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An insight into the use of personality assessment by UK sport psychology consultants

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26

27

Abstract

28

Personality has a long, if somewhat checkered history in the sport psychology

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literature, but insight into its use in contemporary applied practice is more limited.

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This study investigated contemporary sport psychology consultants' perceptions of

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using personality assessment. Ten participants (4 female, 6 male; mean 14 years'

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applied experience), all Health and Care Professions Council registered and

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accredited by either the British Psychological Society or British Association of Sport

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and Exercise Sciences, were purposefully sampled and interviewed. An inductive

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thematic analysis was then performed. Five themes were identified: Effective

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Practice, Perceived Impact, Societal Movements, Organizational Experience and

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Innovation. Findings deliver an original insight into the perceptions of practitioners

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around personality assessment in sport, illustrating a movement from prediction to

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development in the field and providing novel examples of bespoke, individualized

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tool application. Broad training and career experiences will help practitioners fully

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appreciate these potential opportunities.

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Keywords:

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[sport psychology, personality assessment, thematic analysis, experience, innovation]

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48 An insight into the use of personality assessment by UK sport psychology consultants

49 Personality has been a feature of sport psychology since the 1920s (Griffith, 1926).

50 Interest intensified in the 1960s and 1970s as researchers sought to use personality traits to
51 predict individual athletic performance (Fisher, 1984). These efforts collectively yielded
52 results of such variability as to make broader application extremely difficult (Vealey, 2002).

53 They also helped to create a broader skepticism as to whether the construct of personality had
54 any utility in sport and exercise at all (Beauchamp et al., 2007).

55 In contrast, mainstream psychological research investigating the influence of
56 personality has continued extensively (Funder & Fast, 2010), as evidenced by comprehensive
57 meta-analyses showing associations between personality traits and subjects of interest such as
58 leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004). Personality-based psychometrics are also in widespread
59 use throughout the business world (e.g., Bailey, 2017). This can be at least partially attributed
60 to an increase in focus following the development of the trait-based five-factor, or ‘big five’,
61 model of personality in the early 1990s (McCrae & Costa, 2008). The influence of other
62 psychological philosophies though should also be acknowledged. Jungian psychodynamics
63 underpin two commercially popular personality systems (Benton, 2017): the Myers Briggs
64 Type Indicator (MBTI: Myers et al., 1985) and Insights Discovery (Benton et al., 2008). The
65 commercial sphere has also embraced positive psychology-based character strengths systems
66 such as Gallup’s Strengths Finder (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Given the above, this paper
67 seeks to develop a more contemporary picture of the utility of personality assessment in
68 sport, starting with the research literature.

69 Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its societal salience, exploration of the utility of
70 personality in sport has continued despite the aforementioned skepticism, albeit sporadically
71 (See Allen et al., 2013, for a detailed review). Evidence that the big five personality traits are
72 associated with individual sporting performance is provided, with one illustrative study

73 finding that elite athletes tend to have higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness
74 and lower levels of neuroticism than their club-level counterparts (Allen et al., 2011).
75 Compelling evidence demonstrating prediction of short-term success was not found, although
76 given the fine margins between success and failure in many sports this is perhaps an
77 unrealistic expectation. Evidence can also be found associating big five traits with
78 interpersonal relationships and group processes, although it is surprisingly sparse given the
79 importance of social interactions in sport (Carron & Eys, 2012). One exemplar study found
80 that coach-athlete dyads were stronger when both coach and athlete reported high levels of
81 agreeableness and conscientiousness (Jackson et al., 2011), while another has recently
82 illustrated how perceptions of coach-athlete compatibility are associated with personality
83 similarity and personality complementarity (Stanford et al., 2022).

84 While the big five traits do have some predictive value in sport there is also an
85 emerging narrative that they are insufficient and need to be complemented by other
86 personality variables that have a very clear theoretical basis for performance impact (Roberts
87 & Woodman, 2017). The so-called ‘dark side’ behaviors, popularised by Robert Hogan, are
88 one such area of interest (Furnham, 2017). Individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to
89 perform at their best when there is an opportunity for personal glory and, given that these
90 opportunities are common in sporting situations, individuals possessing such traits may
91 perform well within the high-pressure environment of elite sport (Roberts et al., 2018). There
92 are also clear downsides to these strengths, with one being their tendency to disengage
93 morally and behave anti-socially, which can have severe consequences for team functioning
94 (Jones et al., 2017). Importantly for the sport psychology consultant (SPC), there are clear
95 applied implications. For example, narcissists can benefit from imagery but only if this
96 focuses on an image of themselves from an external perspective (Roberts & Woodman,

97 2017). In contrast they tend to respond less favorably to coaches who, in fostering feelings of
98 collective unity in a group, reduce their opportunity for personal glory (Arthur et al., 2011).

99 The fact that efforts to predict performance based on personality traits have had limited
100 success may also be because the relationships are in fact far more complex. Investigating the
101 quality of athletes training, Woodman et al. (2010) found that high levels of extraversion
102 were associated with higher levels of distractibility, a relationship mitigated when the same
103 athletes systematically employed goal setting in training. Extending this line of research,
104 Zhang et al. (2019) found that the extraversion-distractibility relationship was also moderated
105 by coaches' high-performance expectations. Studies of coping behavior found that 'problem-
106 focused' approaches were favored by extraverted athletes who were also emotionally stable
107 and open to new experiences while 'emotion-focused' coping strategies were preferred by
108 athletes who were high on extraversion, openness and agreeableness (Allen et al., 2011).

109 This brief review of the contemporary research literature has illustrated continued
110 exploration of the potential for personality assessment to predict, albeit in a more subtle and
111 nuanced way than the efforts of the mid-late 20th century. Indeed, from the researcher
112 perspective, there would seem to be an opportunity to uncover even more predictive
113 relationships, moderators and mediators that are not currently understood. From a practitioner
114 perspective, literature documenting how such findings are actually used by SPCs is now
115 explored.

116 A small number of diverse case studies were identified that describe the use of
117 personality assessment in applied practice, with sports covered including rowing
118 (Shambrook, 2009), soccer (Lavalee, 2005), cricket (Cotterill & Moran, 2017), synchronized
119 swimming (Holder, 2017), basketball (Dempsey et al., 2017), and rugby union (Hodge et al.,
120 2014). These cases also cover both genders, athlete career stage from youth to retirement and,
121 while the cases covered are all team sport athletes, at least two of them are primarily focused

122 on the individual. They provide examples as to how the results of personality assessment
123 were actually used, including tailoring of service delivery to squad members preferences
124 (Holder 2017), providing a common framework to increase athlete self-awareness of
125 personality (Cotterill & Moran 2017), driving step-change in mindset across an organisation
126 (Shambrook, 2009) and helping retiring soccer players undergoing career transition to
127 understand their strengths (Lavalee, 2005). These applications all fit within a framework of
128 “understanding self, understanding others, adapting and connecting” (Beauchamp et al.,
129 2007, p35). Interestingly, in terms of group dynamics, two of the cases illustrate the two main
130 approaches open to a coach (Beauchamp et al., 2007), to either train the team and adapt the
131 environment to accommodate a high performing player (Dempsey et al., 2017) or create an
132 environment that shapes the players into a collective and rejects them if they do not fit
133 (Hodge et al., 2014). It is also worth noting that these applied case studies all seem to be
134 focused on the use of personality assessment for developmental purposes when compared to
135 the rather more prediction-focused research literature.

136 However, the relatively small number of articles identified raises the possibility that the
137 above precis does not fully represent today’s reality, particularly given that organizational
138 psychology is increasingly influential in elite sport (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) and that this
139 discipline has led to widespread use of psychometrics elsewhere (Bailey, 2017). That said, it
140 might also be that the critique such psychometrics continue to attract within the SPC
141 community, in terms of design, application and overall ecological validity, (Collins &
142 Cruickshank, 2017) have inhibited their growth. This study was consequently designed to
143 address this potential gap, by understanding the perceptions of contemporary SPCs regarding
144 the use of personality assessment in sport.

145 **Method**

146 **Philosophical Beliefs**

147 To help ensure appropriate and coherent methodological decision-making, careful
148 consideration was given to overarching philosophy (Willig, 2013), resulting in adoption of
149 interpretivism for this study. Specifically, a relativist ontology (i.e., reality is multiple and
150 created) and a constructionist epistemology (i.e., knowledge is subjective and constructed).
151 This in turn led to an idiographic design, in which each SPC's individual experiences were
152 carefully considered. It also led to the adoption of a constructionist data collection
153 methodology (e.g., interviews) rather than a potentially separatist alternative (e.g.,
154 questionnaires). Analysis was then conducted thematically, with the approach selected having
155 been defined as epistemologically flexible by its creators (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
156 Throughout the analysis process the first author led and the second author acted as a critical
157 friend (Smith & McGannon, 2017). The inductive approach followed is reflected in the
158 presentation and discussion of results in this paper, with SPC quotations presented first
159 followed by supporting literature.

160 **Sampling and Participants**

161 Given the use of personality assessment in applied practice remains a polarizing subject
162 (Collins & Cruickshank, 2017), it was important to secure a heterogenous sample with a
163 range of experiences and opinions. To achieve, this a purposeful criterion-based sampling
164 strategy was employed (Patton, 1990). Two qualifying criteria were used. First, participants
165 had to be a British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered sport and exercise psychologist
166 registered with the Health and Care Professions Council and/or an accredited sport and
167 exercise scientist (e.g., Psychology – Scientific Support) with the British Association of Sport
168 and Exercise Sciences (BASES). Second, they were required to have a known interest in the
169 use of personality assessment in applied practice, with 'known advocacy' or 'known
170 skepticism' both acceptable. To further ensure diversity, recruitment sub-strata were also
171 applied so that the sample included SPCs who had experience of at least one of the following

172 work experience contexts: a national high-performance organization, a professional club
173 and/or working as an independent SPC.

174 A collaborative approach was taken to defining the sample. A shortlist, based on BPS
175 and BASES registers together with a review of relevant published literature, was developed
176 and discussed by the authors, with the information sourced by the first author and
177 complemented by the second authors extensive understanding of the UK-based SPC
178 community. This process resulted in a final sampling list of 16 SPCs who were all
179 approached. Ten individuals (4 female, 6 male) who met the inclusion criteria accepted an
180 invitation to participate and provided informed consent. Participants had an average of 14
181 years ($SD = 8$ years, range 5-30) of experience working as SPCs across the three
182 environments: Nine having worked in a high-performance organization, seven in a
183 professional club and five as an independent SPC. Three had worked in all three settings
184 versus five with experience of two settings and two who had worked in one context only.
185 Two of the sample were known to have particularly skeptical views regarding the use of
186 personality assessment in applied practice.

187 **Procedure and Data Collection**

188 To elicit the relevant experiences of SPCs, semi-structured interviewing was selected as
189 an appropriate methodology, since it ensured important areas of interest were covered while
190 still providing the interviewee with enough latitude to enable a free-flowing discussion
191 (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). An interview guide was developed around five key questions that
192 sought an understanding of: 1) overall SPC experience with personality assessment; 2)
193 specific examples of the SPCs experience with personality assessment; 3) how the SPC had
194 evolved in their use of personality assessment over time; 4) hints & tips for those considering
195 using personality assessment based on their experience; and 5) anything else. The guide
196 deliberately started with a “grand tour” question (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.91), the intent

197 being to allow the response to this question to guide the order in which the remaining
198 interview questions were covered in a relatively unstructured manner. Probes designed to
199 clarify or elaborate were employed throughout. A reflexive journal was also kept throughout
200 the fieldwork, and this was helpful in enabling reflection on subtle dynamics observed during
201 interviews to facilitate iteration of interviewer approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

202 Following approval by the University Ethics Committee, the first author conducted the
203 interviews. To begin with, a successful pilot interview was conducted face-to-face with a
204 qualifying interviewee. Given only very minor changes were indicated (e.g., modification of
205 initial rapport-building questions and removal of enabling props), the data obtained was
206 included in the final analysis. At the request of the interviewees all subsequent interviews
207 were conducted remotely, eight via synchronous video (i.e., Skype) and one via cell phone
208 audio. No significant technological issues were experienced during the interviews. All
209 interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Trint transcription software followed by
210 manual review and correction versus audio recordings (Trint, 2019). This process helped
211 ensure a high level of accuracy within each transcript and allowed the lead author to become
212 more familiar with the data. The final transcripts were then shared back with the interviewees
213 to help check for accuracy and to provide the opportunity to add additional perspective.
214 Interview duration was on average 63 minutes ($SD = 11$ min, range 45–76).

215 **Data Analysis and Rigor**

216 The first author carried out an inductive thematic analysis to analyze the dataset derived
217 (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Braun and Clarke's six-step approach was chosen due to the clarity
218 and breadth of guidance available (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The exploratory research question
219 was the key factor influencing adoption of an inductive approach. The analysis process
220 commenced with extensive immersion in the data, with transcription followed by several
221 rounds of re-reading, during which thoughts were noted down by the lead author. Initial

222 codes were then generated, taking care to systematically cover the entire dataset. These were
223 then collated into potential themes, a process facilitated by hand sorting and re-sorting. A
224 more formal iteration process then followed, including three separate occasions on which the
225 latest thematic maps were formally presented to, and critiqued by, the second author, with the
226 critique particularly focused on understandability, clarity of communication and theme de-
227 duplication. During this process themes were clarified, named and refined.

228 Project rigor was a priority throughout, and significant efforts were made to enable this.
229 Importantly, the exploratory research question was underpinned by balanced recruitment,
230 ensuring the sample included SPCs with a range of views, positive and negative, towards the
231 applied utility of personality assessment. The analysis draws from the entire dataset, as
232 illustrated by anonymised labelling of the SPC source in this report, with all ten SPCs quoted.
233 The perspective of Smith and McGannon (2017) underpinned other choices, particularly
234 given the specific interpretivist philosophy adopted for this research. Their assessment of the
235 limitations of ‘member checking’ was noted and so, while participants were provided with
236 the opportunity to correct any perceived transcription errors (which one participant did – due
237 to a misunderstanding caused by a strong regional accent), they were also given the
238 opportunity to provide any ‘member reflections’ on their final transcripts (although none
239 were forthcoming). For ethical reasons participants were also provided with an opportunity to
240 comment on the initial report of this study, to reassure that steps taken to guard against the
241 risk of accidental disclosure of identity were sufficient. No related concerns were raised.
242 Finally, inter-rater reliability was rejected as an approach in favour of the first author leading
243 the analysis and second author acting as a critical friend, resulting in iterative improvements
244 to the clarity of the analysis and how it was communicated.

245 **Results and Discussion**

246 The analysis of contemporary SPCs perceptions of using personality assessment
247 resulted in five themes that summarize the considerations and areas they explored: Effective
248 Practice, Perceived Impact, Societal Movements, Organizational Experience and Innovation.
249 Each is comprised of supporting sub-themes (see Figure 1) and these are used to characterize
250 the themes as they are introduced and discussed below.

251 **Effective Practice**

252 This first theme reflects a recurring message from the SPCs interviewed that the
253 maintenance of high professional standards in applied sport psychology practice is critically
254 important if the use of any kind of tool or intervention, including personality assessment, is to
255 be legitimate.

256 So, you've got to have a strong therapeutic approach that you're going to be assessing
257 against. That's your blueprint in your mind of the people who are in front of you. You
258 need to understand what the individual needs to do, what the system needs to do to be
259 able to do the function well ... you want to get to the stage where you can say you
260 know right it's important that we work well together and function well together then
261 you go now we're there this is a tool to help you do it because it will accelerate how
262 quickly you get to know each other. (SPC 2)

263 This quote from a highly experienced SPC introduces two of the sub-themes identified,
264 the first of these being *Congruence*. There is extensive literature regarding the desirability of
265 psychologists maintaining a congruent, or consistent, approach to practice, from philosophy
266 through to delivery (e.g., Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Lindsay et al., 2007). That said, it is
267 also accepted that it is a legitimate choice to be more eclectic provided there is clarity as to
268 the reason for doing so (Keegan, 2016). Holder (2017) talked of the dilemma of a
269 philosophically cognitive behavioural practitioner accepting the suitability of the
270 psychodynamically-underpinned Insights Discovery tool to achieve a very specific goal in

271 enabling a higher level of understanding of communication preferences within a team, the
272 type of situation that this study indicates is relatively common. The second sub-theme the
273 aforementioned quote introduces is *Clarity*, which refers to the thought process a SPC is
274 generally expected to go through when consulting, including robust case formulation
275 (Keegan, 2016), so enabling clear professional judgements (Martindale & Collins, 2005) to
276 be made regarding the core issue and how best to address it.

277 For a SPC to be able to work in this way it is vitally important that they are *Well-*
278 *informed* and this is the third sub-theme. While ‘top of mind’ for those more skeptical of the
279 value of personality assessment, when probed it was a key point for all. First, and foremost,
280 the SPCs emphasised the importance of understanding the theoretical underpinning of any
281 tools they use and in having been properly trained and accredited in their use. This in turn
282 should lead to a critical understanding of the associated limitations with the use of the
283 specific tool.

284 The predictive validity of these things has to be in question when you're looking at
285 such a specific application of them. And that's where I think all of these measures of
286 personality traits or characteristics can tend to break down. Because it's the
287 application of that personality within a particular context and a particular time and a
288 particular set of circumstances... (SPC 1)

289 Views such as this also critically challenge the validity of personality psychometrics in
290 general, a topic explored in detail by Collins and Cruickshank (2017). Such concerns are of
291 course not just sport-specific, with the furore around MBTI being a good example
292 (Beauchamp et al., 2005), although the application in sport does also bring very specific
293 additional concerns:

294 But the challenge is when you take a tool that is designed for the general population
295 and then apply it to a very specific group of people, and we know that certainly elite
296 athletes are probably a bit different to normal population (SPC 3)

297 One other topic it is important that SPCs are fully aware of is the commercial reality of
298 many psychometrics. They are often branded products that generate significant revenues for
299 their owners, a potential conflict explored by Forde (2017), and one that can also mean
300 potentially unsustainable costs, especially for independent SPCs:

301 But then you need to understand how and why you would use that sort of tool and
302 need to understand the cost implications and a whole range of things that we're not
303 educating people in. So, you go and pay your £900 to do the training and then, while
304 the framework might be useful, I think lots of people will never use the tool ever.

305 Because of the [ongoing] cost of doing it (SPC 5)

306 The SPCs also described other examples of good and bad practice and these are
307 reflected in the fourth sub-theme: *Executional Excellence*.

308 So, it's not an excuse to behave in a certain way or to label somebody or to name call.

309 But those are dangers I've seen – you know you will have that at first as people get a
310 bit excited [when first exposed to the profiles] (SPC 2)

311 A particularly illustrative example is the importance of ensuring that a good quality debrief is
312 conducted with the client(s) post-assessment to avoid counter-productive misinterpretations
313 such as labelling (over-simplistically describing a colleague) and self-limiting (using one's
314 profile as an excuse for not being able to do something). The guidance offered by Benton et
315 al. (2008) on how best to apply Insights Discovery is cited as exemplar in this respect
316 (Collins & Cruickshank, 2017).

317 The fifth and final sub-theme is *SPC Self-Awareness*, reflecting consistent advocacy
318 for those SPCs using personality assessment with clients to have first used it themselves. In

319 addition to better understanding the process and outputs it can also help enable increased
320 understanding of self and so lead to improvements in their reflective practice (Anderson et
321 al., 2004).

322 **Perceived Impact**

323 The second theme reflects SPC experience that, used appropriately, established
324 personality assessment tools such as MBTI (Myers et al., 1985) and Insights Discovery
325 (Benton et al., 2008) can deliver beneficial impact.

326 “Like a physiologist goes ‘come here and I’ll take your blood and we’ll tell you about
327 your lactate.’ Nutritionists ... go like ‘come here, this is the drink that you need to take
328 in order to be able to rehydrate.’ And with sport psych I’d find myself there sort of
329 wandering around with my pad [laughs]. And um I always thought you needed like a
330 platform as a starting position with people ... because ... they don’t know what you
331 know. And it takes time to build that sort of like rapport ... particularly when you’re in
332 a very full-on applied environment and time is precious (SPC 10)

333 This quote introduces the first sub-theme *Rapport*, with relationships being one of the
334 most important factors behind whether any psychologist is successful (Assay & Lambert,
335 1999). SPCs often work in a multi-disciplinary environment where comparisons with other
336 support staff are almost inevitable and in which the intangible nature of SPC practice can
337 sometimes feel like a disadvantage, particularly during the initial stages of a new role or
338 working relationship. Against this backdrop, having something tangible to offer at the outset
339 can be a big enabler and even those SPCs sceptical of the value of personality assessment
340 acknowledge it can be helpful in this respect:

341 I’m still quite cynical of what it provides but I think it gives you a platform from
342 which you can get lots of spin off benefits. Even if it’s just talking about people
343 talking about themselves and understanding themselves. Even if they disagree entirely

344 with this profile, it gets them talking about themselves and identifying differences.

345 (SPC 1)

346 A related consideration is that of the second sub-theme of *Speed*, as introduced by the

347 following quote:

348 what is also useful about it is it's quicker than observing a team for six months to do a

349 needs analysis [so] speed in a system which is about fast improvement. Very quickly

350 get some ideas to land and get some traction in a way you wouldn't through, you

351 know, observing [and] making notes. I don't think that's what this system needs; it

352 needs 'Right. How do I improve it? Now!'. Not give me 2 months to do a needs

353 analysis. (SPC 2)

354 The saying 'time is of the essence' could have been invented for the elite sporting

355 environment where pressure to make a difference quickly is high (McDougall et al., 2015). In

356 this context the speed with which a personality assessment tool can be administered,

357 debriefed and then acted upon can be highly attractive.

358 The combined benefits of enabling rapport-building and speed of impact can be

359 particularly beneficial for the younger practitioner as recalled by another member of the

360 sample:

361 looking back, I did know at the time my knowledge base was not huge because I was

362 just starting out, and to have something in your toolkit like MBTI that you could

363 automatically get some credibility and run a day with, and run a really good day, with

364 a team or with a group of coaches was a really good thing to have. (SPC 6)

365 The SPCs also articulated two key outcomes that personality assessment tools are used

366 to achieve and these are the final two sub-themes in this section. The first is to increase *Client*

367 *Self-awareness* which, as one SPC pointed out, is perhaps not too surprising in the world of

368 elite sport:

369 It is useful because if you think about the population we're working with are very
370 young adults, not necessarily that self-aware. ... and people love being given a
371 profile. They love it and they love going home and sharing it with their friends and
372 family. Often, it's their age, they're 18-25. So, it's 'wow this is really interesting' the
373 first time most people do it. (SPC 2)

374 The second is to help facilitate better understanding and communication in groups, often with
375 the intent of improving *Group Cohesion*, whether that be socially-focused, task-focused or
376 both (Beauchamp et al., 2007). Overall, the 'understanding self, understanding others,
377 adapting and connecting' framework seems a fair summary of potential impact when using
378 personality assessments (Beauchamp et al., 2007). Furthermore, there were also potential
379 links to athlete performance made by some SPCs when talking about two more recently
380 developed tools: Spotlight and a more bespoke approach. It is for this reason that they are
381 discussed separately under the innovation theme.

382 **Societal Movements**

383 The third theme describes societal and cultural changes that are potentially influencing
384 contemporary SPC perceptions of personality assessment.

385 [something] I've seen change relatively recently is this acknowledgement that we
386 don't have to be the same and that there isn't an ideal personality to do anything you
387 know ... I think there's a much greater acceptance of difference and a much greater
388 acceptance of fluidity of how people apply themselves to different situations at
389 different times. And I think that's pushed a lot of people forward whereas in the past I
390 might have gone I'm X therefore I can't do Y (SPC 1)

391 This quote from the most experienced SPC in the sample introduces two of the supporting
392 sub-themes, the first being *Acceptance*. Individualization has been studied as an evolving
393 trend for many years (Genov, 2013) and there is evidence to confirm that tolerance of

394 differences such as race and sexuality is gradually increasing in the UK from one generation
395 to the next (Janmaat & Keating, 2019). It seems consistent therefore to hear experienced
396 SPCs discussing a similar trend related to the acceptance of personality variation in sport,
397 particularly when one also considers the deservedly widespread skepticism related to
398 historical attempts to identify the ‘ideal personality’ for particular sports (Beauchamp et al.,
399 2007).

400 Psychological *Fluidity*, the second sub-theme highlighted, is another topic of
401 contemporary interest in sport psychology (e.g., the use of Acceptance and Commitment
402 Therapy as an enabler for psychological fluidity: Lundgren et al., 2020). This is somewhat
403 mirrored by broader societal interest in the concept of fluidity, as indicated by the media
404 attention given to gender fluidity (e.g., Independent, 2019). There is also significant interest
405 in psychology and sport psychology around concepts that require us all to flex and adapt
406 (e.g., identity; Rees et al., 2015). Perhaps the most high-profile example of recent years to
407 have popularised the concept of being flexible and adaptable though is the work of Carol
408 Dweck and her messaging around the benefits of adopting a ‘growth’ versus a ‘fixed’
409 mindset. Indeed, influences promoting flexibility, adaptability and fluidity are all around us
410 (Dweck, 2008).

411 The final sub-theme in this section is *Mental Health*, as introduced by the following
412 quote:

413 You get people like [Player X], who is a classic extrovert, he would say he couldn’t
414 wait to get on the plane to go on tour... And then you get other people like [Player Y]
415 who really struggled (SPC 5).

416 One of the most salient topics of recent years in broader society (e.g., BBC News, 2019) and
417 sport (e.g., Souter et al., 2018), the stigma associated with mental health is fast disappearing
418 and interventions to address the associated challenges are becoming more common. The

419 English Institute of Sport's 'Project Thrive' is a good example in that it holistically considers
420 both aspects of well-being and performance (English Institute of Sport, 2019). Such
421 considerations can also place a premium on understanding personality differences and
422 associated possible risks, as illustrated by the preceding quote.

423 Personality assessment can be an invaluable tool in identifying and then working with
424 an introverted performer to help them cope with a long overseas tour away from family and
425 friends or an extroverted performer with a long-term injury cope with the potential isolation
426 of injury rehabilitation. It is through such application that the increased focus on mental
427 health seems to be also helping to increase interest in personality assessment.

428 **Organizational Experience**

429 The fourth theme reflects the positive influence that personal experience of working in
430 a large, high-performance sport organization can have on SPCs perceptions of personality
431 assessment. By way of introduction, consider the reflections of a senior SPC working in a
432 large high-performance organization on a conversation he had with his (non-psychologist)
433 line manager:

434 You'll bring in this psychologist they act like a counselor, this psychologist they ...
435 want to be next to me ... on the field, this psychologist says ... that they only ever
436 work one to one with athletes ... [So] the first thing we had to do was create some
437 common principles of work that went across everyone, even though people would
438 have their own approaches ... We needed some common things that connected
439 everybody ... that meant some common tools as well (SPC 10)

440 This quote introduces two of the associated sub-themes, with the first being *Exposure*.
441 Organizational psychology literature articulates the very widespread application of
442 personality psychometrics by commercial human resources professionals (e.g., Bailey, 2017).
443 Therefore, an increasing connection between organizational psychology and sport psychology

444 has very likely been a contributory factor in the increasing use of personality psychometrics
445 in sport (Collins & Cruickshank, 2017). So, if a SPC has experience of working in a large
446 high-performance sport organization then they are highly likely to have had significant
447 exposure to personality assessment tools.

448 The above quote also illustrates the second sub-theme, as one of the reasons such tools
449 are appreciated in these environments is that they provide a degree of *Consistency* in the
450 client experience. Indeed, such tools are credited by some with helping to compensate for
451 philosophical, therapeutic or practical differences between SPCs.

452 The third sub-theme explores the influence of *Resource* availability on perceptions of
453 personality assessment in such large organizations. As one SPC explained,

454 ... the four-day accreditation is just your entry point and then with good supervision
455 from your line manager [you can better] understand how to ... make it stick and work
456 in a sport. We've come up with our own resources ... that are adapted to the different
457 sports ... you'd have a sport-specific presentation that you could go and deliver or
458 tweak for your sport ... So, there's lots of intellectual ... property (SPC 2)

459 Resource availability is a key enabler to such tools being used extensively. Financially, large
460 organizations have the scale to enable the significant ongoing costs of personality assessment,
461 as well as additional investment in bespoke training resources that consolidate the applied
462 knowledge built up by multiple SPCs practical experiences,

463 The final sub-theme captures the potential benefits of utilizing personality assessment
464 tools when working with fellow *Support Staff* in large organizations. One SPC with an
465 English Premier League soccer club described how the outputs from use of a personality
466 assessment tool are used to enable tailoring of service delivery by the physio during injury
467 rehabilitation:

468 ... it's all put on a little trump card. So ... they're writing a rehab plan. Well actually
469 this injured player likes to know all the details. They want to know what's happening,
470 when's happening, how they're going to do something ... They like routines, that's
471 fine. Where you could have someone else that you've got to keep it different all the
472 time. If you keep the same mundane routine ... you're going to lose them (SPC 8)
473 This approach of using such tools to systemically impact via other support staff, such as
474 coaches, strength and conditioning coaches or physiotherapists, seems to be the most
475 common. However sometimes the tools are also used directly with the staff themselves, such
476 as SPC1 who cited personal experience during an Olympic Games in which using such tools
477 helped mitigate conflict between support staff that could otherwise have had potentially
478 severe repercussions for the athletes.

479 **Innovation**

480 The final theme explores the view of some SPCs that the use of personality assessment
481 in applied sport psychology is starting to evolve in a significant way. This development is
482 perceived to have a stronger potential to help directly with individual athletic performance.
483 The first of two sub-themes, *Evolutionary*, is so-called as a descriptor for the profiling tool
484 Spotlight (Mindflick, 2022) when compared to other 'similar' tools. As one highly
485 experienced SPC explained,

486 So when I first started I think [personality assessment] was more: yes, learn to
487 understand the athlete as a person and you understand about personality traits and
488 things but you don't make it kind of part of the practice in terms of how you then
489 work...so now [after having used it] I would think about personality in a way that
490 might help me understand why that person feels under pressure [and] how I might use
491 that in our practice (SPC 4)

492 When probed as to how their perceptions, based on many years of applied and
493 academic experience, had been changed the same SPC explained that it was because both
494 behavior and mindset were considered by the Spotlight tool, and real emphasis was placed on
495 the option performers have to shift depending on their situation. Continuing this line of
496 thought another SPC explained why they felt the tool was genuinely different:

497 I think one of the limitations ... is just how significantly people change in context.
498 And I think Spotlight, to an extent, overcomes that. Because it looks at stuff around
499 extroversion, conscientiousness, thinking and feeling but then it also almost layers
500 over the top of that Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory. So, how sensitive people are to
501 threats and rewards which goes a long way to explaining differences in behavior I
502 think (SPC 6)

503 Spotlight is primarily centred on identifying individual preferences in terms of
504 behavioral style and mindset (Mindflick, 2019). Behavioral style is summarised in a colours-
505 based visually similar way to Insights Discovery, although it is theoretically underpinned by
506 the five-factor model (McCrae & Costa, 2008) rather than Jungian psychodynamics
507 (Beauchamp et al., 2005). What is genuinely more evolutionary however is the mindset
508 element, which is summarised via the COPE model (Contained, Optimistic, Prudent,
509 Engaged) and theoretically underpinned by reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST). RST is a
510 biological model of personality, originally known as Gray's behavioral inhibition system
511 theory of anxiety (Gray, 1982). It is based on the premise that there are individual differences
512 in the responsiveness of basic brain systems to reinforcing and punishing stimuli and further
513 that these differences underpin anxiety and impulsivity. In its updated form (rRST: Gray &
514 McNaughton, 2000), it has underpinned a line of research exploring mental toughness and
515 personality in sport that would appear to have been potentially formative to this application
516 (Hardy et al., 2014). From an SPC perspective, it does seem that philosophically,

517 theoretically and practically Spotlight deserves to be described as a evolution versus the
518 status quo, with the practical advantage further reinforced by the comment of another SPC
519 following their initial experiences with the tool:

520 ...it feels that you can 'box' people less and blame colours less ... It feels it's more
521 changeable, flexible, you see the strengths of all of them and the willingness to
522 change or adapt to flex. People seem to see that more (SPC 9)

523 If Spotlight is best described as evolutionary then another innovation, whereby
524 personality assessment has been used to help guide bespoke, individualized performance
525 improvement interventions, seems genuinely *Revolutionary*, providing the inspiration for the
526 name of the final sub-theme. By way of introduction, one of the SPC collaborators in the
527 work explained:

528 I've been involved in some exploratory studies around using a combination of
529 psychometrics with some physiological responses ... and some other fundamental
530 psychology-like experiments, effectively to explore decision making and response
531 times under pressure (SPC 7)

532 This applied project was run in conjunction with the Institute for the Psychology of Elite
533 Performance at Bangor University. It focused on enabling individuals playing a team sport in
534 an elite environment to cope more effectively under pressure. The same SPC, a collaborator
535 in this program, explained how they believed these exploratory studies were genuinely
536 different to the mainstream personality assessment referred to previously:

537 All similar tools. All designed around that self-awareness and understanding
538 behavioral preferences, behavioral styles and creating a common framework or a
539 common language to support and enhance the relationships that take place within a
540 system... [whereas this had] a different objective in terms of, yes trying to understand
541 personality in terms of what makes someone tick. ... helps us understand their

542 experiences of, and responses to, pressure and then being able to tailor interventions
543 or support programs (SPC 7)

544 This work appears deliberately bespoke and prepared to embrace the almost inevitable
545 associated complexity. The lead SPC for this program was also interviewed and provided
546 more detail on both the overall rationale and the detail:

547 ... the innovative bit is bringing all these ... multi-faceted measures together ... we
548 measure threat and reward sensitivity, we measure extraversion, measure
549 psychoticism, we measure socially-oriented and self-oriented perfectionism, we
550 measure narcissism (both grandiose narcissism and hypersensitive narcissism) ... And
551 then we measure a load of psych skills as well around emotional control, we measure
552 movement self-consciousness ... And then when you mix all that together ... we try
553 and predict certain processes (SPC 6)

554 Three observations are immediately apparent. The first is a reaffirmation of the
555 potential for RST (Pickering & Corr, 2008) to enable innovation in performance psychology.
556 The second recalls contemporary efforts to strengthen the theoretical basis for trait impact on
557 performance discussed earlier. The big five was identified as being potentially insufficient
558 and, to compensate, an associated opportunity was identified to go beyond it and explore
559 other personality variables that have a very strong theoretical basis for performance impact
560 (Roberts & Woodman, 2017). This program seems to be operating under the same premise,
561 exploring grandiose narcissism (Roberts et al., 2018), hypersensitive narcissism (Roberts et
562 al., 2015), psychoticism (Watson & Pulford, 2004), socially oriented perfectionism (Dunn et
563 al., 2002) and self-oriented perfectionism (Hill & Appleton, 2011). The third is that the lead
564 SPC regards the real innovation to be in the process of analyzing, integrating and then
565 interpreting the vast amount of data that was no doubt generated, explaining:

566 So, there's ... quite different reasons that, with heightened scrutiny and heightened
567 expectation, people's behavior might change. Which is kind of the new bit ... other
568 lead research around performance under pressure [has posed questions such as] is it
569 because of reinvestment or not? Is it something to do with cognitive processing or
570 not? [etc] Whereas this is [saying] it could be any of them – the skill is in thinking
571 who is more prone to what based on individual differences (SPC 6)

572 So, the team adopted the working assumption that any of a list of pre-identified
573 'psychological processes' could be likely to inhibit an individual's performance under
574 pressure. They identified which was most likely for each individual by collecting and
575 analyzing data from personality testing, psychological skills testing, biofeedback and
576 behavioral observations and then proactively implemented suitably tailored interventions.
577 While the term 'process' was used in some cases, it simply implied a trait behaviour. The
578 lead SPC also then shared summary detail of the way in which the efficacy of this
579 intervention was evaluated:

580 We did a big randomized controlled study with eight [teams]; with four control
581 [teams] and four intervention [teams]. And we found over a two-year period that the
582 individualized approach, the players that adopted the individualized approach
583 performed better in the perceived high-pressure moments than those that just did
584 normal simulation training (SPC 6)

585 While these are impressive results, it is important to note that they were enabled by
586 expert academic support and were bespoke in nature so it may be unrealistic to expect
587 widespread reapplication across elite sport any time in the near future. Nonetheless it does
588 also seem that this is a significant step change in the use of personality assessment in sport,
589 clearly strengthening the link with performance, and so does have exciting potential.

590 **General Discussion**

591 Sly et al. (2020) recently discussed the rapidly changing face of sport psychology. The
592 field of personality assessment in sport was not included in this analysis, but maybe should be
593 in future. If so, four factors that this research has noted will be crucial. First, today's socio-
594 cultural environment is more conducive to such work than it has been historically. Second,
595 the increasing influence of organizational psychology and requirement to work systemically
596 requires more systemic approaches. Third, the contemporary SPC who chooses to use
597 personality assessment is likely to be using it for developmental purposes. Fourth, the tools
598 are changing in meaningful ways, potentially strengthening the link to performance and so
599 opening up new possibilities for SPCs to add value to their clients. While it is too early to
600 predict a fully-fledged renaissance of interest in personality in sport, these are exciting
601 developments that at least warrant attention from across the SPC community.

602 The present study has both strengths and limitations. One strength is that it is relatively
603 unencumbered by debates regarding theory, choosing instead to focus on the real world
604 applied experiences of a strong sample of contemporary SPCs. As regards limitations, it
605 should be noted that this study was conducted exclusively in the UK, so the themes identified
606 might not be representative of SPCs experiences elsewhere. International replication would
607 enhance efforts to develop culturally competent practice (Mellalieu, 2017). Follow-up studies
608 complementing the still relatively limited case study literature would also provide more
609 diversity and depth for the SPC community to draw on.

610 **Conclusion**

611 A review of the extant literature revealed that both research and practical application of
612 personality assessment in sport has had a checkered history, certainly when compared to the
613 salience of personality assessment in mainstream society. This present study however has
614 revealed a more positive, if still nuanced, interest in its practical application by SPCs, neatly
615 summarised under five themes: Effective Practice, Perceived Impact, Societal Movements,

616 Organizational Experience and Innovation. While personality assessment remains a
617 polarising subject in applied sport psychology, its application is seen as legitimate provided
618 high professional standards of Effective Practice are maintained. Used appropriately,
619 traditional tools such as MBTI and Insights Discovery can deliver beneficial Perceived
620 Impact, by increasing client self-awareness and facilitating improved group cohesion.
621 Societal Movements, such as an increased acceptance of difference, fluidity and the
622 importance of mental health, mean that the general environment SPCs operate in is
623 potentially more conducive to the use of such tools than has been the case historically. This is
624 particularly the case for those with Organizational Experience of working in large high-
625 performance organisations. Finally, this study has revealed evidence of real Innovation, both
626 evolutionary and revolutionary, which is starting to change the way personality assessment is
627 used by SPCs, specifically by strengthening the link to performance. The research
628 underpinning these innovations is making a real difference to the utility of personality
629 assessment for SPCs and we would encourage researchers to consider expanding efforts that
630 focus on such developmental capabilities, as opposed to the more traditional focus on
631 prediction.

632 We conclude by offering the following professional-practice recommendations:

633 Training and career path: SPCs are encouraged to seek exposure to large, high-
634 performance organizations, as these provide potentially the best context in which to
635 learn how to fully utilise personality assessment tools.

636 Be open-minded: SPCs should consider, or reconsider, the potential for personality
637 assessment tools as part of their professional practice. Not only is the environment
638 becoming more conducive but genuine innovation is leading to tools with greater utility
639 than those they may have encountered in the past.

640 Bespoke application: SPCs should also be increasingly open to opportunities to
641 individualize the use of personality assessment to maximise developmental potential
642 with their clients.

643

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