainton Town FC. The extended duration of our research resulted in the identification of a number of practitioner-researcher challenges that have not been discussed previously from the position of an organisational insider in sports literature (for example, threats to authenticity, acceptance of academics in professional football, and managing confidentiality). Furthermore, over the duration of the study, there was a significant period of organisational change (e.g. 1st team manager, assistant manager, U14/U16/U18/U23 coaches, all sports science and medicine team departed Tainton Town FC). Despite, the significant transition in personnel my experiences as a practitioner-researcher remained consistent. The limited impact of the organisational change further solidified my belief that the cultural characteristics of professional football transcend individual actors within the clubs, and shaped the actions and attitudes of staff members towards the research. This kind of holistic understanding of practitioner-research is important for developing appropriate education and support mechanisms for future ethnographic practitioner-researchers.

Consequently, we suggest that a range of support mechanisms are essential for the ethnographic practitioner-researcher in helping them to deal with researcher emotionality, and challenging ethical dilemmas. Firstly, we believe that the introduction of ethnography clubs both within and external to universities would be beneficial in supporting practitioner-researchers on their research journey. For example, ethnographers with different levels of experience, and areas of expertise might come together at regional hubs

674 to meet and share their experiences of using ethnographic research methods. With
675 particular relation to this study, a neophyte practitioner-researcher support group would
676 be beneficial. In addition to this, training and educational support might be offered to
677 practitioner-researchers and their supervisors at the start of their research journey. For
678 example, ethnographic experts may run workshops or webinars for practitioner-
679 researchers on the complexities of occupying a dual role. Practitioner-research is a
680 relatively new ethnographic space in sport psychology, in that there is limited research
681 from neophyte sport psychologists working in professional football clubs who occupy the
682 dual role as a researcher. Therefore, adding sport psychology course content on
683 organisational culture and identity development, power and politics might provide novice
684 practitioner-researchers with more interpretive resources so that they can make sense of
685 their lived experiences in a more constructive manner. This paper has developed our
686 knowledge and understanding of some of the challenges that individuals might face in
687 this particular setting. Finally, we believe that by encouraging practitioner-researchers to
688 develop a clear sense of self might facilitate their successful navigation through the
689 challenging research journey. Often the only people who can do this type of research are
690 doctoral students as they can give up the time to really embed themselves. Therefore, the
691 practical implications that we have proposed should focus on this population.

692 **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

693 We acknowledge that we have not attained the perspective of Tainton Town FC
694 on my occupation of a dual role as a sport psychology practitioner-researcher. This could
695 be addressed by studies that explore the organisations perspective on how practitioner-
696 researchers might operate within elite sport using focus groups and interviews. This is
697 only the view of one individual. It is important to note that other practitioner-researchers
698 might not have experienced or reflected on their experiences in the same way as me (Van

699 Maanen, 2011). For example, we believe that a more experienced practitioner-researcher
700 or ethnographic researcher might not have experienced the same uncertainty and tension
701 if the coaches did not acknowledge their role, rather they might see this as beneficial, a
702 demonstration that participants were not shaped by the research. In addition to this, only
703 one organisation was studied which might not be representative of the culture of other
704 elite sports environments.

705 To date, only a very small number of practitioner-researcher ethnographies (e.g.
706 Devaney *et al.,* 2018) have been conducted in elite sport. Further studies from other
707 practitioner-researchers within elite sport would help us to better understand whether the
708 findings of this study lie in isolation, or if they are generalizable across this social context.
709 In conclusion, our findings highlight the challenges that practitioner-researchers might
710 face when operating in elite sport environments that are often sceptical of academics
711 (Nesti et al., 2012), and driven by performance (Nesti & Sulley, 2014). A clearer
712 understanding of the challenges that practitioner-researchers face in other high-
713 performance cultures may inform the development of more effective education and
714 support methods.

715 **Conclusion**

716 The present study sought to reflect on the challenges of practitioner-research
717 within professional football, thereby deepening our understanding of how to manage the
718 dual role tensions of practitioner-researcher ethnography. Our analytic work resulted in
719 identifying three key challenges: threats to identity, acceptance of academics in
720 professional football, and managing confidentiality. Based on this three-year
721 ethnography, we have shown that practitioner-research methods are demanding,
722 emotional, and hugely challenging. More specifically, practitioner-researchers are
723 required to make pressurised decisions (e.g. reporting on data) in the best interests of the

participating organisation and the associated academic field, which often have conflicting ideals. Furthermore, if practitioner-researchers fail to demonstrate their value in both the practitioner and the researcher role they risk being deprived of their position within an organisation. Therefore, a practitioner-researcher should possess a high level of self–awareness, and an appropriate level of support and guidance should be available throughout (ethnographers clubs, strong supervisor relationship, and peer support).

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