An Exploration into the Provision and Delivery of Sport Psychology within Professional Football Academies in England.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bournemouth University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Bournemouth University

June 2025

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Sport psychology is increasingly recognised as a vital element of athlete development, enhancing performance, mental resilience, and well-being, particularly in football. The English Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), introduced in 2012, mandated the inclusion of psychological support within youth football academies. However, the full integration of sport psychology into these academies remains a challenge, with several barriers hindering its widespread implementation. This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore the current provision of sport psychology in elite youth football academies in England. The study examines the perspectives of key stakeholders, including academy staff, coaches, and players, to identify both the barriers and facilitators of integration. Data was collected through two phases of semi-structured interviews, complemented by an autoethnographic account drawn from five seasons of the researcher's practice at a Premier League Academy. Study one draws on interviews with sport psychology practitioners across academies, revealing key barriers to integration, including limited coach understanding, resource constraints, and role ambiguity. Study two, involving coaches and support staff, highlights both obstacles and enablers, such as leadership support and a growing appreciation of sport psychology's value. The third phase, an autoethnographic account of the researcher's applied experience at the Premier League Academy, offers reflective insight into the practical challenges of part-time delivery, exclusion from decision-making processes, and navigating a male-dominated environment. Despite these constraints, the researcher contributed to resilience-based interventions and psychologically informed workshops. Collectively, the findings highlight cultural, structural, and relational barriers to integration, while identifying opportunities to embed psychological support more effectively through improved collaboration, education, and communication.

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Acknowledgements

There are a number of people I would like to thank for their contribution towards the completion of this thesis. First, I would like to thank all participants for their involvement in the data collection process and for sharing their experiences with me. I would like to show gratitude to my supervisors, Prof Tim Rees, Dr Amanda Wilding, and Dr Emma Kavanagh for their insight and support, you are all inspirations, and I cannot thank you enough for your guidance throughout this process.

I would also like to thank the Premier League Academy for match funding this PhD and welcoming me in as part of the academy family. I will be forever grateful.

I wish to thank my family and friends (you know who you are) for your continuous support and understanding, you are all incredible. In particular, I would like to give my ultimate gratitude to my Mum - without your support, I would not be where I am today. Thank you for continuing to push me and motivate me in everything I do. Mum, thank you for always being there, unconditionally, through my highest points, and my lowest.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to dedicate this piece of work to two very special men who sadly cannot be here to see me across the finish line, my Dad, and my Grandad. Although you are not here now, you were there at the start of my university journey and never stopped believing in me. Grandad, thank you for always keeping me anchored and showing me what hard work and determination really means. Dad, I continue to look to you, in times of difficulty and times of happiness, knowing that you will help guide me in the right direction. I hope I have made you both proud.

Declaration

Some of the work within this thesis has been published/currently under review and/or has been presented at national/international conferences, as listed below:

Publication

An Examination of the Experiences of Practitioners Delivering Sport Psychology Services within English Premier League Soccer Academies.
Sports **2022**, *10*(4), 60; **https://doi.org/10.3390/sports10040060**.

In Preparation

An Exploration of the Provision of Psychological Support at an English Elite Football.
Projected Journal: Journal of Applied Sport Psychology ***2025***

Conferences

Exploring the Experiences of Sport Psychologists Working Within Elite Youth Football in England; The Annual Post Graduate Research Conference, Bournemouth University – 2019.

Exploring the Experiences of Sport Psychologists Working Within Elite Youth Football in England; FEPSAC, Padova – 2022.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1. Rationale and Background

Professional football is a sporting game watched and played by millions of people worldwide each year (Rathi et al. 2020). For example, the 2022 World Cup reached five billion viewers, with the final alone attracting around 1.5 billion viewers (FIFA, 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK), professional football leads the way of sport. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Youth Development Academy system (the key development environment for young players in England) contracts over 1000 young players (age 9-16) each year (Platts 2012; Kelner 2021). However, it is estimated that only 10% of players who receive a youth scholarship (at U17's) will be awarded a professional contract at 18, and only 1 in 4 of those players will make it in the professional game beyond the age of 23 (Anderson and Miller 2011).

Henriksen et al. (2010) define talent development environments as the immediate surroundings in which an athlete's personal development occurs, the interrelations within these settings, and the broader organisational culture of the club or team. To support youth development within such environments, the English Premier League (EPL) introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012, backed by £320 million (Horrocks et al., 2016). Its primary aim was to "increase the number and quality of... [English]... players gaining professional contracts... and playing first team football at the highest level" (Premier League, 2011, p.12). To achieve this, the EPPP established a structured academy system offering expert coaching, education, and support, including a mandated psychological component. However, despite this requirement, the integration of sport psychology remains inconsistent (Konter et al., 2019) and is

not always well received (Champ et al., 2018). Moreover, limited research has examined how the psychological elements of the EPPP are interpreted and delivered in practice. To address this gap, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the provision of sport psychology within elite youth football academies across England.

1.2. Relevance and Importance of the Thesis

The following section will discuss the importance and relevance of this thesis, and the way in which it will broaden our knowledge of the provision of sport psychology in English academy football.

Currently, there is very little literature regarding the sport psychology framework of the EPPP. Although the EPPP mandates the inclusion of psychological support as part of its wider development model (Premier League, 2011), the specific psychological expectations remain under-defined. The framework outlines general goals such as improving the number and quality of home-grown players and enhancing player development across multiple domains, yet the delivery and integration of psychological support is often inconsistent. The EPPP's psychological requirements are included within a broader set of performance aims, such as increasing playing and coaching time, improving measurement and quality assurance, and encouraging strategic investment (Premier League, 2011). However, guidance around how to operationalise psychological support within the daily academy environment remains vague and subject to interpretation. Despite psychology's formal presence in the framework since 2012, its integration remains a challenge (Konter et al., 2019), and the discipline is not always positively received by academy staff (Champ et al., 2018).

Additionally, there is limited research describing: (a) the experience of applied sport psychology practitioners working in the sport, and (b) the understanding and provision of sport psychology within elite football (Champ et al., 2018). According to Larsen and Engell (2013), one explanation for the scepticism surrounding the implementation of sport psychology services may be because football is so widespread and familiar to the masses, resulting in those working in the sport believing they are experts in anything that is covered within it. They suggest that previously, both coaches and players have been ignorant of the existence of sport psychology services, which has caused further difficulty in integrating the discipline into the football environment.

Since the introduction of the EPPP, each English football academy is audited every three years and must provide evidence of individualised coaching interventions that address each player's physical, technical, tactical, social, and psychological development. Subsequently, each academy is then awarded a categorisation of 1 to 4 (1 being the highest), which dictates the level of provision that is expected of them. As part of the EPPP guidelines, academies must provide a sport science and medicine programme to all players at the academy. Such programmes include physical testing and measurement, physiotherapy, and psychological support. However, as outlined by Champ et al. (2018), there is limited research evaluating how these psychological services are actually delivered, how practitioners experience their roles, and how psychological knowledge is communicated and applied across academy settings.

This thesis seeks to address these gaps by examining the provision of sport psychology within elite youth football academies in England. It investigates the practical realities of delivery through the perspectives of psychologists, coaches,

and support staff, alongside autoethnographic insight from the researcher's experience in a Category 3 academy. The aim is to inform both theoretical understanding and practical integration of sport psychology within the academy system.

1.3. Thesis Objectives

The underpinning aim of this thesis is to explore the provision, delivery, and experiences of sport psychology within elite youth football academies across England. This will be delivered through three main objectives:

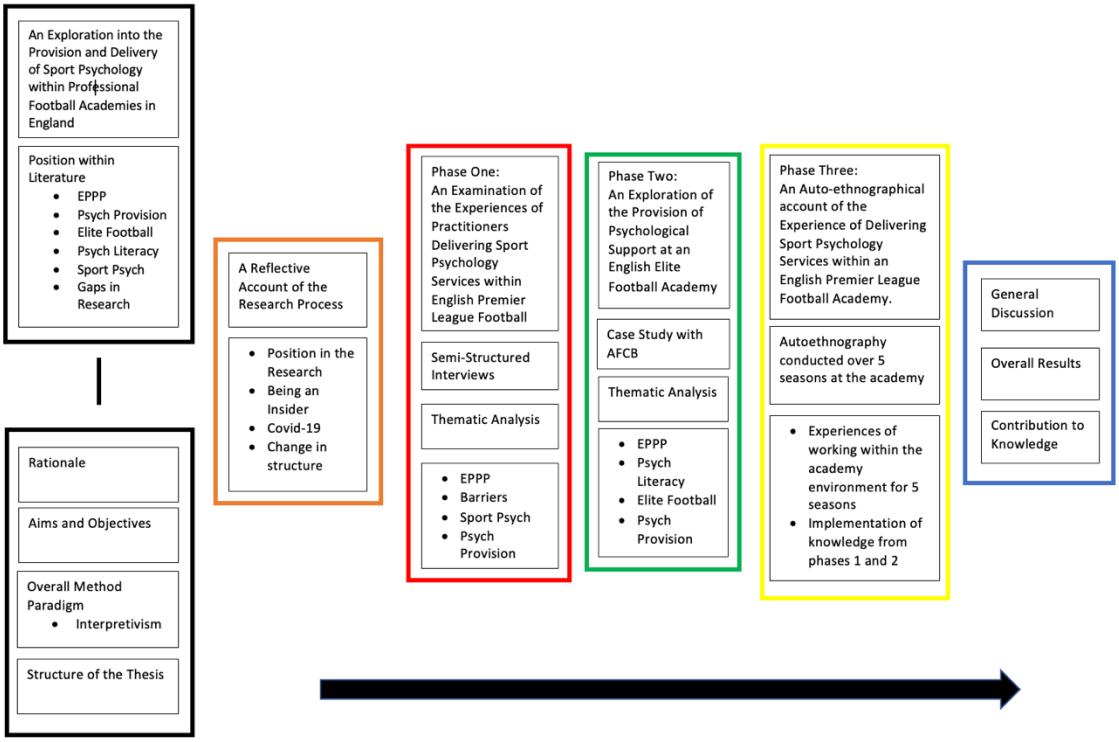
1. Explore the perceptions and experiences of sport psychologists working within the elite, English academies, through the use of a qualitative methods design, in order to understand the nature and implementation of sport psychology within the auspices of the EPPP.
2. Critically assess the provision of sport psychology within an elite youth football academy from multiple perspectives (coaches and support staff), using a qualitative methods design, to explore current perceptions and attitudes of psychology.
3. Present an auto-ethnographical account of the lived experiences of working within a premier league academy delivering sport psychology services.

1.4. Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised into eight chapters, the first being the introduction. Secondly, the literature review outlines the current position of each area of interest. The methodology is then subdivided, firstly it outlines the theoretical paradigm that underpins the research, before discussing the qualitative approach and use of semi structured interviews, finally, it presents the aims and objectives

of the thesis. Chapter 4 provides a detailed reflection of the research process, including the position of the researcher as an insider, and the impact of Covid-19 on the research. The thesis is then separated into two phases of data collection, chapter 5, and chapter 6, these are presented as individual papers. Each paper contains its own introduction, literature review, methodology, findings/discussion, and conclusion; chapter 7 then provides an auto-ethnographical account of working within a premier league academy and the experience of delivering sport psychology services. Chapter 8 discusses of the overall findings from chapters 5, 6 and 7 and finally, concludes the thesis with reference to the practical and theoretical implications of the research, as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

Figure 1: Structure of the Thesis.



CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

This chapter seeks to explore the current academic climate in relation to the study of psychology provision within the elite youth context, more specifically elite youth football. The chapter will present the existing literature surrounding nine key topics of interest: 1) The academy football environment, 2) The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), 3) Sport psychology: what is it and why is it important, 4) Psychological provisions in elite youth sport, 5) Psychological provision in UK football academies, 6) Current implementation of sport psychology, 7) Psychological literacy, 8) Service delivery, 9) The experiences of sport psychology practitioners. This will provide literary context and foundation in which the research will build upon, whilst also establishing any gaps in the literature that this research can address.

2.1. Context

Different researchers offer different definitions of the term elite (McAuley et al. 2022; Rees et al. 2016; Reeves et al. 2018), and these interpretations can vary quite significantly, from “elite” under 9 athletes (Kirkland and O’Sullivan 2018) to athletes competing at the senior international level (Johnston et al. 2018), with terms such as “super-elite” being increasingly common (Jones et al. 2018). This inconsistency can be potentially problematic for researchers as there does not appear to be one universal definition of “elite” that can be applied across the different sporting contexts (Williams et al. 2017). Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, the term “elite” will be associated with talent development environments, specifically academy football. Whereas the term professional will be used to describe those players who gain contracts to play for the football clubs first team or under 23s team (Anderson and McGuire 2010).

Professional football clubs are described by some, as ‘service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment and financial profit’ (Relvas et al. 2010, p.165). As enterprises, professional football clubs must maintain a high standard of competitiveness, both in a sporting context and a financial one, in order to be successful within the ever-expanding sport industry (Slack and Parent 2006; Relvas et al 2010). The elite football environment receives significant amounts of generated revenue (Fletcher and Arnold 2011; McDougal et al. 2015) (such as money accumulated from ticket sales) which can then be used to aid the identification and development of excellence. Access to such revenue results in the elite football environment being surrounded by top class equipment, state of the art facilities, and a large body of highly qualified and trained staff, which make up the complex club environment. Not only do these environments provide services to football teams, but also act as structured, money making, businesses (Larsen and Engell 2013; McDougal 2015; Larsen 2017).

It is widely recognised (e.g. Champ et al. 2018; Cushion and Jones 2006; Eubank et al. 2014; McDougall et al. 2015) that the elite sport, and specifically elite football, environment is highly competitive and renowned for being ruthless and success orientated. Subsequently, this results in the progression of youth players also being particularly difficult. Each year, over 1,000 boys (ages 9-16) across England are awarded a contract with a professional football academy (Champ et al. 2018), however, of these numbers, only 10% of academy players who gain a scholarship at age 16 will then also gain a professional contract at age 18 (Anderson and McGuire 2010). This statistic, alone, demonstrates the

ruthless nature of elite football and the pressure that is placed on young players hoping to reach first team level.

To date, previous research appears to focus upon the characteristics of those who excel in sport (Williams and Krane 2001; Gould, Dieffenbach and Moffett 2002; Baker and Horton 2004; MacNamara, et al. 2010; Mills et al. 2014); however, it is evident that less interest has been given to the systems of the development environments in which the talent development process is embedded in (Martindale et al. 2005; Mills et al. 2014). Therefore, a wider understanding of such development environments, in this case academy football, is required.

3.2. The Academy Football Environment

Contemporary football, at the most elite levels, has become significantly more complex during recent decades (Jonker et al. 2019), due to initiatives such as the EPPP (Rampinini et al. 2007; Heidari et al. 2019), for example, the game has become faster and players are committing to increasing numbers of training hours in order to meet the requirements of the game (Jonker et al. 2019). Previously, the focus of academic and applied research was primarily focused on the identification of talent (Fransen and Güllich 2019; MacNamara et al. 2010; Martindale et al. 2007; Mills et al. 2014). However, there is now significantly more attention being given to understanding the talent development environment in which the athletes' development is taking place (e.g. football academies), and the process of how athletes develop. That is, there has been increased research examining the environmental factors of effective development of the athlete, such as environment (physical, social-cultural, and socioeconomic factors), individuals (those who may have positive or negative impacts on the athletes development),

and provisions (all talent development services and programmes) (Li et al. 2014); this recent exploration is due to the idea that the environmental, individual relations, and provision factors are the most controllable within the development process of elite athletes (Collins and MacNamara 2012; Hall et al. 2019; Li et al. 2014; Mills et al. 2014; Pankhurst et al. 2013).

For example, a study by Mills et al. (2014) examined the development environments of UK football academies. By conducting a Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ) with 50 elite players (aged 16-18), they gained perceptions of the quality of the learning environment at a crucial stage of a player's development from youth to professional level football. The areas of the questionnaire included seven factors: long-term development focus; quality preparation; communication; understanding the athlete; support network; challenging and supportive environment; long-term development fundamentals. Mills et al. (2014) found that overall, the quality of the elite player development environments was of a good level, particularly in areas of coaching, organisation and sport-related support. However, areas such as key stakeholder relationships, athlete understanding, and links to senior progression were of somewhat less quality. This suggests that elite high-performance environments may not actually be meeting the developmental needs of young players, thus proving the need for future research on the key processes and mechanisms that are essential for effective player development to take place within elite environments (Mills et al. 2014).

Henriksen et al. (2010) provided a holistic definition of talent development environments, they stated that talent development environments comprise an athlete's immediate surroundings where personal development takes place, the

interrelations between these surroundings, and the broader context in which these surroundings are embedded; the organisational culture of the sports club or team. When considering talent development environments, it is important to go beyond that of simply physical development; environments must be created to support the holistic development of athletes, acting as a form of 'life coaching' (Beckmann and Beckmann-Waldenmayer 2019, p.283) that develops the whole athlete.

When discussing the talent development environments, more specifically elite sport academies, it is important to explore the position of sport psychology within this domain; This is not surprising as previously MacNamara et al. (2010) suggested that, due to the complexity of the talent development process, psychological factors should underpin the ability that have to develop into top-class performers. Furthermore, they suggest that talent development programmes should place greater emphasis on the expansion and application of psychological skills, in order for athletes to develop and perform at their optimum ability (MacNamara 2010).

While it is stated that the psychological characteristics of an athlete are considered when recruiting athletes into a development programme, the overpowering aspect is that of the athlete's physical state and ability, and current performance (MacNamara et al. 2010). That is not to say that the physicality of an athlete is not important, it is just problematic when other (psychological) concepts such as decision making, communication, team interaction and tactical awareness are neglected (Burgess and Naughton 2010), particularly when it is universally accepted that the psychological factors are characteristics of those

athletes who are competing at the most elite levels (Gould et al. 2002; MacNamara et al. 2010; Williams and Krane 2001).

Kingston (2020) explored the motivational climate of the academy football environment, by using the TARGET (ask, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, and time) framework to assess 64 training sessions, at a category 2 academy, across a 7-month observation period. They found that TARGET does provide a meaningful framework which allows for the evaluation of the conditions relating to the motivational climate. It was explained that, for coaches, creating an environment that both, prepares players for the realities of professional football, as well as facilitates the development of academy players is a challenge in itself. This demonstrates the complex needs of the academy environment and balancing a multitude of objectives, whether they be deliberate or inadvertent in the attempt to create a positive performance climate.

2.3. The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP)

The purpose of the EPPP was to "increase the number and quality of . . . [English] . . . players gaining professional contracts . . . and playing first team football at the highest level" (The Premier League 2011, p.12). This was to be achieved through six fundamental principles (critical success factors): a) increase the number and quality of home grown players gaining professional contracts and playing first team football, b) create more time for players to be coached and play, c) improve coaching provision, d) implement a system of effective measurement and quality assurance, e) positively influence strategic investment into the academy system, f) seek to implement significant gains in every aspect of player development (The Premier League 2011, p.12).

Although the overall vote was in favour of introducing the EPPP into the academies across the Premier League, there were also a number of concerns (Eurosport, 2011). A main concern was that the EPPP was going to cost lower league clubs a significant amount of money, causing a number of them to close their academies, just as Yeovil did soon after the EPPP's introduction (Doidge 2013). Another concern was that the requirements set out in the EPPP would take too much time away from players' game time. It was said that although the EPPP was working towards the development of UK youth players, the fact that the players had less time simply playing the game, may cause the exact opposite effect (Soccerstore 2014). Nonetheless, despite these concerns, the EPPP was introduced in 2011 and continues to frame the development of English youth footballers today.

In 2012, the Premier League, as part of the EPPP, made it mandatory for all academy clubs to employ a Head of Sports Science and Medicine, who is be responsible for managing the delivery of the sports science and medicine programme across the academy; a Lead Sport Scientist, responsible for co-ordinating the sport sciences services across the academy and reporting back to the head of sport science; a Senior Sports Physiotherapist, who is responsible for co-ordinating the physiotherapy services across the academy and reporting back to the head of medicine; a minimum of two match analysts (at Category 1 and 2 level), who are responsible for analysing, coach determined, aspects of performance of the teams and individual players across the academy; a Head of Education to oversee all education services provided to the players within the academy (Premier League, 2012). Previous regulations required clubs to employ only one physiotherapist to be responsible for the medical care of young players

(The FA 1997). In addition, there were no rules or guidelines concerning sport science and the employment of a sport scientist, or any measurements for effective practice. However, the current EPPP guidelines state that all academies must have a sport science and medicine programme available to all players within that academy. The EPPP online document (2011) requires the sport science and medicine programme to be holistic and multidisciplinary, providing a number of areas to each of the academy players: physical testing and measurement, physiotherapy, medical services such as injury treatment and nutrition, performance analysis, and psychology (Premier League 2011).

At the point of writing, the Premier League and only one study has suggested that English football academies are delivering psychology in accordance with the requirements of the EPPP (Premier League 2012; Steptoe, Barker and Harwood 2016). That is, they deliver the topics that are required by the EPPP. However, this does not make the guidance efficient or effective, as there appears to be no set criteria or measurements for the delivery of sport psychology within the EPPP, it is likely that each academy will be delivering these topics in a different way and using in house strategies and interventions to do so. Therefore, limiting the quality and effectiveness of the academies' psychology programmes.

Despite the lack of attention given to the psychological aspects of development, within the EPPP document, compared with other disciplines (e.g. sport science, coaching, medicine), the fact that psychology is included in the EPPP framework suggests that psychology is progressively becoming more accepted in the footballing context. However, it must be noted that there is still

progress to be made before psychology is as accepted as other disciplines in football (Roe and Parker 2016; Tears, Chesterton and Wijnbergen 2018).

Despite the increasing recognition of the role psychological support plays in athlete development, there remains a distinct lack of research critically examining the psychological framework of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). While the EPPP was designed to create a holistic development model for academy players, its psychological pillar is both under-theorised and inconsistently implemented across academy contexts. Notably, Roe and Parker (2016) provide one of the few studies engaging with this dimension, examining the use of chaplaincy within a Premier League academy as part of its EPPP framework. Their work positions the chaplain as a potentially influential figure in supporting the 'non-performance' elements of player development, suggesting an expanded view of psychological care that incorporates emotional and spiritual wellbeing. However, the specificity of the context and the limited scope of the study reduce its broader applicability, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how psychological frameworks are operationalised across academies of differing resource levels and organisational structures.

Similarly, Jones (2018) critically evaluates the EPPP's support for mental wellbeing across academy categories, identifying several key psychological stressors such as injury, parental expectations, and peer dynamics—all of which place considerable strain on young players. The study recognises that while certain academies have implemented resilience-based strategies, including psychoeducational workshops, reflective practice, and inclusive protocols for injured players, the uptake and effectiveness of these interventions are highly inconsistent. In particular, Jones highlights that academies in Categories 3 and 4

often face pronounced structural limitations, such as reduced funding, fewer specialised staff, and the delegation of welfare roles to personnel with limited psychological training. These findings suggest that, although the EPPP has conceptually elevated the importance of mental wellbeing, there is a persistent disconnect between policy ambition and practical delivery, especially outside the top-tier academy settings.

Crucially, the current literature lacks comprehensive analysis of how the psychological components of the EPPP are experienced, delivered, and sustained across academy systems—particularly at the Category 3 level, where resources and access to sport psychology provision are most constrained. There is also a notable absence of research that foregrounds the lived experiences of both practitioners and coaches in attempting to deliver psychologically informed support within such settings. This absence represents a significant gap in both academic knowledge and practical understanding, especially given the EPPP's stated commitment to holistic player development.

In terms of sport science testing, all academies must provide medical and physical screening, anthropometric assessments, fitness testing, movement screening, and maturation measurements (category 4 academies are not expected to conduct maturation measurements). However, only category 1 academies are expected to provide psychological profiling and physical exertion testing, and there are no set criteria for conducting these tests; this is problematic due to the freedom within the requirements, specifically the way in which psychological testing is conducted may differ in each academy causing the results to be invalid (Fischer and Milfont 2010). Additionally, the way in which the psychological results are interpreted may also differ due to the lack of guidance

relating to the way in which the testing should be conducted and explained (Fischer and Milfont 2010).

Moreover, the EPPP also suggests that clubs may want to also deliver psychological services to the club's youth players (ages under 12 – under 21), however, this is considered to be at the discretion of the Academy Manager. The details stipulate minimal requirements in that category 4 academies need to provide education on stress management, lifestyle management, focussing, and imaging to all players U17-U21; Category 3 academies must include education around stress management, lifestyle management for all youth players, and focussing and imaging for U17-U21 players; and Category 1 and 2 academies must include education on stress management and lifestyle management for all youth players, focussing for U15-U21 players, and imaging for U17-U21 players. Additionally, the EPPP states the minimum qualifications required for the role of delivering the psychological support. Individuals within the role are expected to have at least an MSc in Psychology or Sport Psychology and must be registered on either the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) or the British Psychology Society (BPS) accreditation pathway evidencing, a commitment to drive up standards as recognised previously by researchers (Larsen 2017; Larsen and Engell 2013; McDougal 2015).

The EPPP vision promotes a multidisciplinary approach that is implemented and supported across departments, with the Sport Psychologist playing a key role in enhancing performance and providing age-appropriate support for player development. While there is often a clear—if sometimes implicit—emphasis on addressing the technical, tactical, and physical demands placed on young

players, academies do recognise the importance of developing the necessary psychological skills (Chandler et al. 2020).

The significance of a strong psychological foundation is reflected in the language embedded within academy culture, which often highlights qualities such as desire, courage, self-discipline, and a strong will to win. Players are also expected to demonstrate bravery, resilience, and mental toughness. However, despite this apparent clarity around the psychological attributes required for success, sport psychology practitioners frequently face a lack of structure and shared understanding when it comes to assessing and evaluating these key competencies (Chandler et al. 2020).This, together with the lack of guidance around the role of the psychological programmes, supports the fact that the psychological provisions for English football academies are still not to the standard of other disciplines within the EPPP. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted in order to establish the true psychological needs and provision in English football academies, thus enabling an update of the EPPP and the most effective way of providing psychological education and support delivery to elite youth footballers.

2.4. Sport Psychology: What is it and why is it important?

Although sport psychology is a widely adopted term, it often lacks a clear and consistent definition. This may be attributed to the broadness of the discipline, particularly as the term sport psychology covers both academic study and the practical application. Sport Psychology consists of many sub-disciplines such as exercise, research, performance, and applied. In order to understand these sub-disciplines, it is essential to firstly grasp the meaning of sport psychology as its own umbrella term: the study and application of the

psychological aspects underlying human movement (Gill and Reifsteck 2014). Alternatively, Gill and Williams (2008) and Gill et al. (2017) suggest sport psychology to be 'the scientific study of human behaviour in sport and exercise, as well as the practical application of that knowledge in physical activity settings' (p.6). Gill et al. (2017) do not simply identify the relevance of the psychological factors associated with sport but explain that the focus is on human behaviour and the way in which the research around human behaviour in sport and exercise is then applied to physical activity settings, in order to develop our understanding of sport psychology, both theoretically and practically. More recently, however, the terms sport psychology and exercise psychology have been used independently to add specificity to the definition to help distinguish between scholarly contributions and practical contributions (Horn and Smith 2018). Sport and exercise psychology differ due to the nature of sport versus exercise. Sport has a greater emphasis on performance and competition than exercise does, and their psychological goals mimic this; exercise psychology focuses on the positive health of the individual, whereas sport psychology focuses on the performance of the individual (Hays 2012; Portenga et al. 2017).

Differences in definitions may in part, therefore, be due to the number of disciplines that sit under the umbrella of sport psychology. The first being applied sport psychology, defined by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP, 2019) as transferring theory and research into the practical field in order to better educate athletes, parents, coaches and other fitness/sporting professionals about the psychological aspects relating to their chosen sport/activity. For the purpose of this research, reference to exercise psychology is being removed as it is not considered a topic of interest in relation to the current

objectives. One of the main aims of applied sport and exercise psychologists is to enhance involvement, performance and enjoyment within sport and exercise. Such definition is of importance to the current study due to the study's focus on the psychological provisions within a premier league academy, with particular attention given to the delivery of sport psychology by psychologists and coaches and whether this delivery is meeting the needs of the players at the academy.

A somewhat emerging facet of sport psychology is that of performance psychology. Hays (2012) places focus on performance psychology and understands it as helping individuals to perform better, with a higher consistency when excellence is of importance. Portenga et al. (2017) built upon this definition and proposed a more expansive explanation of performance psychology: 'Performance psychology is the study and application of psychological principles of human performance to help people consistently perform in the upper range of their capabilities and more thoroughly enjoy the performance process.' (p.52)

Within academic studies, sport psychology is best understood through the underlying aspects of human behaviour and thoughts. Definitions indicate sport psychology, applied and performance all seek to understand how best to help individual athletes, teams, and sport organisations perform at their optimum when faced with pressurised and challenging situations; this is achieved through evidence-based interventions which are supported by research data (Cogan 2019), thus increasing the likelihood of increasing performance (Portenga et al. 2017; Hays 2012; Gill, Williams and Reifsteck 2017; AASP, 2019; Cogan 2019; Horn and Smith, 2018; Gill and Reifsteck, 2014; Gross, 2005; Coleman, 2016).

According to Cotterill and Barker (2013), the profession of sport psychology continues to be accepted within the UK sport and exercise sector. Sport

psychology is still considered a young profession which, whilst being more widely accepted than in previous years, still faces challenges which are preventing it from developing into a universally well-established profession (Collins and Camin 2012; Portenga et al. 2017; Winter and Collins 2016). Specifically, Portenga et al. (2017) suggest a key issue to be the lack of shared understanding into what the practice of sport psychology includes and therefore the supervision and qualifications that are required of sport psychology practitioners.

Although there has been a significant increase in the level of interest in sport psychology, the job availability for sport psychology consultancy remains limited (Barker and Winter 2014). Barker and Winter (2014) explained that full-time sport psychology consultancy (SPC) roles will remain limited unless sport psychology is recognised and accepted by many more professionals, especially within the sporting world. Similarly, Cotterill (2017) stated that many sport psychology consultants are only being given short term contracts rather than being instated as part of the full-time staff. This seems to support the idea that psychology in sport is still being used as a 'quick fix' (Pain and Harwood 2004) rather than being incorporated into a progressive development plan. Mellalieu (2017) explains that because sport psychology is still considered as a recent profession, sports (in this case rugby union) do not often have a full-time sport psychology consultant on their payroll; therefore, coaches and athletes in these environments are not exposed to sport psychology or its service providers on a continual basis. This in turn contributes to a lack of understanding around sport psychology, what sport psychology consultants are, what their role is, and how they can enhance performance and well-being (Mellalieu 2017).

2.5. Psychological Provisions in Elite Youth Sport

A study by Hung et al. (2008) into the provision of sport psychology services to the Taiwan Archery Team in the lead up to the 2004 Olympic games, explained (sport) psychological provisions to be the application and delivery of sport psychology education, skills, and interventions to an athlete or team. They stated that the application experience itself can differ depending on the sport, the climate of sport science within that context, and the background of the coaches and athletes within it. For this reason, it is essential to understand the development environment in which the psychological provision is intended for. In support McDougal et al. (2015), previously stated that psychological provisions differ between elite and nonelite sporting environments due to the level of financial investment into elite sport compared to nonelite, meaning that elite teams such as English Premier League (EPL) football clubs have access to large numbers of staff (coaches, sport science and medicine, analysis, and organisational personnel), sophisticated facilities, and state of the art equipment. These elite environments are thus able to provide higher levels of sport psychology provisions, such as employing a full-time sport psychology consultant to provide psychological support to athletes throughout their career. However, it has been found that sport psychology has been better received within nonelite than elite sporting environments (Cruickshank and Collins 2013; McDougal et al. 2015); that is, sport psychology is better received within EPL football academies than it is at first team level.

Despite these general findings cross the football context, sport psychology has become increasingly recognised across the wider elite setting, with a large body of evidence showcasing the usefulness and benefit of sport psychology on athletic performance (Zakarejsek et al 2013). In recent years there has been

evidence of an increase in the number of sports adopting a formalised talent development approach within their elite sports clubs (Cotterill 2012; Cotterill 2018).

Additionally, more sports adopting psychological aspects into their training/development programmes, this creates a level of demand for sport psychology consultants to deliver education and skill development as desired by an organisation (Cotterill 2012). However, it is important to note that, there is still evidence that the psychological factors associated with talent development continue to be neglected compared to other disciplines such as sport science and medicine (Burgess and Naughton 2010; Collins and Camin 2012; MacNamara et al. 2010; Portenga et al. 2017; Winter and Collins 2016).

Following his study in 2012, Cotterill went onto explore the challenges, experiences and opportunities of psychologists working in an elite cricket environment (2018). A total of 12 sport psychology practitioners (8 male, 4 female) were interviewed in order to gain an insight into their roles at the club and their experiences of delivering sport psychology in elite cricket. Findings from the interviews presented 7 core themes: the role, perceptions of the psychologist, consultation approach, limiting factors, first-team environment, challenges faced, and proposed changes. Those interviewed stated that their role as a practitioner was often determined, on a short-term basis, by the coach; consequently, the role description often lacked clarity, leaving the practitioner unsure of their position/purpose within the club. Additionally, the role was perceived to be that of a short-term contract with restriction to classroom-based sessions on mental-skills training. Some participants perceived this to be due to the lack of

appreciation that that level of cricket had for the sport psychology discipline (Cotterill 2018).

Recent research by Ford et al. (2022) offers important insights into the practical challenges surrounding the implementation of sport psychology services, particularly from the perspective of coaches. Surveying 296 high school coaches in the United States, the study found that, while attitudes towards sport psychology were generally positive and coaches acknowledged the potential benefits for athlete development, there remained a notable disconnect between these favourable perceptions and the actual integration of psychological support into everyday practice. Coaches reported being moderately willing to engage personally in such services with their athletes, suggesting a conceptual endorsement of psychological support. However, this willingness did not necessarily translate into consistent or structured application, largely due to a range of perceived and practical barriers.

The barriers identified by Ford et al. (2022) highlight the systemic and cultural challenges that continue to hinder the effective utilisation of sport psychology services. These included limited financial and logistical resources, a lack of clarity around the role and function of the sport psychologist, and issues of access and availability of qualified consultants. Additional concerns were raised regarding stigma associated with seeking psychological support, inadequate support from parents and administrative bodies, questions surrounding the “fit” and competence of the practitioner, and uncertainty over issues of confidentiality and consent. Moreover, some coaches questioned the necessity of sport psychology services altogether, citing a perceived lack of demonstrable effectiveness. Collectively, these findings suggest that while sport

psychology is becoming increasingly accepted in principle, its implementation remains inconsistent and heavily constrained by broader structural and attitudinal barriers.

These challenges are not exclusive to the American high school context. As Thelwell et al. (2018) argue, there remains a significant lack of empirical clarity around the application and utilisation of sport psychology consultants within youth sport more broadly. In particular, there is a dearth of research focused on how consultants are embedded within organisational structures, how their roles are negotiated with other stakeholders (e.g., coaches, parents, administrators), and how their work is operationalised in ways that reflect both athlete needs and organisational constraints. This lack of clarity represents a critical gap in the literature, especially within professional football academies, where the expectations placed on psychological support often exceed the infrastructure and understanding required to implement it effectively.

2.6. Psychological Provisions in UK Football Academies

It used to be considered that success in football solely relied on the physical, technical, and tactical abilities demonstrated by the player and team, while psychological abilities were discarded (Heidari et al. 2019). More recently, however, sport psychology has become increasingly recognised and accepted within professional sports, including football (Heidari et al. 2019; Konter et al. 2019). While high level technical, tactical, and physical abilities are still necessary for success, it is argued that successful performances are reliant on the development and execution of advanced psychological skills within matches, as well as the overall psychological state of the players (Konter et al. 2019; Heidari et al. 2019). This has led to the promotion of psychological skills, and therefore

psychological skills training (PST), in order for players and teams to gain an advantage over their opposition (Heidari et al. 2019). PST is the continuous practice of mental techniques such as concentration, communication, imagery, and relaxation, in order to enhance performance, well-being and enjoyment (Weinberg and Gould 2014; Beckmann and Elbe 2015; Heidari et al. 2019; Konter et al. 2019). However, practices are not always positively received by all (Nesti 2010; Champ 2017). Consequently, there is a clear lack of research around the understanding and provision of sport psychology within elite football, particularly from the experience if applied sport psychology practitioners working with the field (Champ 2017).

The potential impact of sport psychology within the academy system has been acknowledged for over a decade, with both researchers and practitioners consistently advocating for its deeper integration (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005; Nesti, 2010; Pain & Harwood, 2009). This recognition was formally embedded within the Football Association's (FA) development strategy through the 2001 introduction of the four-corner model, which conceptualises player development through four interrelated domains: technical/tactical, physical, social, and psychological (The FA, 2001). By including a psychological component, the FA acknowledged the importance of mental and emotional development in shaping high-performing athletes, aiming to equip future English players with the psychological skills and mindset required to support a winning mentality and robust footballing culture (Daley, Ong & McGregor, 2020).

In response to this strategic direction, the FA launched the 'Psychology for Football' course (The FA, 2002), an initiative aimed at upskilling both players and coaches by promoting greater psychological literacy through the involvement of

qualified professionals (Cale, 2004). Despite these developments, however, the psychological dimension of the four-corner model continues to lag behind the technical/tactical and physical components in terms of implementation and perceived value within academy systems (Pain & Harwood, 2004; Daley et al., 2020). While the model offers a theoretically balanced approach to player development, in practice, the psychological corner often remains underprioritised—frequently viewed as supplementary rather than integral.

This ongoing disparity raises important questions about the structural and cultural barriers that continue to limit the integration of psychological provision. It also highlights a broader issue concerning how psychological support is conceptualised and operationalised within elite youth football. Despite the availability of frameworks and training opportunities, the limited presence of sport psychologists within academies, combined with inconsistent coach education, suggests a persistent gap between policy and practice. The result is a fragmented approach to psychological development, often dependent on individual practitioner efforts rather than institutionally embedded support.

Pain and Harwood (2004) investigated the perceptions and understanding of sport psychology within UK youth football using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Their study focused on three key areas among academy directors, youth coaches, and national coaches: their knowledge and awareness of sport psychology; their perceptions and subjective evaluations of sport psychology and consultant services; and the barriers that limit the adoption of psychological support within youth academies and national teams. They found that the overall understanding of sport psychology topics amongst the participants to be low, unless the psychology topic fell under the domain of

coaching (for example, goal setting) (Pain and Harwood 2004). Consequently, Pain and Harwood (2004) found there to be a common misconception, amongst the participants, of the nature of sport psychology, thus causing further barriers for the practitioners trying to implement the discipline. Interestingly, the most commonly perceived barrier to the implementation of sport psychology was the lack of finance dedicated to the discipline (Pain and Harwood 2004). This finding may be linked to the finding by Champ (2017) that academy psychology programmes are believed to be less valuable than the other areas of football development.

A popular psychological strategy within elite football academies is that of Harwood and Anderson (2015) 5C's which aims to increase the integration of psychological skills into the coaching process and behaviour. The model focuses on five psychological components: communication, control, concentration, commitment, and confidence referred to as the 5Cs Model (Harwood and Anderson 2015); the idea of the model is to develop each of these factors within a coaching session in order to increase the athlete's psychological awareness and skill set, thus facilitating their overall development. Harwood and Anderson (2015) state that each of the five components are 'considered to be the important components of positive psycho-social development in players' (p.13). They believe that the 5C's model should be the foundation of the psychological and social development of every competitive youth footballer. As a framework for psychological intervention, its purpose is to ensure that youth footballers were provided with a greater amount of psychological education and development within training sessions (Harwood 2008). It seeks to promote the importance of youth sport programmes developing the interpersonal, motivational, and self-

regulatory skills of youth players (Harwood et al. 2015; Steptoe et al. 2017). Harwood et al. (2015) Have previously suggested that the model was derived from Lerner et al.'s (2000) 6C's of youth development: character, confidence, connection, competence, caring, and contribution, which were developed with reference to the skills necessary to develop a more civilised society (Lerner et al. 2000; Harwood et al. 2015; Steptoe et al. 2019).

A study by Harwood et al. (2015) reported evidence that the 5C's intervention could be a valuable tool when used within youth football as it could help coaches to gain the confidence to integrate psychological skills into their training sessions. Furthermore, Harwood et al.'s (2015) study suggested that sport psychology practitioners working within youth sport should consider the coach as a vehicle for the psychological development of their athletes. They also noted that by integrating psychological skills into training sessions, coaches would develop a better understanding and become more supportive of the role of psychology within youth football, thus helping to break down the barriers to the implementation of psychology programmes in English football academies (Gould et al. 2012; Harwood et al. 2015; Pain and Harwood 2004). However, some researchers have suggested it is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of this model due to a lack of data regarding the number of clubs which use it. Furthermore, the research examining the model is only being conducted by a small group of individuals (Harwood et al. 2015; Konter et al. 2019; Pain and Harwood 2004; Steptoe et al. 2019).

A study by Steptoe, Barker and Harwood (2016) detailed the consultancy of a sport psychologist (SP) within an elite football academy, who was employed to help the academy meet the expectations of an upcoming Elite Player

Performance Plan (EPPP) audit. Using the 5C's model (Harwood and Anderson (2015), the SP delivered the psychology programme to players aged 9-21, as well as coaches and parents. The SP consultancy role included: delivering player workshops on each of the components of the 5C's model; individual consultancy with players; conducting weekly coach education sessions; delivering parent focus groups and workshops; and enhancing team belief amongst the players at the academy.

An integral component of the academy psychology programme is the gradual development of psychological application across the entirety of the player pathway, including the support of parents, in a way that responds to the specific demands of each development phase—ranging from foundation through to the professional phase, and ultimately, transition out of the game. While this approach is increasingly prioritised in practice, the academic literature still lacks the necessary depth and contextual understanding to support consistent integration across academy systems. Gledhill, Harwood, and Forsdyke's (2017) systematic review provides a valuable contribution to this area, identifying 48 interconnected psychological and social factors that influence talent development. Drawing on 43 studies and close to 15,000 participants, the review presents a compelling argument for the inclusion of psychosocial development as a fundamental component of academy provision. Attributes such as resilience, self-regulation, commitment, and discipline are shown to support adaptive behaviours—including focused training and effective coping—that shape coach perceptions and contribute to long-term player progression.

Alongside these individual traits, the review highlights the importance of social influences, particularly the role of autonomy-supportive coaching, high-

quality coach-athlete relationships, and appropriate parental involvement. These social conditions are understood to facilitate motivation, wellbeing, and continued engagement, further emphasising the need to move beyond a purely technical or physical model of talent development. However, despite its contribution, the review also reinforces several persistent limitations in the current evidence base. The dominant focus on white, male, Western European participants raises concerns over the generalisability of findings, while the predominance of cross-sectional designs and self-report methods offers limited insight into how these psychological and social processes unfold in practice.

More critically, while the review advocates for greater psychosocial integration, it offers little clarity on how sport psychology support can be meaningfully implemented within the structural, cultural, and logistical realities of academy football. Specifically, there remains a lack of research that explores the day-to-day delivery of sport psychology, the challenges faced by practitioners, and the contextual factors that shape effective integration. Issues such as role ambiguity, inconsistent resourcing, and limited coach education are often acknowledged but rarely examined in sufficient detail to inform applied practice.

The introduction of the EPPP allowed for coordinated support services within sport science and medicine and the systematic development of staff roles within a multidisciplinary team structure. The EPPP vision included a multidisciplinary approach that would be adopted and reinforced across departments, with the Sport Psychologist's role focused on performance enhancement and age-appropriate support for player development. Although there is often apparent, if not explicit, prioritisation in addressing the technical, tactical, and physical demands placed on the young player, the need to possess

the requisite psychological skills is valued by academies (Chandler and Steptoe 2020).

2.7. Current Implementation of Sport Psychology

Despite increasing academic interest in the psychological dimensions of athlete development, the application of sport psychology within professional football—particularly at the academy level—remains underexplored. The existing literature provides limited empirical evidence on how psychological services are implemented, experienced, and sustained across varied academy contexts. This gap is particularly pronounced in relation to applied practice, where there remains a lack of critical insight into how sport psychology is operationalised to meet the specific developmental needs of youth footballers

Daley, Ong, and McGregor (2020) offer a valuable contribution to this discourse by identifying three systemic barriers that continue to delay the full integration of sport psychology within academy structures. Firstly, the absence of appropriately qualified specialists—those with both academic grounding and practical experience—often leads to underdeveloped or misaligned delivery of psychological support. Secondly, the psychological provision that does exist is frequently shaped by academic curricula rather than being driven by practitioner-informed, context-sensitive approaches. This misalignment can result in content that lacks relevance or immediate applicability for coaches and players alike. Thirdly, resource limitations—most notably, the reliance on part-time rather than full-time psychological staff—restrict the consistency and depth of support that can be offered. These constraints inhibit the embedding of psychological principles into the everyday practices of academy life and often lead to

fragmented or superficial engagement with the psychological corner of development.

Taken together, these challenges point to a significant shortfall in the literature's engagement with the lived realities of sport psychology delivery within youth football. There is a pressing need for research that moves beyond theoretical advocacy and examines the structural, cultural, and relational factors that shape psychological provision in practice. A study by Cotterill (2012) documented, over a four-year period, his experiences as a sport psychologist, working in a professional cricket academy, and provide an insight into the approaches and techniques used. He also stated that his role included a number of responsibilities, including educating the players on sport psychology, the delivery of the psychological module of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) raising player self-awareness, and the creation and implementation of individual development programmes for the players. Additionally, (Cotterill 2012) was responsible for assessing the players' ability to transfer their psychological skills into high pressure situations, their psychological profile (the psychological underpinning of the athlete, for example their level of resilience), and their mental game. Cotterill (2012) stated that his role developed over time; he began his focus on delivering educational psychology sessions to the players. He explains that this was due to a number of limitations, such as the small time allocated to the psychological programme, and the club's previous experience with sport psychology programmes. However, as time went on, he was able to individualise the programmes depending on the needs of the club and the players

Kingston, Wixey, and Morgan (2020) offer a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature advocating for psychologically informed environments

within football academies, with a particular focus on the motivational climate cultivated by coaching staff. Their study emphasises the importance of creating a mastery-oriented climate—one that foregrounds effort, learning, and long-term personal development over short-term performance outcomes. This approach is underpinned by the assumption that intrinsic motivation is critical to sustained engagement and psychological wellbeing in youth athletes. By encouraging autonomy, task mastery, and personal progression, such environments foster a sense of psychological safety wherein players are more likely to embrace challenges, take learning risks, and demonstrate resilience in the face of setbacks.

Importantly, the study also highlights the pivotal role that coaches play in shaping this motivational climate. Through behaviours such as providing constructive feedback, acknowledging effort, and modelling a growth-oriented mindset, coaches can significantly influence players' mental and emotional development. When these behaviours are embedded within the daily coaching process, the environment becomes one that actively supports not only skill acquisition but also psychological adaptability—an essential attribute for navigating the demands of elite sport.

However, while the value of a mastery-oriented climate is increasingly supported in theory, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how such climates are implemented and sustained across different academy contexts, particularly within resource-constrained environments such as Category 3 academies. Much of the current literature, including that of Kingston et al. (2020), focuses on ideal conditions or well-resourced settings, which limits its transferability to academies where psychological provision is either

underdeveloped or inconsistently delivered. Furthermore, there is limited empirical exploration into how coaches' psychological literacy mediates their ability to create and maintain such climates, especially when balancing performance pressures and organisational constraints.Additionally, a number of other academics (Evans and Slater 2014; Heidari et al. 2019; Konter et al. 2019) explain the importance of sport psychology service delivery in elite development environments. They explain the value of providing services such as psychological skills training (PST) to athletes in order for them to enhance their own performance and development. It is important to note, however, that much of this research (Cotterill 2012; Barker and Winter 2014; Cotterill 2017) examines each psychological intervention in an isolated manner, thus not addressing the previous concerns of Portenga (2017), who stated the need for planned, deliberate use. Thus, to date, whilst the individual benefits including increased player confidence, resilience and self-awareness (Thelwell et al. 2018) have been identified, Portenga (2017) calls for the need for more research examining the best way in which to facilitate the holistic performance development of individual athletes, teams, and sport organisations (2017). That is, exploring the provision, needs, and experiences of sport organisations such as the category three academy within this thesis, and using such findings to guide the creation of a comprehensive psychological development programme that will, in turn, contribute to the holistic performance development of athletes, teams and sport organisations.

2.8. Psychological Literacy

The application of psychology relies on the fundaments of psychological literacy. That is, psychology cannot be successfully applied unless there is an

adequate level of psychological understanding by both the service provider and the individuals in which they are working with. Psychological literacy is defined as 'the ethical application of psychological skills and knowledge' (Murdoch 2016, p.189). An alternative definition by Cranney, Botwood and Morris (2012), states psychological literacy to be 'the general capacity to adaptively and intentionally apply psychology to meet personal, professional, and societal needs' (p.iii). It is therefore understood to concern the ability to transfer psychological knowledge and understanding to the personal, professional, and societal aspects of one's life, and to do so in an ethical manner. Psychological literacy is a term with particular relevance to this thesis as it refers to 'the ability to apply psychological knowledge to personal, family, occupational, community and societal challenges' (Sebbens, Hassmén, Crisp and Wensley 2016). The first use of the term 'psychological literacy' was by Boneau (1990) who did not specifically define psychological literacy but rather tried to list the attributes that contributed to psychological literacy. The list was identified through a study which sought to identify the terms and concepts, within the basic subfields of psychology, that are believed to be of enough importance to be considered as general knowledge within the psychological community. The list comprised of a total of 113 attributes, including anxiety, attachment, conformity, depression, ego, id, intelligence, meaning, mental illness, and reinforcement. He referred to his list of attributes when attempting to understand the concept of psychological literacy and stated that the most crucial aspect of psychological literacy was having a comprehensive understanding of psychological concepts and the vocabulary used within the psychology.

A more contemporary and well-established definition of psychological literacy is that proposed by McGovern et al. (2010), who stated that psychological literacy links to the attributes expected from psychology graduate students. Thus, they explain psychological literacy to consist of: 'having a well-defined vocabulary and basic knowledge of the critical subject matter of psychology, this is important as it is the underpinning of all psychologically literate behaviour – one must have a basic understanding of psychology in order to transfer their knowledge into action; valuing the intellectual challenges, such as a university degree, required to use scientific thinking and the disciplined analysis of information to evaluate alternative courses of action; taking a creative and amiable sceptical approach to problem solving; applying psychological principles to personal, social and organisational issues in work, relationship, and the broader community; 'acting ethically whereby?; communicating effectively in different modes and with many different audiences; recognising, understanding, and fostering respect for diversity what constitutes diversity?; being insightful and reflective about one's own and others' behaviour and mental processes; being competent in using and evaluating information and technology' (McGovern et al. 2010, p.11).

Although this definition is well established, Murdoch (2016) describes it as problematic due to its lack of specificity to psychology. The majority of these skills would be expected from any graduate student, the ability to act ethically is a general expectation of society, not just displayed by psychology graduates. Murdoch (2016) states that these skills may assist with the application of psychological knowledge but they themselves are not what defines psychological literacy.

Murdoch (2016) explains psychological literacy to be a meta-literacy, whereby other literacies such as numeracy, reading, emotional intelligence, and science are incorporated, along with psychology specific knowledge, to form one higher order literacy. He suggests that psychological literacy is therefore the integration of reading, numeracy, scientific, information and data, computer, emotional intelligence, cultural, and multicultural literacies as well as psychological knowledge (p. 191). Furthermore, he states that psychological literacy involves increasing the impact of psychology through non-professionals (not just trained practitioners). However, Murdoch (2016) also recognises the potential danger of non-professionals sharing psychological knowledge that may not be accurate. This statement was supported by Pain and Harwood (2004), who's research explored the perceptions of sport psychology in English Football Academies; their findings recorded a significant lack of understanding and knowledge of sport psychology by coaches which meant they were not equipped to deliver psychology within their coaching sessions. McGovern et al. (2010) state that once one becomes psychologically literate, one intentionally develops their psychological literacy and integrates it with the other lessons in which they have learned during their undergraduate study. It is then that the psychologically literate individual develops into a more sophisticated problem solver (2010, p.20). This can impact many areas of an individual's life, as well as society as a whole. It is important to understand that while much of the impact is beneficial, there are also dangers that need to be addressed (Murdoch 2016).

Gross (2005) suggests psychology to concern the human mind and behaviour, therefore, the first and broadest benefit of becoming psychologically literate is that an individual will be able to understand and communicate with

people better (Hulme 2014). Though rather simplistic, this is the platform of all the other benefits of the psychologically literate citizen. Through the exposure to psychological skills and knowledge, psychology undergraduates are being given the tools and understanding to be able to transfer their psychological knowledge from the classroom to practical life and employment. Those students who are able to demonstrate this application of knowledge are then considered to be a psychologically literate individual (McGovern 2010; Hulme 2014; Roberts, Heritage and Gasson 2015; Murdoch 2016). This, Murdoch (2016) suggests, enables an individual to improve their personal, occupational, and civic lives by applying their knowledge in order to overcome the challenges in which they may face in the current climate of contemporary society as well as helping others through influence and intuitive problem solving (Roberts, Heritage and Gasson 2015). Although this research has primarily focused upon undergraduate university students, the information is relevant more broadly to anyone providing psychological services, as well as those who are recipients of those services. If any individual has an adequate level of psychological literacy, they are better able to apply their knowledge to their practical lives, thus finding it easier to problem solve, understand others, and overcome challenges (Murdoch 2016; Roberts, Heritage and Gasson 2015). Additionally, sport psychology service providers who are psychologically literate will be able to transfer their knowledge more effectively to those they are working with. Similarly, if the recipients of the sport psychology services have a better developed psychological literacy, it will be easier for them to understand and absorb the information being given to them by the service provider, and in turn, will help them to apply their knowledge into practical situations, such as matches and competitions. It is also important to note

that there is very limited research around psychological literacy within sport. This may be due to the lack of understanding within sport of what sport psychology entails and therefore how to apply it. That said, moving forward it would be of great value to the progression of the theory and practical application of sport psychology if further research was conducted around the level of psychological literacy within sport and the way in which it can be developed.

Despite the positive recognition of psychological literacy, it is not without its critics due to the way in which it impacts society. Murdoch (2016) states that many professionals who provide a mental health service, such as doctors, counsellors, and mental health nurses, do not have the required level of psychological literacy. This is potentially problematic due to the nature of the discussions that will be had with potentially vulnerable individuals in their care. The way in which these professionals approach individuals in their care can have a significant impact on the individual's psychological well-being. If a sensitive subject is not handled with care by the professional, then they could be at risk of causing significant psychological harm and distress to the individual they are treating. Whilst this study focuses on the health care professional, the issues that are discussed along with the context draw parallels to the football environment. That is, it is important to understand that the young players at an academy may have sensitive issues related to their mental wellbeing, home life, or relationships; therefore, it is essential for the staff around them, specifically the psychologist, to be understanding and sensitive when talking to them. Furthermore, both health and psychology fall under the same legislation, the HCPC (Health and Care Professionals Council), meaning that both professions must follow the same rules of practice: 'Promote and protect the interests of service users and carers;

communicate appropriately and effectively; work within the limits of your knowledge and skills; delegate appropriately; respect confidentiality; manage risk; report concerns about safety; be open when things go wrong; be honest and trustworthy; keep records of your work' (Health and Care Professionals Council 2016). It is also important to note that the care providers (that fall under the HCPC) have a position of authority so the services they provide to their care users will be trusted and followed, even though the care providers may not actually have the adequate skill set to give their service users the correct information. However, to date, there has not been any research published around sport (specifically football) about the level of risk, within the academy setting, of having service providers with inadequate psychological literacy. In order to combat this, research must be conducted to find out exactly who is delivering the sport psychology provisions within football academies, their qualifications, and the level in which they are delivering such services.

It is a common trend that psychological literacy is discussed and researched in relation to undergraduate psychology students, and the skills that are required to become psychologically literate are commonly learned within a university setting (McGovern et al. 2010; Roberts, Heritage and Gasson 2015; Murdoch 2016). Additionally, the term and concept of 'psychological literacy' is rarely discussed outside of psychological literature (Murdoch 2016). Within psychological literature, there is an increase in academics conceptualising psychological literacy; however, these concepts lack the evidential research to validate them (Murdoch 2016). It is evident that research around psychological literacy is gaining interest from academics, however, it remains in the juvenile stages. Little research has been conducted further than anecdotal case studies

and pilot studies (Murdoch 2016). A primary reason for this lack of evidential research within the field is that there is no standardised measure of psychological literacy, making it challenging to obtain experimental data (Roberts, Heritage and Gasson 2015; Murdoch 2016). Roberts, Heritage and Gasson (2015) made an attempt to rectify this and establish an approximate way of measuring psychological literacy through the use of self-report. The study was conducted with two samples (N=218 and N=381) of undergraduate psychology students from a University in Australia and used a number of self-report techniques, to measure each of McGovern's nine aspects of psychological literacy (2010). An intention of the study was to identify whether the future measurement of psychological literacy should be unitary or multi-faceted like that of McGovern (2010). Roberts, Heritidge and Gasson (2015) identified three higher order factors which best constructed psychological literacy: reflective processes (of self and of others), generic graduate attributes, and psychology as a helping profession. Ultimately, they suggest that further research into the measurement of psychological literacy is imperative, and in order to identify and develop these measurements, self-report measures need to be further researched and developed (2015).

Psychological literacy is fundamental to the application of psychology within sport. In order for psychological skills and knowledge to be transferred from the psychologist to the athlete, there needs to be an adequate level of psychological understanding from both parties. It is therefore desirable to achieve psychological literacy in both those who are delivering the psychological services, but also those who are recipients of such psychological services. However, at present, the level of psychological literacy in sport may be being limited by the lack of

understanding of what sport psychology actually entails and therefore the clear articulation of the boundaries of psychological delivery. Therefore, further research into the application of psychology within sport is required, which, in turn, will provide an understanding around developing psychological literacy with athletes and service providers.

2.9. Service Delivery

As previously stated, in order for athletes to become psychologically literate, the psychology service needs to be delivered by the right psychology professional, otherwise there is risk that the athletes will be given the wrong information which, in turn, may cause more harm than it does good. In order for the correct individuals to be appointed the role of delivering the psychological services, there needs to be a clear framework in place. Although the EPPP does provide a framework for staff requirements in each department, there is not clear guidance around the way in which the psychological provisions should be delivered; this means that there is not a standardised guide for the dissemination of psychological information within elite youth football. The participants of Cotterill's (2018) study around the challenges, experiences and opportunities of psychologists working in an elite cricket environment, consistently noted the 'free reign' that sport psychology practitioners had when selecting the approach in which to adopt and what it was that they were delivering. This would suggest that there may be a lack in framework for the practitioners to follow, as well as supporting the earlier findings that the role of the practitioner is not always clearly stated. Other challenges identified were the amount of time that the practitioner had with individual athletes, and the lack of space provided for the psychology delivery to take place (Cotterill 2018).

These points highlight a clear tension between practitioner autonomy and the need for consistency in service delivery. While the ability to tailor psychological support to specific environments can be beneficial, the absence of a standardised framework may compromise both the credibility and effectiveness of the provision. Without clear guidelines, the quality and content of psychological support can vary significantly between academies, potentially leading to confusion among players and staff, and undermining the overall impact of the discipline. The lack of clarity around the practitioner's role, as noted in Cotterill's (2018) study, further illustrates the structural limitations that exist in performance environments. If practitioners are expected to operate without defined responsibilities or boundaries, their ability to contribute meaningfully to athlete development becomes restricted. This also limits opportunities for the evaluation of psychological interventions, making it difficult to assess effectiveness and inform future practice. These issues reinforce the need for clearer direction from governing bodies such as the EPPP, not to impose rigid protocols, but to ensure that psychological services are delivered ethically, consistently, and in alignment with the broader aims of holistic athlete development.

2.10. The experiences of sport psychology practitioners

While an increasing number of professional clubs and academies are incorporating psychology into their programmes through dedicated staffing, the approaches to delivering this support vary significantly. Depending on the organisational structure and resources available, some academies partner with academic institutions and involve multiple practitioners or trainees, while others rely on a single psychologist, who may be employed in-house or contracted as an external consultant (Daley et al. 2020).

Chandler et al. (2020) explained that for practitioners—particularly those new to the field—it can be difficult to clearly define their unique contribution to performance enhancement. This is often complicated by the presence of various individuals operating within the psychology space. Distinguishing their role from that of coaches, educators, and parents can be challenging, and there's a risk of unintentionally slipping into the role of problem-solver or focusing solely on performance issues. Doing so may reinforce persistent negative stereotypes that still exist in some elite sport environments.

A study by Mellalieu (2017) documented the experiences of a sport psychology consultant working within professional rugby union. Through his experiences at the rugby club, he identified a number of challenges in which sport psychology consultants face when working within rugby union. The first issue he found was the fact that sport psychology does not have a long-standing existence within the sport, which has led to the common misperceptions of sport psychology consultants and what it is they do, instead they are seen as the person to 'sort players' heads out' (p.113) and solve problems, rather than enhance development and performance (Mellalieu 2017; Pain and Harwood 2004). The second issue he identified was that players feel they have to 'act tough' (p.114) (particularly male players) due to the physical nature of the sport; that is, they feel they cannot show their true emotions when faced with challenges such as injury, being dropped from the starting line-up, or losing a game (Tibbert et al. 2015; Mellalieu 2017). This, in turn, makes the players less likely to discuss their emotions or seek advice or support from a sport psychology consultant, out of the fear they may break the stereotype. The final challenge that Mellalieu (2017) identified was the overall nature of high-performance environments. He states

that particularly in professional male team sports, there is a traditional and closed culture that is often resistant to change, meaning that athletes and staff can often be unwelcoming of new approaches (like sport psychology) if they do not immediately see the value of them. Finally, Mellalieu (2017) provides five recommendations for sport psychology consultants to consider if they intend to work in a professional sporting environment such as professional rugby union: 'acknowledge the importance of culture; learn the culture; immerse in the culture; work with the culture; change with the culture' (p.118), he suggests that such steps will help increase sport psychology consultants' contextual intelligence and cultural competency, thus enabling them to work effectively in high performance environments. Although this study focussed on the experiences within professional sport, it is still relevant to the provisions of psychology within youth sport as it helps to shed light on the challenges faced by sport psychology consultants within elite sport. Therefore, this knowledge can be transferred to the youth sport context in order to help explain the reasoning behind the current sport psychology provision and delivery within elite youth environments.

Henriksen (2015) reflected on the experiences of working as a sport psychology practitioner within the Danish, Olympic sailing team. They reported that, in addition to the expected, performance based, factors that arise at major events, there are also a number of unexpected issues that may arise, such as family issues, media scrutiny, as well as other private issues that may impact the athlete. Such concerns require skilled interventions in order to prevent such issues having a critical impact on the performance and wellbeing of the performers (Henriksen 2015). This demonstrates the need for sport psychology

support to go beyond performance but to also address the overall wellbeing of athletes.

More recently, Sly et al. (2020) provided a commentary on the changes that are occurring within applied sport psychology practice, this included a discussion around the professional experiences that applied sport psychologists currently encounter within the field. As such, Nesti (2016) reflected on his experiences working within Premier League football, reporting issues of interdepartmental conflict, poor internal communication, and role ambiguity. Such issues demonstrate the need for effective collaboration with other coaches and support staff, as suggested by Melalieu (2016). Furthermore, due to the growth of medicalisation and scientisation of elite sport (Stewart and Smith 2008), applied sport psychologists are increasingly required to operate as part of a multidisciplinary team (McCalla and Fitzpatrick 2016). Therefore, applied sport psychologists would benefit from greater education and exposure to the realities of working within a multidisciplinary team (Eubank et al. 2014; Parker 1995; Roderick 2006), further helping to prepare them for the environments in which they may end up working in (Champ et al. 2018).

2.11. Gaps in Literature

Through an examination of both historical and contemporary literature concerning sport psychology provision in elite and youth sport, several key themes emerge—highlighting the progress that has been made but also exposing significant and persistent gaps. It is now widely acknowledged, both in academic discourse and applied settings, that psychological skills are crucial for supporting performance, well-being, and development in youth athletes (Harwood, 2008; Nesti, 2010; Cotterill, 2016). However, despite this recognition, the literature

continues to overlook how sport psychology is actually understood, implemented, and experienced within real-world youth sport environments—particularly in the context of professional football academies (Pain & Harwood, 2009; Thelwell et al., 2018).

While there is growing consensus that the youth sport phase presents a critical window for psychological intervention (MacNamara et al., 2010; Harwood & Johnston, 2016), existing research remains heavily weighted towards theoretical benefits and outcome-based studies. For example, work by Visek et al. (2009) and others has helped to validate the relevance of psychological skills training for young athletes. However, these contributions tend to offer generalised conclusions and rarely engage with the day-to-day complexities of sport psychology delivery—such as how services are perceived by coaches and players, or how they are influenced by the cultural and organisational constraints within academy systems (Fraser et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2022). This often leads to an overly simplified view of psychological provision, where benefits are assumed and barriers under-examined.

One of the most persistent issues in the literature is the lack of clarity surrounding the role of the sport psychology consultant (Andersen, 2000; Sharp & Hodge, 2013). Even as the discipline gains more visibility, misconceptions remain—most notably, the perception of psychology as a reactive tool for dealing with problems rather than as a proactive component of holistic development (Tod et al., 2009). This framing not only undermines the potential contribution of practitioners but also restricts collaboration with other key staff, such as coaches, welfare officers, and performance leads, whose buy-in is essential for integration (Fraser et al., 2016).

In addition, the processes underpinning effective psychological delivery are often overlooked. While improved performance and enhanced well-being are commonly reported outcomes, few studies explore how these outcomes are achieved in practice (Martindale & Collins, 2007). There is limited guidance on how sport psychology is best integrated into daily routines, coaching sessions, or long-term development plans—particularly in resource-constrained environments such as Category 3 academies (Harwood & Johnston, 2016; Thelwell et al., 2018). Similarly, there is a notable absence of longitudinal research examining the sustainability and developmental impact of psychological provision over time (Nesti, 2012).

A further gap relates to the experiences and challenges faced by practitioners themselves. Although issues such as part-time roles, lack of funding, and role ambiguity are occasionally noted (Pain & Harwood, 2009; Ford et al., 2022), there is little empirical research exploring how these challenges play out in context, or how practitioners work to navigate them. As a result, the literature offers limited practitioner-informed insight into improving sport psychology provision in elite youth football.

This is particularly relevant in the context of professional football academies, where psychological provision—though formally embedded within the FA's Four Corner Model (The Football Association, 2023)—often fails to meet its intended scope. While the model gives equal importance to technical, physical, psychological, and social development, the delivery of psychological support is frequently fragmented, inconsistent, or misunderstood (Nesti, 2010; Harwood & Johnston, 2016). This is especially true in Category 3 academies, which tend to

operate with fewer resources, less specialist staff, and limited structural support for psychological integration (Ford et al., 2022).

This thesis seeks to address these gaps by offering a contextually grounded, longitudinal examination of sport psychology provision within a Category 3 football academy. Using a multi-phase qualitative design, the research explores how psychological support is currently delivered, interpreted, and valued—drawing on the perspectives of both coaches and practitioners, as well as the researcher's own sustained autoethnographic engagement. The aim is to identify the cultural, relational, and organisational factors that influence how psychological provision is enacted, and to assess the extent to which the aims of the Four Corner Model are being achieved in practice (The Football Association, 2023).

Importantly, this research moves beyond abstract claims about the value of sport psychology. Instead, it focuses on the practical realities of delivering support within the specific constraints and pressures of academy football. It explores where psychological provision is supported, where it is constrained, and why these patterns emerge. It also considers how principles such as mastery-oriented climates and long-term psychological development are understood and applied by those working within the system (Harwood et al., 2010; Dweck, 2006).

In doing so, this thesis contributes to a relatively underexplored area of applied sport psychology. It offers an in-depth, practice-based account of psychological delivery in a lower-tier academy context, providing both theoretical insight and practical implications for improving the integration of sport psychology across the development pathway. Ultimately, the research aims to support a more realistic, sustainable, and embedded approach to psychological provision—one

that acknowledges the structural limitations of the academy system while working to maximise the psychological support available to players.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a qualitative methodology designed to facilitate the exploration into the provision of sport psychology within English academy football. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a rationale of the methodological decisions made throughout the research process and to explain how these decisions came to be. It will present the research objectives, as well as unpack theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, and finally discuss the ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and transferability of the research.

3.2. Research philosophy

Adopting an appropriate research paradigm is essential when laying out the context of a study. It is the underlying philosophy that underpins the whole meaning of the research and the way in which the data is interpretated. Therefore, the term paradigm can be defined as the lens that is used to interpret reality, which reflects the researcher's worldviews and philosophical values (Hennink et al. 2020). Within this paradigmatic net are the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises. Ontology is concerned with the idea of reality in relation to human existence, the nature of being, and social reality (Daymon and Holloway 2011); whereas epistemology focusses on how this reality or knowledge is known. Axiology, however, highlights the value or what is considered 'good' for humans and society (Biedenbach and Jacobsson 2016). As a result of these premises, the individuality of each researcher means that they will approach the world with their own specific set of ideas (ontology) which then specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that they then explore in their own specific way (methodology). A number of researchers argue (Sparkes and Smith

2014; Smith and Sparkes 2016; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2017) the different underpinnings of each paradigm guide researchers towards different questions, causing them to develop specific research designs, use different data collection techniques and analysis, present their findings in unique manners, and utilise the most appropriate judgement criteria to assess the quality of their research. Furthermore, Smith and Sparkes (2016) explain that these differences should be celebrated rather than criticised because they allow us to gain a deeper and diverse understanding of the social world, including that of sport and exercise.

For the purpose of this thesis, three main paradigms were considered: positivism, post-positivism, and interpretivism. The table below is constructed and adapted from the representations of Lincoln et al. (2018), Žukauskas et al. (2018). It demonstrates the way in which each of the considered paradigms is understood in relation to its ontological, epistemological, and methodological stance. It is important to note that the way in which researchers understand the paradigmatic definitions that underpin their research is entirely dependent on the representations and interpretations in which they are exposed to in the body of literature in which they explore.

Table 3.2.

The Intersection of Research Paradigms

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Research Methods
Positivism	Naïve realism – "real" reality but apprehendible, singular and objective. One true reality.	Dualist/objectivist – formation of knowledge is not linked to morals or values, findings true.	Quantitative only – manipulative experiment, survey, quasi experiment. Verification of hypotheses.
Post-Positivism	Critical realism – imperfectly	Modified dualist/objectivist –	Modified experimental –

	and probabilistically apprehendible "real" reality. One true reality.	critical tradition, findings probably true.	can use quantitative and qualitative, falsification of hypotheses.
Interpretivism	Relativism – multiple, socially constructed realities.	Subjectivist - knowledge is formed from social interaction and experiences.	Qualitative only - interviews, case studies, ethnography, phenomenology.

(Source: adapted from Lincoln et al. 2018, p.111 and Zukauskas et al. 2018, p.126)

Positivism is a very scientific school of thought, with the idea that human behaviour can be observed and measured through 'facts' and 'laws' (p.20). Positivism has little place for emotions, feelings or beliefs as these concepts cannot be directly controlled or measured by the researcher (Jones and Gratton 2015). It takes the ontological approach that reality is objective, and the world is external to the researcher rather than existing as part of the individual's perceptions (Ryan, 2018). The epistemological purpose is to uncover a universal truth or set of laws that provide an objective explanation of the world. According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), positivist researchers seek to find causal relationships between the data in order to create law-life generalisations and would utilise universal rules and laws to support and explain the findings within organisations.

A not dissimilar paradigmatic approach is that of post-positivism, which understands that it is not always possible to gain truly objective results, due to the influence of the researcher through their own values and understandings (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Post-positivism offers an alternative to the traditional approach of positivism (Kankam 2019) and assumes that there are a number of

ways of gaining knowledge outside of using the scientific method (McGregor and Murnane 2010). According to Markula and Silk (2011), post-positivism promotes qualitative research in order to include participants' meanings and views and the influence that natural settings have on reality. Furthermore, it recognises that there are issues with an approach that seeks complete objectivity, such as the values and biases of the researcher that he or she may subsequently put into the research (Jones 2015). Therefore, post-positivism takes a more open approach to reality and conducting scientific research.

The final paradigmatic approach considered, and subsequently chosen for this thesis, is that of interpretivism. The underpinning of the interpretivist paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Guba and Lincoln 2003). As Cohen and Crabtree (2006) assert the philosophical assumptions that underpin the interpretivist paradigm are that reality and truth are fluid and socially constructed (Kanham 2019). Interpretivism understands that reality is constructed by the individual and their interpretation of the meaning of their own or others' actions (Daymon and Holloway 2011), meaning that the ontological perspective (what phenomena can be known) of this thesis is that of relativism (Ryan, 2018). That is, reality is interaction and existence is not absolute (Rassokha, 2021), in other words, in order for an entity to exist to an individual, they have to have interacted with it in some way. The epistemological stance (how phenomena can become known) is that knowledge is acquired from experiences and the meaning behind behaviour (Hiller 2016). In this case, the ontological and epistemological principles stay the same across both of the studies that form this thesis. This is because both seek to understand the

experiential realities of the participants, with the understanding that they are socially constructed.

It is for this reason that this thesis is best suited to a qualitative approach, as opposed to a quantitative approach. While the quantitative approach assumes one single, constant, objective social reality, with objective, statistical analysis; the qualitative approach assumes social reality to be that of a subjective experience, where data are rich and subjective, focussing on understanding and meaning (Jones and Gratton, 2015). Therefore, the nature of the qualitative approach is much better suited to the philosophical, ontological, and epistemological position of this thesis.

3.3. Adopting a Qualitative Approach

In line with the assumptions of interpretivism, this research has adopted a qualitative approach to data collection. According to Hennink et al. (2020), qualitative research allows a researcher to critically examine participants' experiences through a number of methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, content analysis, biographies, or observation. They explain that qualitative approaches are typically used to conduct an in-depth exploration into the research questions and to understand the experiences and perspectives of the study population and the context in which they exist (Hennink et al. 2020). Furthermore, Jones (2015) explains that qualitative research seeks to uncover meanings and/or qualities that cannot be quantified, such as an individual's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This is achieved through non-numerical analysis as the purpose is to describe, understand, and find meaning behind the data, therefore assuming that social reality is a subjective experience that is constructed in relation to the social context (Jones 2015).

In qualitative research, and more specifically within this research, there is an emphasis on how individuals understand and interpret their experiences, allowing us to make sense of the phenomena in relation to the meanings that those individuals bring to them (Austin and Sutton 2014).

This research adopted an open approach in order to explore the multiple meanings that participants brought to their experience of sport psychology within academy football. Therefore, it sought to understand and interpret the experiences of those working within academy football in relation to the provision of sport psychology, rather that attempt to predict or generalise such experiences. This is the most suitable approach for this research topic because there has been very little research conducted into the provision of sport psychology within academy football and the experiences of those working within the field, therefore the need is to uncover knew knowledge around the subject rather than to predict outcomes. A qualitative approach can adopt a number of data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, case studies, and ethnography, all of which seek to gain a deeper understanding of a social environment through an interactive lens, in order to uncover meanings that are embedded within the words and experiences of the participants (Lincoln et al. 2018). While an ethnographic and case study method was considered, due to the researcher being embedded within the environment, this would not have been possible for this project due to the restrictions associated with the covid-19 pandemic. Alternatively, focus groups were considered, however, due to the confidential nature of the information that was to be discussed, it was deemed inappropriate to do this within a group setting. Therefore, it was agreed that the use of interviews would be the best suited data collection method for the project.

3.4. Semi-Structured Interviews

For the purpose of this research, semi-structured interviews were utilised. Semi-structured interviews are considered the most common type of qualitative interview (Markula and Silk 2011), and involve and interviewer and interviewee having an in-depth discussion around a chosen topic of interest (Hennink et al. 2020). Similar to the structured interview, the semi-structured interview approach uses a standard set of questions, laid out in an interview guide or schedule, however, unlike the structured approach, the interviewer has flexibility and freedom in the delivery of such questions and is able to include follow up questions and ask the participant to delve deeper into their answer (Jones, 2015). This enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and the surrounding contexts.

Traditionally, semi-structured interviews would be conducted face-to-face at a destination that both the interviewer and interviewee would travel to. However, the Covid-19 pandemic made this impossible to achieve due to travel restrictions, lockdowns, and furlough. Therefore, there became a need for an alternative method of data collection for the current research, in this case, an alternative way of conducting the interviews was required. As Covid-19 meant that travelling to meet a participant for an interview was no longer possible, a more digitised approach became necessary, such as telephone or video calls (Saarijärvi and Bratt 2021). Therefore, it was decided that the best path was to conduct all interviews over video call (Zoom) in order to eliminate the issue of travel restrictions. According to Krouwel et al. (2019), the video interview is the most similar to the traditional face-to-face method of interview and is only minimally inferior to the face-to-face interview. This is because, the use of video

allows the researcher to observe the behaviour and facial expressions of the participant, no matter the distance between them. Additionally, the video interview may be considerably more convenient and cost effective as it eliminates the need to travel, and thus travel expenses (petrol, train tickets etc.), and can be completed wherever each party deems most suitable, reducing the time it takes to carry out each interview, particularly when there are a larger number of participants.

Due to the restrictions that were encountered during the data collection process, the ability to conduct all interviews digitally (Zoom) meant that the research was able to continue to progress during the Covid-19 pandemic in a way that would not have been possible if there was not this acceleration in digitisation (Saarijärvi and Bratt 2021).

3.5. Autoethnography

In addition to semi-structure interviews, an autoethnographic approach was adopted. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography to explore and interpret the personal lived experiences of the researcher within a particular social and cultural context (Poulos, 2021). This approach allows the researcher to reflect on their own position and experiences, using these insights to deepen understanding of the research topic. Autoethnographers often engage in self-reflective writing as part of the research process, situating their experiences within wider cultural, social, or institutional frameworks (Poulos, 2021).

One common method of data collection in autoethnography is the use of personal memory data—that is, recalling significant events or experiences from the past to provide a contextual foundation for current reflections and

interpretations (Chang, 2016). For this study, personal memory served as the primary form of data collection, offering insight into the researcher's past experiences and how these have shaped their understanding of the research setting.

In addition to memory recall, self-observational and self-reflective data were also collected and used. These included notes and reflections made by the researcher throughout five competitive seasons, which captured thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and interactions in the moment they occurred (Chang, 2016). This type of data collection allowed for a more immediate and accurate record of experience, as opposed to relying solely on retrospective accounts. While Chang (2016) notes that the researcher's awareness of the research purpose may influence such reflections, they also argue that present-moment data is valuable in preserving emotional authenticity and contextual detail.

In this approach, the researcher becomes the primary participant, and their personal account serves as the central source of data (Jones, 2015). Anderson (2006) identifies five key features that guide autoethnographic research: (a) the researcher must be a 'complete member' of the group or environment being studied—in this case, the researcher is embedded within the staffing structure of a football academy; (b) there must be a strong emphasis on analytic reflexivity, where the researcher actively reflects on their role and influence within the research; (c) the researcher's presence should be visible within the analysis and reporting, making their experience central to the narrative; (d) engagement with dialogue and interaction with others is encouraged to enrich the data and provide alternative perspectives; and (e) the research must be guided by an analytical

agenda, aiming to interpret the deeper meaning of experiences rather than simply describing them.

3.6. Ethical Considerations of the Research

Gratton and Jones (2010) emphasise that the ethical issues associated with any research should be of great concern to the researcher and the researcher themselves must be socially and morally sound. In the same vein, Moriña (2020) states that any research involving people should have ethics at its core. Such considerations include but are not limited to the role of the researcher; anonymity; the importance of gaining informed consent; and the risks of carrying out the research versus the benefits (MacNamee et al. 2007).

The most common process to assess the ethicality of research is through submission to an ethics review board, the purpose of which is to ensure that the research being carried out both respects and safeguards participants (Wijngaarden et al. 2018). Ethical approval for the current research was gained through the Bournemouth University ethics panel and the research was deemed to be of minimal risk.

A number of specific ethical considerations were applicable to this research. The main concern of study one was ensuring the anonymity of the participants and the football clubs in which they were representing. This is often common practice amongst research reports, with use of pseudonyms, changes in organisation names, and, in some cases, the use of fictitious elements (Moriña 2021). Due to the nature of the interview questions, participants often disclosed information about their organisation and/or individuals within the organisation that may not have been considered favourable by those discussed, this may have then led to negative ramifications for the participant if they were identified.

Additionally, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which caused a number of honest, and somewhat negative, discussions to emerge. Therefore, it was important to ensure that the participants providing such opinions were not identifiable after the research was published. In order to address this issue, each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity in the presentation of the data, and (in the first strand of data collection) the names of the participants respective clubs were withheld to ensure that they remained unidentifiable.

Study two posed a different issue, in relation to the researcher-participant relationship, and the responsibility of being an insider/practioner-researcher (Fleming 2018). Throughout the duration of study two, the researcher also held a practioner role at the organisation, responsible for delivering the sport psychology programme to the academy players. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and the participants was already established and the researcher had already been accepted into the environment (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Chammas 2020), which would not be possible if the research was conducted by an outsider. While the pre-existing relationship between the researcher and participants was a benefit in relation to the acceptance of the researcher and comfort of the participants during the interviews, it also needed to be considered as an ethical implication. It was essential that, in order for the research to be valid, the researcher learnt to separate their role as a practitioner within the organisation from their role as a qualitative researcher. This separation ensured that the researcher did not influence the participants answers and cause the data to be bias. It was achieved by the careful development of the interview guide, avoiding questions that directly related to the researcher in relation to their role as a

practitioner within the academy. This issue is discussed in greater detail and reflected on in chapter 4.

Each participant that was approached to take part in the research was required to read a participant information sheet (appendix 3,4) and complete a participant agreement form (appendix 5). This was to ensure that all participants received all the relevant information that they needed in order to wholly understand the what the study entailed and its intended use. They were then able to make an informed decision on whether to volunteer to partake or not and complete the participant agreement accordingly. Additionally, on the day of the interview, participants were once again reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any point during the process. It was further explained that if at any point during the interview they felt uncomfortable, they could pause the interview, reschedule, or withdraw from the study.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the development and conduct of this autoethnographic study. The research, which spanned five competitive seasons, was centred primarily on the researcher's own thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and experiences within a professional football academy environment. As the data was generated through personal reflection, memory, and self-observation—and did not involve the direct participation of others—formal ethical approval was not deemed necessary. Nevertheless, ethical sensitivity was maintained throughout, particularly given the potential for others to be indirectly implicated within the narrative.

In recognition of this, all identifying details—such as names, roles, and specific events—were either anonymised or suitably modified to preserve confidentiality and protect the privacy of individuals associated with the context.

Although the researcher functioned as the primary participant, a sustained reflexive awareness was applied to ensure that the writing remained ethically sound, respectful, and mindful of the broader implications of self-disclosure. Particular attention was paid to avoiding misrepresentation or harm, even in instances where individuals were not explicitly named.

The study adhered to the core principles of ethical research practice as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2018), including the safeguarding of privacy, the minimisation of potential harm, and the fair and respectful portrayal of others within the research setting. These principles guided both the methodological approach, and the interpretive choices made during the representation of personal experience.

The role of the researcher was considered throughout the research process (particularly in relation to the second strand of data collection) and is discussed in depth in chapter 4. In addition, gaining the trust of the participants and providing a safe and comfortable environment for them to share their experiences was an integral part of the research and was fundamental for its success.

Trustworthiness

According to Polit and Beck (2022), the trustworthiness of a study refers to level of confidence in the data collected, the interpretation of that data, and the methods used to ensure the quality of the findings. This degree of trustworthiness is imperative to the usefulness and integrity of the overall research (Cope 2013). Adler (2022) explains that the most important element of trustworthiness is transparency. They explain that, while the assumption is that quantitative research adopts the ontological and epistemological stance of science and are therefore credible; the principal research instrument in qualitative research is the

researcher themselves (Dogson 2019). Therefore, if the researcher is not deemed trustworthy by the consumers, the research as a whole will be questioned (Adler 2022). It is for this reason that the researcher should provide transparency by clearly presenting the research techniques, as well as the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings that the research is based on (Adler 2022).

Another important aspect of trustworthiness is reflexivity, whereby the researcher makes a conscious effort to acknowledge their position in the research and understand the impact that their involvement had on the study (Mao et al. 2016). This is something that was given significant consideration throughout the research and is unpacked in greater detail in chapter 4.

Transferability

Traditionally, transferability is referred to by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as 'the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts' (p. 124). This research, however, borrows its definition from Smith (2018), who offers an alternative perspective from the epistemological assumption that knowledge is subjective and constructed by the individual, and that there is not one single reality. Smith (2018) offers the definition that transferability occurs 'whenever a person or group in one setting considers adopting something from another that the research has identified' (p.140). Therefore, this research views transferability as the level to which the results are transferable to other settings. In this case, the project findings are transferable across the academy football environment. This is because of the breadth of participants involved; the first study explores the experiences of seven practitioners across six different football academies, while the second study examines the perceptions of ten participants operating in

various roles within a Premier League Football Academy's multidisciplinary team. Therefore, the findings from this project are relevant and transferable to any UK football academy (category 1-3).

3.7. Thesis Objectives

To reiterate, the underpinning aim of this thesis is to explore the provision, delivery, and experiences of sport psychology within elite youth football academies across England. This will be delivered through three main objectives:

1. Explore the perceptions and experiences of sport psychologists working within the elite, English academies, through the use of a qualitative methods design, in order to understand the nature and implementation of sport psychology within the auspices of the EPPP.
2. Critically assess the provision of sport psychology within an elite youth football academy from multiple perspectives (coaches and support staff), using a qualitative methods design, to explore current perceptions and attitudes of psychology.
3. Present an auto-ethnographical account of the lived experiences of working within a premier league academy delivering sport psychology services.

3.8. Summary

This chapter has presented an interpretive, qualitative approach that used semi-structured interviews and autoethnography in order to collect the in-depth experiences of participants across two data collection phases (Chapters 5 and 6) and an auto-ethnographical account of applying such knowledge over the course of five seasons. While each of these phases presents its own methodology within the respective chapters (5,6,7), this chapter has provided a philosophical and

theoretical underpinning of the research, as well discuss the ethical considerations that were addressed. Finally, this chapter has presented the overall aim and objectives of the research, which are unpacked in greater detail in later chapters (5,6,7).

CHAPTER 4: A Reflexive Account of the Research Process

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this reflexivity chapter is to tell the story of the PhD journey, from novice to expert researcher. It will highlight the key points of decision-making and influencing factors which have shaped the PhD.

According to Haynes (2012), the term reflexivity is the awareness of the role of the researcher within the research and the way in which it is influenced by the object of the research, allowing the researcher to then acknowledge the way in which they may affect the process and outcome of the research. The conceptualisation of reflexivity is dependent on the researcher's own epistemological and ontological stance, whether that be objectivist or subjectivist. Akin to the research design, the subjectivist view suggests that the knowledge gained from the research is socially constructed, and the researcher's interpretation of this knowledge creates reality (Haynes 2012). Additionally, Alvesson and Skoldburg (2000) explain two key elements which are fundamental to reflexive research – interpretation and reflection. The interpretive element suggests that interpretation is based on more than just the analysis of data, which reflects a form of 'reality'. The reflection element is when the researcher focuses on themselves and the intellectual and cultural influences that surround them, thus informing the research.

The issue of the researcher as an insider offers a deeper insight into the environment and the occurrences within those environments, which would not be accessible through outsider approaches (Wolcott 2011). If researchers choose to take this insider approach, it is important that they openly recognise their position,

the relationships that they hold within the organisation, and the impact in which this may have on the research (Chammas 2020).

When discussing reflexivity, it is important to consider my own philosophy towards sport psychology, to shed light on my individual perspective towards the research. I believe that sport psychology is the foundation of performance, how an athlete thinks and acts in a sporting context, whether that be in the gym, in training, or in competition. Additionally, athletes are impacted by external factors, such as home life, work and school life, and their personal relationships, therefore, sport psychology should take a holistic approach and consider the impact of such issues, as well as those that are performance-based. I feel that the role of the sport psychologist is to support the athlete in a holistic manner, providing a range of provisions, such as psychological skills education, live feedback, and 1-2-1 support sessions. Obviously, this is not always possible due to the workload that this would include, particularly if there is only one sport psychologist working with a larger group of athletes, such as a football team. Therefore, I believe that this research is essential, not only to broaden the academic literature around the topic, but also to prove that there needs to be a greater level of provision provided within academy football, to ensure that each player receives the level of sport psychology support that they require.

4.2. Background Context

The PhD was match funded between Bournemouth University and a Premier League Academy, specifically the sport science and medicine department of the academy. However, the first key decision was that study one (chapter 5) would explore the experiences of sport psychologists across the United Kingdom. This was to establish what is considered ‘normal’ practice, and

broadly used across academy systems, and what is considered to be above or below this standard. This then provided me with an overview of the psychological provisions being utilised and how other sport psychologists delivered sport psychology education and support, which could then be used as benchmark data to allow for critical analysis of sport psychology at the category 3 academy within study two (chapter 6). To further contextualise and enrich the empirical findings, an autoethnographic account was compiled over a five-season period (chapter 7). This account offered a first-hand, experiential perspective on the delivery of sport psychology within the academy system, contributing depth and reflexivity to the overall investigation.

4.3. Position in the Research

For transparency, it is important to recognise where I sat within the research. Throughout the duration of the research project, I was embedded within the academy football environment. Due to the contractual expectations of the industry partner, I reported to the head of sport science and medicine. The sport science and medicine department consisted of sport science, medical, sport analysis, and sport psychology. In order to meet the EPPP requirements, I assisted with the delivery of the psychoeducational programme at the category three academy discussed in chapter 6. This entailed delivering weekly workshops to ages 14-16 but also providing less regular support to ages 8-13 and 17-18. As part of this role, I worked closely with the multidisciplinary team. Due to the nature of football and turnaround of staff, this is ever changing; however, at the time of study two, the sport science and medicine department consisted of two sport scientists (full-time), two physiotherapists (1 full-time, 1 part-time), three part-time sport analysts, and myself. Additionally, I worked particularly closely with three coaches

and the head of education. This embedment into the environment enabled me to build strong relationships with both staff and players and gain access to data that would otherwise not be attainable, as previously mentioned by Wolcott (2011). The belief is that, due to the relationship that I had with the academy, the members of staff who participated in the study gave true and detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions of the current position of the academy. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the experiential realities of the youth players and staff embedded in the academy football environment through providing an opportunity to "understand the cognitive, emotional and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field" (Chavez 2008 p. 481; Champ et al. 2020).

My position at the football club throughout the research was unique because not only was I collecting data from the staff at the club, but I was also working alongside them to deliver sport psychology content to the players attending the academy. This gave me a different research experience because I had access to information that would only be attainable through internal involvement. Additionally, I had already built strong relationships and level of trust with the participants, meaning that they would be more comfortable disclosing their experiences and perceptions to me. Because the participants trusted me, they knew myself and my research were credible, and were therefore more open to taking part than if an outside researcher conducted the research using a standard, external academic, approach.

As discussed in other chapters (3,5,6,7), the paradigmatic approach that was taken was that of interpretivism. However, due to my position within the

football environment throughout the research, ethnographic action research could also have been used. Ethnographic action research seeks to combine the two approaches of ethnography and participant action research. This means that the researcher is immersed in the environment of study for an extended period of time in order to gain a holistic understanding of the local contexts (Bradbury 2015). This could have been used for this research project, whereby I would be embedded in the football organisation that was discussed in study two, I would, alongside interviewing each of the key stakeholders, report my observations and experiences, both formal and informal, throughout the PhD. However, this was not considered suitable for the more traditional 'helicoptering' research method required for study one. Study one required me to conduct interviews with multiple participants from multiple organisations, to explore their perceptions and experiences rather than my own.

An alternative approach would have been that of the ecological stance. This refers to the impact of the environment and how day-to-day events shape an individual's life (Wicker 1988). According to Carneiro and Howard (2011), ecological studies seek to explore the relationship between outcome and exposure within a group of individuals with a shared characteristic, such as employment, geography, or gender. This approach could have been taken when conducting study two, as all participants shared a common characteristic, their employment at the category three football academy. Unlike study one, which explored the experiences of multiple individuals from multiple football academies, study two sought to place a magnifying glass on one specific organisation and the day-to-day experiences of those individuals working within it.

Finding the most appropriate epidemiological approach to the studies within this research project has contributed to a large part of my journey to discovering the type of researcher I am. Throughout the process of the PhD, I have established that I have become an interpretivist who embeds myself in the environment in which I am researching. In addition to this, it is clear that I take a pragmatic approach to qualitative research. That is, combining and borrowing from the most suitable qualitative approaches in order to meet the needs of the research (Ramanadhan et al. 2021).

4.4. Points of Consideration

Whilst my position provided a unique insight into the experiences of those working within the academy football environment, there were also several factors that needed to be taken into consideration when carrying out the research project (Poulton 2021). It was essential to recognise that while my position allowed for positive relationships to be built with the participants, there was also a risk of bias if I became too involved in the research setting and therefore no longer able to be objective (Saidin and Yaacob 2017). When designing the interview guide, there were topics that I knew would be insightful, and within that, there were certain participants I knew would provide particularly valuable answers due to their position in the academy and their overarching philosophy and approach to sport psychology and the academy environment. That said, the questions were not built around any individuals, and each question was asked and discussed in the same way with each participant, ensuring that the quality of the interviews was consistent and there was no bias towards a particular topic or participant. Building strong relationships with the participants made my role as a researcher easier because it meant that they were more forthcoming with their answers due

to the level of trust that already existed between us, which would otherwise not exist with an outsider researcher. However, my role as a researcher became challenging when trying to distinguish my position as a researcher collecting data, and the member of staff that the participants knew and worked with as part of a team. It took some time to separate these roles for the purpose of ensuring the interviews were not biased in any way or influenced by my own beliefs about the academy.

4.5. Being an Insider

When conducting insider research, I had to consider a number of ethical issues that differ from those faced as an outsider researcher (Fleming 2018). One of these issues is that, as an insider researcher, I had access to information that would not be available to an outsider, some of which was personal and confidential. Therefore, I had to consider whether it was ethical to use the information I had gained from working within the environment, and if so, which information to use and how to ensure the confidentiality of the participants (Floyd and Arthur 2012; Fleming 2018). Additionally, I had to be aware of the risks relating to being in a role of formal/informal power, that is, because I was responsible for delivering the sport psychology programme, would this impact the answers in which the participants gave, out of concern of being judged, as stated by Fleming (2018). Other issues that should be considered are social position, theoretical orientations, political and professional beliefs, personal preferences, and emotional responses to participants (Berger 2015; The and Lek 2018). In this case, the most prominent factors to be considered were my social and professional position within the academy, my influence on the psychological content at the academy, and my emotional responses to the participants. When

considering my social and professional position, the personal relationships between myself and other members of staff must be considered. At the time of the second study, I had developed several friendships within the academy that branched outside of the professional environment; however, when in the academy setting, the relationships with those individuals remained professional and unbiased, particularly throughout the interview process. One way that this was ensured was by using the interview guide, meaning that each participant had the same core questions to answer, despite the level of relationship they held with me. This meant that there was no bias towards a particular participant with whom I had a stronger relationship, and it meant I could not change the interview questions for each participant in order to obtain the answers I wanted or influence the way in which they explained their experiences. My professional position and my influence on the psychological content at the academy also required consideration. That is, during the time that I spent at the academy, I was responsible for creating and delivering the sport psychology programme to all academy players; therefore, I had great influence on the psychological content that players and staff were exposed to. This may have impacted the way in which the participants in study two answered, out of concern for insulting me if they criticised the psychological programme that was in place. This was taken into consideration when creating the interview guide, and questions that would put participants in a position where they had to directly talk about me were removed, focusing solely on the psychological provisions at the academy, the experiences of those working there, and the way in which this provision could be enhanced. When I became involved with the academy, the sport psychology programme was already in action, and I just took over the delivery of that programme. Over

time, I have developed and progressed the programme to better suit the players and staff at the academy, whilst also adhering to the requirements of the EPPP and working to the restrictions of the academy itself (contact time, staffing numbers, facilities, financial availability). Therefore, this research is also of interest and benefit to me because it has furthered my understanding of 1) the experience of sport psychology at other academies in England, allowing a comparison to the category 3 academy and where the provisions can be improved, and 2) how coaches and support staff perceive the current psychology programme that is in place at the category 3 academy, which will assist in the development of such programme, further bettering the provisions in which the players and staff receive.

4.6. COVID-19

A major factor which impacted the research was the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown that occurred across 2020/21. This proved very challenging as the lockdown was announced in the middle of the data collection for study one; therefore, travelling to interviews was no longer possible. In an attempt to keep the data collection progressing, participants were asked if they would be happy to take part in Zoom calls in order to complete the interviews. Due to the rules of the furlough scheme, members of staff were unable to reply to work emails or be interviewed, which set the research back significantly. Once furlough began to be lifted and people were able to start working from home again, interviews were able to continue on 31st August 2020, but only over Zoom. A further setback was encountered during the data collection stage of study two, when another national lockdown was announced on 5th November 2020. This meant that the category 3 academy was closed, and staff were again furloughed,

which meant that they were unable to take part in interviews until they were once again allowed to work from home. Interviews continued over Zoom after the academy staff were able to resume work, but the whole data collection process for study one and study two took considerably longer than planned, taking a total of 10 months.

When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, I was eighteen months into the PhD process and at the beginning of my development as a researcher, which made me especially nervous when the lockdown was announced. I was worried that I would no longer have a constant line of communication with my supervisors and would therefore be isolated from the support that I had been receiving up until this point. In addition, I was extremely concerned about the data collection that I had planned in the coming weeks/months and the fact that I would have to push this back due to the restrictions.

While the contact with my supervisors was not as frequent, we continued to have regular meetings over Zoom, which kept the line of communication open and ensured that I was still able to send work to them to look at when needed. On the other hand, where the contact was less frequent, I had to become more independent and trust myself as a researcher. I found that I was taking more time to work on the write-up of other sections (methodology, literature review) myself before then sending it to my supervisors, which was beneficial because it meant that I was able to continue progressing in between meetings, despite being unable to collect data when planned. This meant that I grew in confidence in my ability to write and became less reliant on the reassurance of my supervisors. I used the extra time that I had to focus on the method and literature review, and was able to gain more specific knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of

these aspects. Overall, I feel that I grew as a researcher during this unpredictable time, which provided me with added time to better separate and manage my dual roles as a practitioner and researcher.

Whilst Covid-19 meant that the project took longer to complete, I do not believe it impacted the overall quality of the research. While I was unable to complete data collection, I continued to work on other aspects of the thesis, specifically, the literature review and methodology sections of both studies and the overall thesis.

4.7. The Change in Structure of the Research

Throughout the research project, I have had to change and adapt to unforeseen circumstances (Covid-19) which has proven difficult at times, but I believe that the research that has been presented is representative of the current provisions of sport psychology within academy football, and what it is like to both deliver and receive such provisions.

The psychology programme at the category 3 academy stayed the same after the research, but will be reviewed in light of the findings that have emerged. This will then form a post-doctorate study and will seek to document the development of the psychology programme over a period of time, about the recommendations of this PhD.

The PhD was advertised with a title and focus agreed by both parties, and there was then a period of narrowing down the specific question. That is, as a research team, we needed to develop a specific research question and subsequent studies in order to best answer this question. We had to identify and discuss the key information that the funding organisation wanted to be included in the PhD, and we could best frame this into a substantial body of research that

would also benefit the university. This deliberation took more time than we were intending, but I feel that it meant that we were able to start the research with a clear plan and several objectives that everyone from both parties was happy with and agreed on. The objectives that we had to consider included the academic gain from delving into the experiences of a variety of English academy sport psychologists and the position in which the category 3 academy took within this. Due to the nature of the research, I feel that providing a reflexivity chapter is invaluable as it gives context and depth to the thought processes and the underlying factors that influenced the research and the way in which the research was conducted. It also highlights information and data that were not included in the actual studies, such as what it was like working within the environment in which I was carrying out the research, and how this impacted the way in which I conducted and presented it. It also allows me to present the issues that I faced during the PhD process and how, as a research team, we overcame these. This chapter, along with chapters 5, 6 and 7, provides a plethora of rich data which is then supported by my experiences during the research and the context that underpinned each decision.

4.8. Summary

Upon reflection, I found this chapter the hardest to present. The practice of personal reflection within a research setting is fairly new to me. It has challenged me to think further than the evidence-based findings that emerged from the research, but to consider my journey through the research process. This required me to look at my research from a different angle, and I have had to consider my position within the research and how this will impact my level of bias and the way in which I can ensure my research remains ethical and robust.

When I first got accepted for the PhD, I was a 23-year-old student, fresh out of my undergraduate degree. I had very limited experience with large-scale research, and the most I had written was my 15,000-word dissertation. I was excited to learn and broaden my knowledge, as well as being very proud of myself for being accepted onto a PhD in the first place, however, I was also very nervous and worried that I was not intelligent enough or experienced enough to be able to carry out the project (imposter syndrome comes to mind). I knew it was going to be tough, but I did not quite appreciate how much work and motivation it would take, and how much I would develop as a researcher and overall character. I started to work on my literature review as soon as we had decided on the research questions, I found that this allowed me to get to grips with the topic and see what research had already been done around it, this also allowed me to get used to academic writing again and find my feet in what was a very new experience for me. The nerves stayed with me for the first few months of the PhD, and I felt that I needed approval from my supervisors with every decision I made due to self-doubt. It took a while for me to grow my confidence in my work and my ability to do it. Through regular meetings with my supervisory team, I began to develop my ideas and understanding of what the project required and the route which I saw it taking. By the time of my major review, I felt confident enough to defend my work and discuss the process which I had carried out. I think my real passion for my work came when I started to put together my first study, seeing the data organised and presented in a paper that had been written by myself (with support from my supervisory team) made me feel a real sense of purpose and accomplishment, I knew that what I was doing was innovative and of great value. I proceeded to publish that paper in the ‘Sports’ journal and presented my work

at the FEPSAC 2022 in Padova. I felt that both of these achievements really helped me grow as a researcher by giving me ownership of my work and becoming a true expert in the research which I was doing. More recently, I have been putting together my overall thesis, which has meant that I have been pulling together all of the different aspects of my work that have been completed over the last four years. Looking at all of these pieces of work pulled together as one overall document has highlighted just how much time and work have gone into the PhD, and for that, I feel proud.

As I previously stated, I have found this reflexive chapter the hardest one to write because it has required me to look further than the data and the results of the research and discuss my experiences and feelings around the overall process of completing the PhD. For me, this has been a very surreal experience because it goes against everything that I have learnt about writing a research paper. It feels unnatural to move away from literature and facts to support my comments and instead write in first person, giving my account of how everything has progressed.

By completing a reflective practice, I have been able to better understand myself as a researcher whilst also exploring the role which I took within the research itself. I have learnt a lot about myself and the way in which I apply myself as a practitioner and a researcher, and I have learnt how these two roles overlap and exist and are, in fact, complementary to each other.

CHAPTER 5: An Examination of the Experiences of Sport Psychologists Working in English Premier League Football Academies

5.1. Introduction

Although integration of psychological services within the preparation of football players has tended historically to lag behind a focus on physical, technical, and tactical aspects, sport psychology has become increasingly recognized and accepted within football (Heidari et al. 2019; Konter et al. 2019), as it has in sport in general (Barker et al. 2020; Hings et al. 2020; Sly et al. 2020). Indeed, although there is still some resistance towards employing sport psychology services (Kremer and Moran 2013; Ong and Harwood 2018), psychological skills are increasingly understood as fundamental for success and career progression in sports like football (Gledhill et al. 2017; Konter et al. 2019; Sarmento et al. 2018). As such, there is now an appreciation that successful performance is as much about a player's overall psychological state and the development and execution of advanced psychological skills as it is about physical prowess.

Since 2012, the English Premier League (EPL) has, via its Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), mandated the inclusion of psychology within the development programme for English football players. Despite this initiative, the integration of sport psychology remains a challenge (Konter et al. 2019), and the discipline is not always positively received by all (Champ et al. 2018). Additionally, there is limited research describing the experience of applied sport psychology practitioners working in the sport. The present study sought to gain insight into the delivery of sport psychology within the framework of the EPPP through

capturing the experiences of sport psychology practitioners currently working within EPL football academies in the United Kingdom.

The EPPP was instigated in 2012, supported by a budget of £320 million (Horrocks et al. 2016). The main aim underpinning the development of the EPPP was to "increase the number and quality of . . . [English] . . . players gaining professional contracts . . . and playing first team football at the highest level" (Premier League 2011, p.12). This ambition would be realized through the development of athletes within the Premier League and Football League academies (the key development environment for young players in England), which are designed to provide young players with expert coaching, support, and education. Academies are audited every three years and must provide evidence of individualized coaching interventions that address each player's physical, technical, tactical, and social and psychological development. Academies are subsequently awarded a categorization of 1 to 4 (1 being the highest), which then dictates the level of provision that is expected of them. As part of the EPPP guidelines, academies must make a sport science and medicine programme available to all players. Such programmes include physical testing and measurement, physiotherapy, medical services, nutrition, performance analysis, and psychology.

Although guidelines regarding the delivery of sport psychology within the EPPP were initially quite limited, the EPPP guidelines have more recently progressed, such that there are now more clearly defined minimal requirements. These include psychological testing, lifestyle management, and the delivery of mental skills education, as well as appropriate qualifications for the person delivering the psychological support. The latter means that those delivering sport

psychology in English football academies must be qualified to Master's degree-level in psychology or sport psychology, and registered on either of the British Psychology Society or British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences accreditation pathways.

Beyond the above minimal requirements, however, football club academies are afforded flexibility in delivery of psychological provision, such that there is no uniform content or standard of delivery. Some choose to draw on work focusing on the 5Cs of confidence, control, concentration, commitment, and communication (Pain 2016; Godfrey and Winter 2017), but otherwise evidence for the specific breakdown of psychology provision is scant (Harwood 2008; Harwood et al. 2015). The purpose of the 5Cs psychological intervention was to ensure that youth football players were provided with a greater amount of psychological education and development within training sessions (Harwood 2008). Harwood et al. (2015) suggested that their model was derived from Lerner et al.'s (2000) 6Cs of youth development—character, confidence, connection, competence, caring, and contribution—developed with reference to the skills necessary to develop a more civilized society (Lerner et al. 2000; Harwood et al. 2015; Steptoe et al. 2019). It is important to note, however, that it is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of this model because there is no record of the number of clubs using it. Furthermore, the research examining the model is only being conducted by a small group of researchers (Harwood et al. 2015; Konter et al. 2019; Pain and Harwood 2004; Steptoe et al. 2019).

More widely, coaches have long been considered a key source of support (Rees et al. 2012), who are often the "first line of defence" in dealing with psychological concerns. In this respect, there has been recent interest in the need

for coaches and support staff in sporting organizations to develop their psychological literacy. The importance of psychological literacy, defined as "the ethical application of psychological skills and knowledge" (Murdoch 2016, p.189) should not be underestimated. Although increasing the reach and impact of psychology through non-professionals (not just trained practitioners) would be a goal of developing psychological literacy, Murdoch (2016) also noted the potential risks of non-professionals sharing psychological knowledge that may not be accurate. Indeed, Pain and Harwood (2004) previously observed a lack of understanding and knowledge of sport psychology by coaches and support staff in English Football Academies, meaning they were potentially ill-equipped (even if they sensed the need) to draw on psychology within their coaching sessions. Thus, although the integration of psychological literacy across clubs is a positive steppingstone, it should not overtake the importance of having certified practitioners delivering psychological services to young players. The current research draws upon psychological literacy, that is, an individual's ability to apply psychological understanding to their everyday (personal, social, and work) lives. The purpose of drawing upon psychological literacy is to provide relevant context to the study in relation to the understanding of psychology and how non-psychology practitioners then apply that knowledge.

The purpose of the present study was therefore twofold: first, to explore the role and experiences of practitioners working in sport psychology, within elite football academies in England; and second, to understand the nature and implementation of sport psychology within the auspices of the EPPP. Furthermore, this study sought to explore these practitioners' perceptions of what is successful (cf. Henriksen 2010) and what needs further development in relation

to the EPPP and how the academies are integrating sport psychology into their youth programmes.

5.2. Method

An interpretivist paradigm (Hennink et al. 2019) was adopted to explore the experiences of practitioners responsible for sport psychology delivery within football academies in England.

5.2.1. Participants

Participants (four females, three males; aged 31 to 41 years, mean = 34.8) were British (all white), representing six elite English football academies at four Premier League (the highest-level league in England) and two Championship (the second tier of English football) clubs. Of the six academies, five had (at the time the research was conducted) Category 1 status (the highest-level academy in England, running on a scale from 1 to 3, as stipulated by the EPPP academy audit system); one had Category 2 status. All participants held a master's degree or higher, three were British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) accredited, two participants were BASES Sport and Exercise Psychology Accreditation Route (SEPAR) accredited, and the same two were also Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered. Participants' experience of working as practitioners within a psychology unit ranged from 4 to 15 years.

5.2.2. Sampling

For inclusion in the study, participants were required to meet one key judgment criterion: participants needed to be responsible for delivering the sport psychology programme to youth performers at an elite football academy with EPPP category status in England. In order to ensure that all those working within psychology departments at football academies had an equal chance to take part

in the study, purposive chain sampling (Patton 1990) was initiated during the data collection process. Participants recommended other practitioners who met the criterion of the study and who might be willing to take part.

5.2.3. Procedure

Following ethical approval from an institutional research committee, an internet search using terms including 'EPPP', 'football academies', and 'English football' was undertaken to identify all elite English football clubs with an academy holding EPPP status. Clubs which held the contact details for those working in the psychology department at each of the academies were listed, and clubs that did not display these contact details were removed. Potential participants were then contacted and invited to be interviewed for the study through an initial email. If a response was not received, follow-up contact was attempted, through email, two weeks later. Those who failed to respond were excluded from the study. Those who did respond and agree to be interviewed were sent a participant information pack, which contained details regarding the study aims, as well as information regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, until the point of data analysis and write up. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with the opportunity to review the participant information sheet and give further verbal consent for participation.

5.2.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken, to allow participants freedom to clearly explain their perspective and experiences, but the direction of the interview was still guided by pre-determined questions (Jones 2015; Hennink et al. 2020). The interview guide was flexible, in order to allow each participant to

share their own experience of providing psychological support, yet it centred around a number of key areas of interest. For example, the initial questions ascertained demographic information such as the participants' role, their qualifications and years of experience within the field, and their experience of delivering sport psychology services to youth performers. Questions such as 'can you tell me about your career in sport psychology?' and 'Can you tell me about the academy structure at your club and where you sit within it?' were adopted. The guide probed further in order to explore participants' view of sport psychology and its current delivery in English Academy settings. It further examined the role of the EPPP in guiding such psychological provision.

As each interview concluded, each participant was asked if there was anything that they wanted to add that had not previously been discussed; once answered, the interviewee thanked the participant and closed the interview. A number of probes, where appropriate, were used in order to elicit more depth from the participants, in order to gain a more detailed understanding of their perceptions and experiences. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. The interviews took place virtually, via video calls (rather than in person), due to restrictions on in person meetings due to Covid-19.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the judgment criteria outlined by Smith and McGannon (2017) were applied throughout the design and implementation of the study. The sample was selected with the expectation that it would reflect experiences and practices common to other Category 1, 2, or 3 academy clubs with EPPP status. However, given the elite nature of the environment in which the participants work, the findings are unlikely to be applicable to grassroots or recreational football, where different structures and

processes are likely to exist. While qualitative research does not aim to produce findings that can be broadly applied, this study offers meaningful insights into the work of psychologists operating within English elite football academies, which may be relevant to those in similar professional contexts.

5.2.5. Data Analysis

In order to identify common themes within the data collected, in line with the interpretivist approach, thematic analysis was used as the framework of analysis (Herzog et al. 2019). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim into a word document. Any irrelevant data (welcomes, inaudible audio, pleasantries) were removed in order to ensure the data analysis was meaningful and relevant to the study. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2020), a six-phase thematic analysis process was employed: (a) data familiarization and writing familiarization notes was achieved by listening to the interviews and transcribing them; (b) systematic data coding involved grouping the raw data into common themes; (c) generating initial themes from coded and collated data was achieved through the codes being re-examined and patterns identified among the data; (d) developing and reviewing themes was completed when the identified themes were compared to the raw data, and looked over by the supervisory team, to ensure that they were appropriate ; (e) refining, defining, and naming themes occurred once the themes were agreed upon; and finally, (f) writing the report meant that all themes were presented and then discussed in detail. Although the process consists of six phases, each phase does not have to be isolated. According to Braun and Clarke (2020), as the researcher becomes more familiar with thematic analysis, the six phases can become blended and carried out simultaneously. Following the interviews and transcription, in order to maintain anonymity, each participant was

given a pseudonym. Using thematic analysis, six key themes were constructed. Within these key themes, raw data quotations were coded and grouped to form sub-themes.

5.3. Results and Discussion

From the interviews 50 raw data codes were extracted and organised into six key themes: a) The breadth of sport psychology provision, b) what is sport psychology, c) the stigma surrounding sport psychology services, d) psychological literacy, e) the elite youth football environment, and f) the delivery of sport psychology under the Elite Player Performance Plan. Across these six themes, a further six sub-themes were generated which highlight additional contributing factors to two of the key themes (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3

Themes and Sub-themes Described by the Sport Psychology Practitioners

Theme	Sub-theme	Description
The Breadth of Sport Psychology Provision	The Provision of Sport Psychology in Academies	Psychological practice is diverse, encompassing team-based and individually tailored support, the delivery of psychological education, psychological skills training, and counselling services, alongside clinical referral, or mental health support for players.
	The Application of Psychological Skills	There is value in both classroom and practical sessions, especially when used concurrently. Classroom sessions provide theory, while practical sessions allow for the development of skills in a controlled setting.
	Barriers to the Implementation of Sport Psychology	Clubs need to provide sufficient resources to deliver a successful programme. At present, there is an apparent lack of staffing and financial resources dedicated to sport psychology.
Understanding of Sport Psychology		Although sport psychology may be progressing in terms of awareness and acceptance, there is still a level of resistance to the implementation of sport psychology and the role of practitioners, linked to a narrow understanding of the breadth and scope of psychological support.

The Stigma Surrounding Sport Psychology Services		There still appears to be a stigma attached to the role of psychology and sport psychologists. The role of the psychologist is still unclear to players and is often seen as a way to solve problems, rather than as a holistic aspect of player development and performance programmes.
Psychological Literacy		There is an awareness of sport psychology, but this remains narrow. Psychological literacy is currently lacking in academy settings, especially within core support staff, such as coaches.
The Elite Youth Football Environment		Academy cultures have an impact upon the delivery and reception of psychological support. It is evident that the academy football environment is challenging, highly competitive, and places great demands on both athletes and support staff.
Delivery of Sport Psychology Under the EPPP	Lack of Guidance	It was commonly reported that the EPPP fails to include sufficient detail to scaffold delivery of standardized provision of sport psychology within football academies.

Freedom in Delivery	In some cases, the lack of detail and specificity of the EPPP was viewed as beneficial, because it gives psychology practitioners greater flexibility and ownership over their delivery of sport psychology, allowing them to better cater to the needs of the academy and players.
Room for Development	Further development of the EPPP guidance is required, with greater input from experts in the field, in order to ensure the guidance is relevant and detailed.

5.3.1. The Breadth of Sport Psychology Provision

The initial theme which arose from participants was the breadth of sport psychology provision. This included three sub-themes (a) the provision of sport psychology in academies, (b) the application of psychological skills, and (c) the barriers to the implementation of sport psychology. The current theme relates to the content that is being delivered to academy players and the way in which that is happening, as well as discussing the barriers that have the biggest effect on this.

With regard to the provision of sport psychology across the six academies it was apparent that the levels of provision varied greatly. When discussing differences between academy football and other youth sports, participants often discussed individual sports rather than other team sports. This is because there appeared to be more obvious differences in the provision of sport psychology in

individual sports, and it was a common assumption that individual sports were significantly ahead of academy football in the provision of sport psychology.

The Provision of Sport Psychology in Academies

When discussing the provision of sport psychology, it is important to articulate the meaning of provision. For the purpose of the study, provision is referred to as the amount of sport psychology services that is provided to the players. This includes the form of delivery that is used, how much time is dedicated to delivering sport psychology, and the content that is covered within the sport psychology programme.

Samantha, who at the time of the study, had worked in the setting for eight years, explained:

> 9-11 [the age group], we do half and half, so half out on the pitch and half in the classroom. With the 12s it's again a mixture, so it's half out on the pitch and half in the classroom. With the 13s and 14s at the moment it's all classroom-based, just because of resources. 15s, 16s, again it's a mixture, because we've got one member of staff who mainly focusses on those two, so it's mainly in the classroom and out on the pitch. 18s, their two and a half sessions a week is, err, classroom based.

Similarly, Tony, who has been at his current club for three seasons, described the way the sport psychology programme is delivered to different age groups within an academy:

> For the younger 9s and 10s, I'd run a monthly workshop, where I get them in, weekly or bi-weekly. For the other age groups going up, where something I like to do is, and they have field focus as well. So, I don't want psych to be in the class at all times, so I end up on the field. … So, I have, uh, about

four periods where I'll run through a couple of like challenges or a couple of skills and get all the players involved, with the main objective being psychological one. Not looking at a textbook, although that's working them as well, but they're still working on their football. But the main objective would be that, working on communication, for example, or confidence when they want all the players to get the most confident player in the world, kind of thing. It seemed to buy into that a lot more than when it's in a classroom. And then I say one-to-ones would be more for 18-23s.

The way sport psychology is delivered appears to vary from academy to academy, and even from age group to age group. Dave explained that their sport psychology programme had been designed with an over-arching framework in mind, thus evidencing more of a structural approach to delivery:

So, we have our kind of, I suppose, bespoke profile, if you want to call it that, that we use to identify key characteristics we believe are important to make it as a first team player within our club. So, we use that as our over-arching framework, and then from that we kind of filter it in, in to learning plans, into targets, into goals, based on strengths and development areas as well.

Harry, who has been working as a practitioner in football academies since 2012, went further to explain that their sport psychology programme had been designed to be a key part of the academy's environment, taking a more holistic approach:

When it's performance-related, and essentially, we do a series of things, we do workshops with players, with staff, we do individual support, we try and influence kind of the environment in some ways, so some of the projects we

> work on are more … kind of, systemic, so we try and influence the … I don't want to go as far as to say the culture, that's a bit extreme, but to kind of influence the staff to then influence the players, so we have an indirect impact, so we approach it in different ways, there's lots of different strategies that, but yeah, some of the main things we use would be workshops, interactive workshops, player support, and yeah, kind of just creating, hopefully an environment whereby psychology is talked about and utilized as much as possible.

It was apparent from the interviews that the practice of psychology is diverse, encompassing team-based and individually tailored support, the delivery of psychological education, psychological skills training, and counselling services, alongside clinical referral or mental health support for players.

The Application of Psychological Skills

Although sport psychology is often delivered through classroom-based workshops, an increasing number of academies are now focusing on integrating sport psychology during on-pitch sessions. Therefore, although the amount of official time allocated to sport psychology may lag behind other sport science disciplines, there are novel developments with regard to how sport psychology is being delivered. As Karen noted:

> When we are out there, and we are talking, and we are doing things and then we might reflect afterwards and just try to attach anything to the actual game and making it as engaging and as real as physically possible.

Although there is an increasing focus on delivering sport psychology during on-pitch sessions, Dave explained the benefit of retaining classroom-based sessions. Dave stated that the academy players are educated regarding

psychological skills and strategies, and then given the opportunity to practice them within a classroom setting before transferring them into training and game situations:

> What we try to do is practice the techniques in the classroom. We might do different games, might do, err, just a drive through of the technique, then we'll actually say ok when are these situations or what situations will arise where we might be able to use this technique? And then we go practice it for two or three weeks in training, and they can start to manipulate and practice it in games as well.

From these findings, it is evident that there is value in both classroom and practical sessions, especially when used concurrently; the classroom sessions provide a chance for information and techniques to be explained in detail, while the practical sessions allow for these techniques to be practiced within a controlled environment that can then be manipulated to reflect real match scenarios.

Barriers to the Implementation of Sport Psychology

Barriers towards the use of sport psychology were reported by all participants, thus evidencing that these barriers are not just isolated to one club or category status but instead are relevant across English football academies. Multiple barriers were reported including financial resources, staffing resources, and the relatively slow uptake of sport psychology.

There was evidence in support of Pain and Harwood's (2004) assertion that a lack of financial resources was the most commonly perceived barrier to the implementation of sport psychology. As Dave explained:

> So, I think probably limited resource would be the one area … I think a lot of it, in my, probably being controversial here, it's down to funding a little bit, because if you do have the money, you can buy better facilities, you can go abroad and potentially invite players—some clubs don't have that luxury.

This was similarly noted by Harry, "I have experienced resource as a barrier. You know, you don't need loads of money to implement psychology, I'm not saying that. But to do things in a certain way, having kind of funding backing, even if it's to get things designed nicely or in a professional way."

As well as financial resources proving to be a barrier, it was reported that time and staff resources also had an impact on the delivery of sport psychology. Samantha stated, "With the 13s and 14s at the moment it's all classroom-based, just because of resources. We haven't got the time or the resources to be able to implement it out on the pitch all the time and with them." In the same vein, Harry explained:

> I think that the resources you have can sometimes dictate the delivery you can give. So, my previous experience was of me being alone as kind of being the single practitioner within that environment, so my time was spread a lot thinner, and so my strategy and approach had to be a lot different. I think with more staff in resource, you can do more with the players, because that's when you can have a direct impact.

A number of participants reported sport psychology still lagged behind other sport science disciplines in its level of integration into academy football development programmes. As Lily, who at the time of the study, had worked in the environment for seven years, stated, "Sport psychology is still late to the table, and we are still not there yet." However, with the introduction of the EPPP,

academies are now required to provide psychological support. Nonetheless, Lily did not credit the EPPP initiative for increasing such support, leaving questions regarding its impact upon the integration of sport psychology services into academy development programmes. Samantha did, however, note a greater integration of sport psychology within football academies:

> Probably over the last 18 months or so, maybe a little bit longer, psychology has been very much more integrated. So, we are in the audit meetings, we are in the MDT [Multi-Disciplinary Team] meetings, we have our say, we are now working with the analysis team looking at the psychological behaviour analysis and linking that up with the analysis team and clipping that footage so it can go into the prebrief and debrief. A lot of the things that coaches and the MDT are saying is psychological language … a lot of their CPD [Continuing Professional Development] incorporates psychology.

Samantha then added:

> So, we are kind of riding the wave with that. I think we're probably where sports science was five years ago, where S and C [Strength and Conditioning] was a bit of a taboo subject, but it's on the horizon and it's kind of on the up-and-coming, and I think psychology is the same at the minute. It's still a bit of a taboo subject, but give it two or three years we'll be up and coming, we'll be forefront just like S and C.

Despite the latter quote concerning one specific club, it offers some evidence that the integration of sport psychology within academy football is progressing.

These results suggest that, in order for sport psychology to thrive within academy football, it still needs to take greater precedence, and to do so a lack of

staffing and financial resources must be addressed. That is, clubs need to provide sufficient resources to deliver a successful programme. That said, improving resources alone will not solve the issue of sport psychology integration—there also needs to be a greater level of acceptance from coaches and players in order to minimize the apparent resistance against sport psychology.

5.3.2. Understanding of Sport Psychology

According to Konter et al. (2019), football psychology is multi-faceted, comprising social psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, health psychology, and the psychology of coaching. Exposure to such a variety of psychological sub-disciplines may influence the way in which practitioners interpret the purpose and meaning of sport psychology. This theme's key finding mirrors historical debates in the literature (Brady and Maynard 2010), in that, while being concerned with the psychological strategies and techniques to improve performance, sport psychology is also concerned with players' overall wellbeing. As Lily stated, "For me, sport psychology, performance psychology, is like the interconnection of wellbeing and performance." Similarly, Harry stated:

> So, for me, sport psychology is about educating and supporting athletes and staff within a sporting environment. So, it's about informing and upskilling them in psychology principles. It's about, it's about educating them in an appropriate way around what will impact their performance and what will impact the performance of the athletes they work with … and it's about supporting appropriately so whether that's supporting performance enhancement, and I also think it includes supporting wellbeing as well. So, I think both are really important, and I know different practitioners have different philosophies on that. For me they're both completely linked, they're

> both intertwined, performance and wellbeing. You can't have one without the other. So, for me, both of those are really relevant to the role of a sport psych.

This quote thus underpins that, although sport psychology is of course concerned with athletes' performance, its focus may also be taking a more holistic wellbeing approach (Bissett et al. 2020; Yousuf 2019). Indeed, Sara noted that although sport psychology is concerned with enhancing performance, it is also about understanding athlete mental health:

> Sport psychology is just looking at the mental aspect of their performance. … Sport psychology is not purely about how their mental side affects their sort of training and their performance on the pitch but also the wider aspects around the mental health, just like their daily wellbeing as well. It kinda (sic) just incorporates everything that they (the athletes) are. … The sport psychology will look more at the performance aspects, so looking at kind of like peak performance, optimal performance, and those kinds of things.

The findings in this theme support the work of Moore and Bonagura (2017), who stated that sport psychology is not solely for the purpose of performance enhancement, but instead seeks to support performers, their families, and their related organizations to optimize their level of functioning in a multitude of areas. Thus, while practitioners might think deeply about what psychology means to them (Poczwardowski et al. 2004), discussion then moved on to the level of psychological literacy among players and staff and the stigma that is still associated with the discipline. This demonstrates that, while sport psychology may be progressing in terms of awareness and acceptance, there is still a level

of resistance from non-practitioners in relation to the implementation of sport psychology and the role of practitioners.

5.3.3. The Stigma Surrounding Sport Psychology Services

Participants referred to a stigma associated with the use of sport psychology and the role of the practitioner that still persists in academy football. This supports the findings of Champ et al. (2018), who stated that sport psychology is not always received positively by everyone. Lily noted experiences of such stigma: "They [Premier League personnel] said, well a sport psych is somebody that a player goes to for twenty minutes to be forced to see and then lies to them for twenty minutes and then leaves." This negative attitude that players are 'forced' to see a psychology practitioner and then 'lie' suggests that players may still feel the need to avoid psychological support and would be reluctant to be honest when with the psychology practitioner. This showcases that players either believe that there is little value in speaking to a psychology expert, or they do not want the psychology practitioner to know the truth about how they are really feeling. Regardless, this demonstrates that a level of stigma persists around seeking psychological support. Such stigma was deemed to not just be present with academy players but also higher up in the professional football environment. Lily then explained:

> I still think that the reason there aren't as many sport psychologists is because it is still the unknown … so [coaches and players will say] we really value it, we really think it's important, and we really buy into it, and we talk about it all the time and, you know. … However, we still are quite scared about what we do with it.

The above quote demonstrates that although coaches and players recognize the value of sport psychology, there remains a level of resistance to its adoption in football academies (Kremer and Moran 2013; Ong and Harwood 2018). Harry reported that he still experiences a level of reluctance towards sport psychology: “I think psych is always that one that’s got a bit of, I guess stigma’s a word you could use for it, so there have (sic) been in my experience some reluctance.” Additionally, Samantha highlighted that players are still exposed to the stigma that seeking psychological support means that there is a problem, rather than the notion that the use of psychology can lead to performance gains:

> So even though all the players know psychology is part of it [performance development] and all of that, you’ve still got that stigma behind that, go and see the psychologist because you’ve got an issue, and I think that’s still potentially what it is, rather than know that we are performance psychs (sic).

Participants noted that because players spend most of their time with their coach(es), these coaches have the potential to have more influence on the players than a sport psychologist. Sara stated, “It [the integration of sport psychology into training sessions] comes down to the coaches’ own philosophy.” Thus, if coaches do not consider sport psychology to be valuable, they may not include it. Karen provided insight as to why some coaches may be less likely to incorporate sport psychology into their training sessions: “Maybe sometimes you get the sort of coaches, who are typically in the professional development phase, so 18s, the 23s, seem to be ex-professionals, they are the ones that tend to be less open to change.” Sara noted: “Although you know what you should be doing, if the coach doesn’t then allow you to do it, it becomes like a little bit of conflict between what you know you should be doing versus what you’re actually doing.”

Our findings show how there still appears to be a stigma attached to the role of psychology and working with a sport psychologist. As Sara stated, “They still see it as they go to the shrink. … You go and see them when you’ve got a problem.” Additionally, it seems that the role of sport psychology is generally unclear to players. As Konter et al. (2019) noted, sport psychology is not perceived as a regular performance aspect of development, but rather more often as a strategy for overcoming problems and helping the ‘problem athlete’.

5.3.4. Psychological Literacy

Psychological literacy was noted by the participants as the level of understanding a person has of sport psychology and their ability to apply that understanding. In this case, discussing the current level of psychological literacy participants believed coaches and players had, Lily stated, “Actually, the awareness and psychological awareness and literacy, I don’t think it’s, I don’t think it’s where it could be. I think it could be improved, hundred percent, on what it is.” Although Sara suggested that coaches’ psychological literacy is poor, she had a different stance on where the problem lies: “So, their [coaches’] awareness of it [sport psychology] is high, their understanding of it is low … but if you ask them, they would say they have a very high understanding of it. So, I don’t think they realize quite how complex it is.” As this quote demonstrates, it would appear that coaches have a high level of awareness of sport psychology, in that they are exposed to sport psychology within academy football. However, as Sara stated, these same coaches may also mistakenly believe they have a high understanding of sport psychology. This highlights the value of coach education and workshops and the need to educate coaches about the fundamentals of sport psychology, how to use it, and the benefits that surround it (Villalon and Martin 2019). This in

turn could provide coaches with a greater understanding of sport psychology and the tools to successfully incorporate it into their coaching sessions.

In a similar vein, Karen explained a lack of psychological literacy in simpler terms: “I think there will be some staff where it’s quite new and the topics are not gonna (sic) be particularly familiar … they might have heard of the terms but not know what they mean and what it looks like in practice.” This is an important consideration that is supported by Pain and Harwood (2004), who stated that those coaches with a low knowledge base and understanding of sport psychology are ill-equipped to deliver such skills within their training sessions. As recognized by Murdoch (2016), this has the potential to be problematic, because inappropriate (and incorrect) information and skills can be passed onto the athletes, which can even be detrimental for their performance and wellbeing. The present study’s findings demonstrate an awareness of sport psychology but also a lack of understanding among coaches in relation to the application of sport psychology within their coaching practice. As will be discussed in the later sub-theme ‘Freedom in Delivery’, coach and player understanding of sport psychology may be affected by the varied psychological programmes employed across club academies, meaning there is no standardization in exposure of coaches and players to sport psychology.

5.3.5. The Elite Youth Football Environment

As it is in sport in general (McDougall et al. 2015), elite youth football is characterized by a highly pressurized climate for success (Sagar et al. 2010). This characteristic remains true of the English football academies highlighted in the current research, with a primary focus on results, potentially at the expense of player development.

Participants noted that although the development of players is important, the focus of academy football remains on results and winning. This is evidenced by Sara:

> I think the reality of it is that it's still very competitively orientated. It's still very ego oriented; it's still very much a win culture. Although they are looking to develop the players, um, it's not purely developmental orientated. Whilst they are developing the players, I think the winning aspect is still the primary focus.

Although Sara stated that there is consideration of player development within the academies, the fact that the primary focus is on results may be potentially problematic, because this may mean that other factors, such as player wellbeing, may be neglected. In a similar vein to Sara, Lily stated that the level of competitiveness is related to the idea of academies operating as businesses.

> It's much more of a business than I gave it credit for when I started, there's a massive element of, you know, is it gonna (sic) make us money, is it gonna (sic), is he gonna (sic) go to our first team, are we gonna (sic) be able to sell him for a profit, much more so than I probably wanted to believe when I started.

This statement echoes previous work noting that football clubs maintain a primary focus on achieving the best possible results and winning each game (Larsen 2017).

In a similar vein, Harry stated the importance of understanding that some staff and players may find the academy football environment significantly challenging:

It can be a really difficult environment as well. I think there's, it's, it would be remiss to ignore that some people really struggle with this environment. … There's a lot of pressure, whether it's from themselves [academy players], whether it's from their parents, whether it's from other people involved in their journey, to kind of be a certain way, to perform a certain way, and for some players, that's not for everyone. … It's a high expectation environment that's not for everyone, and again some staff thrive on it, some staff don't. So, I think for both it's one of those that can go either way.

This notion is further supported by Tony, who explained the difficulty that staff working within the environment encounter:

The environment, football generally, as in the organization, is a very cut-throat environment. It's yeah, it's not too forgiving. But at the same time, within your organization everyone's quite close. Like when you have a lot of, yeah, relationships between people can be really good. But then at the same time, if those people don't do well, then potentially you could lose your job. You know. Which might have no relation to you. So that's part of the environment. I think it can be quite hard I think for the coaches as well, all staff, not just coaches.

It is evident that the academy football environment is challenging, highly competitive, and places considerable demands on both athletes and support staff (Champ et al. 2020).

5.3.6. Delivery of Sport Psychology Under the EPPP

When conducting research around sport psychology within English football academies, it is important to discuss the presence of the EPPP, because, as the overarching framework for player development in English academies, it

mandates the minimum requirements for psychology provision. When discussing the EPPP and the delivery of sport psychology within football academies, three subthemes were created: (a) lack of guidance; (b) freedom in delivery; and (c) room for development.

Lack of Guidance

Participants expressed their sense of the inadequacy of the EPPP as a guidance framework for standardized provision of sport psychology within football academies. Many of the participants shared concerns surrounding the EPPP as a guiding document, given its lack of (age appropriate) guidelines. As Champ et al. (2020) purported, to date the EPPP has not yet achieved what it originally set out to in terms of guiding psychological practice in academies. This is reflected in the following extract from Sara:

> I guess, it's [the psychology section of the EPPP] vastly inadequate, in terms of when we get audited and I look at the one-page Premier League document, whereby it says, have you seen it, you've seen it right? 'phychology' [sic] … do I need to say any more?

This was supported by Samantha, "Within the audit process, they spelt psychology wrong, so I mean they obviously don't have a great understanding. They want to include it, but I don't think they have a full understanding of it." Lily then continued to explain why she believed the psychology section of the EPPP to be inadequate:

> It was written by a sport scientist, so the language and everything like that, in terms of testing is very physically driven, and all they've done is they've picked up the sport science kind of language, if you like, and they've

> dumped it onto a page that's 'psychology', and they can't even spell psychology right, so let's not go there.

The above quote suggests a lack of expertise in the creation of the psychology section of the EPPP. All of our participants suggested that the EPPP currently fails to include sufficient detail to scaffold the delivery of standardized provision of sport psychology across academy settings.

Freedom in Delivery

Alongside criticisms of the EPPP as a guiding document, some participants reframed this more positively, because it gave them freedom in their delivery of sport psychology. As Karen noted:

> I think that the psychology section of it [EPPP] is one of the most vague … and I think that might frustrate people, but I think it might also be a good thing. … I think the pure performance psychology section is sort of one page, so it gives us a little bit of a framework and the minimal thing we've got to do, but how we do it is entirely up to us.

Lily similarly stated, "There was a lot of freedom given to clubs on how they wanted to do it, so that is based on the philosophy of the club and resources, of course, and funding and where they want to do things." The freedom noted by Karen and Lily might be problematic, if all clubs deliver psychology differently, without any form of standardization. However, Karen further stated that such an approach may be preferable than a stricter set of guidelines: "I think if it [EPPP] had a lot more detail and was a lot more prescript (sic), I think you'd lose that autonomy as a practitioner, and I think the role would be a lot less enjoyable because you'd feel like you were ticking boxes all the time."

Although it was noted that the EPPP lacked detail and specificity, in some cases, this was viewed as beneficial, because this gave psychology practitioners greater flexibility and ownership over their delivery of sport psychology, allowing them to better cater to the needs of the academy and players. In some ways this mirrors the concept noted by others (e.g., see Daley et al. 2020), that although psychological models and frameworks can be useful as a starting point for applied practice, practitioners should indeed tailor such content to the context in which they are working. That said, this lack of detail and specificity may also lead to a lack of standardization across academies in terms of the psychological content and support that players receive, and thus our results suggested there was still room for development regarding the EPPP and its sport psychology guidance.

Room for Development

Participants noted that implementing the EPPP guidelines could become a 'tick box exercise'. As Lily stated, "The first thing that always springs to my mind [in relation to the EPPP], rightly or wrongly, is tick box." Samantha noted that this can lead to academies not going further in their provision of psychology in their programmes: "Clubs are then using it [EPPP] as a tick box exercise, so they never fully integrate it themselves." Dave did not feel constrained by the guidelines, however, stating:

> Well, it is embedded, but I wouldn't go in to a one-to-one with a player or a workshop thinking, 'oh is this going to be ok for EPPP?' Uh, I think I kind of have faith in the programme that we have meets EPPP requirements, rather than trying to make it fit in to the EPPP.

Conversely, Sara stated, “So, I would say it’s given us a little bit more structure, but in terms of what we deliver and how we deliver it, it has no impact whatsoever.”

Overall, then, these findings suggest that the guidance for sport psychology within the EPPP is considered somewhat sub-optimal, but that the lack of detail and specificity may not necessarily be a negative. Indeed, with this lack of detail and specificity, sport psychology practitioners may have more freedom to design their psychology programme to best meet the needs of their academy. The above said, according to this study’s participants, at least, further development of the EPPP guidance appears warranted, in particular with greater input from experts in psychology.

5.4. Conclusion

In addressing the purpose of our study, we sought to examine the experiences of sport psychology practitioners working within elite football academies in England. Across the six themes presented, our findings highlight the rich and diverse nature of psychological service delivery within these settings. Psychological practice encompassed team-based and individually tailored support, the delivery of psychological education, psychological skills training, and counselling services, alongside clinical referral or mental health support for players. Practitioners highlighted their responsibility for both performance enhancement and player welfare—a critical shift in service delivery. Ecological frames of reference were adopted, whereby participants acknowledged that while they worked with athletes this happened within academy environments with cultures and norms that have an impact on their practice and the behaviour(s) of the athletes with whom they work. As such, participants recognized how in

modern settings, psychology practitioners are responsible for supporting wider cultural development in clubs and academies, alongside education of support staff and coaches. It is evident that practitioners working in football academy settings do so in dynamic environments—psychological practice is varied and ever evolving, and there remains no single way of being a psychologist in this setting (Diment, Henriksen, and Larsen 2020).

The results demonstrated that, although the provision of sport psychology is improving and continuing to develop, there remain a number of factors that inhibit a full integration of the discipline into the academy development programme. The most prominent factors identified in this study were the level of psychological literacy among coaches, and the attention and resources dedicated to the discipline. That is, in order for the integration of sport psychology into the wider development programme to be successful, those who are responsible for aiding the promotion and delivery of psychological content, require a greater level of understanding than is currently present. In line with the findings of Murdoch (2016), our study found that the level of psychological understanding among coaches appeared to be lower than the coaches perceived it to be. This is potentially problematic due to the level of impact and influence that coaches have on players (Mossman et al. 2021), and the fact that they are such a key source of support (Rees et al. 2012). If, due to a lack of psychological literacy, coaches are promoting sub-optimal psychological advice, then players may be at risk of developing poor psychological habits. Thus, in order for sport psychology to be successfully and safely provided to academy football players, practitioners should be employed to deliver such content but further should have a significant role in the education of coaches and other support staff about sport psychology and the

importance of delivering sound psychological advice (Henriksen et al. 2014). Additionally, from the findings, it is evident that there is still a stigma attached to the discipline of sport psychology. This stigmatized thinking and the fear of the unknown is still causing a level of resistance from some coaches and players when seeking psychological support (Souter et al. 2018). Therefore, a recommendation of this study would be to provide education to players and coaches around sport psychology and the way in which it can benefit performance, in order to help combat such thinking.

As well as examining the general experiences of sport psychology practitioners, we also sought to explore participant experiences of working under the auspices of the EPPP—the English Premier League's guiding document concerning player development—of which psychology is a core component of sport science support. Theme six specifically reflected this experience. Although participants acknowledged that, since its inception, the guidance for sport psychology delivery had been improved, they felt that it still lagged behind other sport science disciplines in depth and/or quality of the syllabus, thereby limiting its potential to guide the delivery of psychological services. A key suggestion echoed by all participants was that in order to improve the integration of sport psychology services within academy football, the psychological guidance within the EPPP would benefit from being significantly revised. The evidence from the present study suggests that the EPPP documentation, in its current format, provides inadequate guidance in relation to the content that should be delivered, and how it should be delivered. Such revision of the EPPP guidelines would help to extend the current minimum standards of psychological provision and would also create a level of uniformity across academies within each category, thereby

increasing the focus on developing psychological literacy in players. Along these lines, participants noted their preference for the EPPP guidance for sport psychology to be revised and re-written by leading practitioners who are familiar with the discipline and who have experience of working within academy settings. This would enable the adoption of correct terminology as well as providing clear guidance with a contextual understanding of the demands of such settings. By way of example, further guidance with regard to employing a holistic, player-centred approach, which focuses on well-being as well as performance would be important. In addition, the provision of one-to-one support alongside more general educational sessions, and on pitch-based sessions, with monitoring of player psychological development, would be important (Champ et al. 2020; Keegan et al. 2020). Increasing guidance with regard to the emotional and cognitive maturation of players, alongside an understanding of adolescent psychological development, would provide the opportunity for psychological service delivery that meets the changing demands of youth performers across critical stages of their (player) lifespan. The EPPP, with revision, thus has potential to encourage service provision that genuinely supports youth players within and beyond football environments.

The results of this study could aid in the future refinement of the psychological elements of the EPPP. Indeed, a strength of this study is that data were collected from seven practitioners, working across a number of different academies, with representation of both male and female participants. Thus, the results from this study should transfer to any academy with EPPP Category 1 or 2 status, or indeed to Category 3 academies attempting to reach Category 2 status. The above said, a limitation is that a number of practitioners whom we

approached either (a) did not respond to our invitation or (b) did respond but did not participate. Thus, our sample was to an extent self-selected, such that our results may simply reflect those more willing to speak out about their experiences (Sharma 2017). Overall, this study has helped to deepen our understanding of the role of practitioners responsible for the delivery of sport psychology within English academy football. Future research would do well to also examine perceptions from a range of staff working within English football academies, in order to assess their perception of the level of provision and understanding of psychology.

CHAPTER 6: Exploring Psychology Provision at an English Premier League Football Academy

6.1. Introduction

Talent pathways in sport exist to develop juniors to elite athletes (Keegan et al. 2022)—in football, this means converting academy players into successful senior football players (Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke 2017; Kelly et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2020). Identifying and then developing youth talent is now a significant part of football (Verbeek et al. 2023). How those players are best developed remains a question of significant interest to sport scientists, practitioners, and coaches (Williams & Reilly 2000; Layton et al. 2023). In a bid to address questions of player development, researchers have encouraged academies to pay closer attention to the psychosocial environments they create (Gledhill et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2014; Murr et al. 2018; Kramers et al. 2022; Layton et al. 2023). The present study sought to examine, from the perspective of coaches and support staff, the current provision of psychology at an English Premier League football academy.

The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) was implemented at the beginning of the 2011/2012 season by all 72-football league clubs in England, supported by a budget of GBP 320 million (The Premier League, 2011). The main aim underpinning the development of the EPPP was to “increase the number and quality of [English] players gaining professional contracts and playing first team football at the highest level” (The Premier League, 2011). A further five key points of interest (termed KPIs) were to (a) create more time for players to play and be coached, (b) improve coaching provision, (c) implement a system of effective measurement and quality assurance, (d) positively

influence strategic investment into the academy system, and (e) seek to implement significant gains in every aspect of player development (The Premier League 2011, p.12). Academies are audited every three years and must provide evidence of individualized coaching interventions that address each player's physical, technical, tactical, and social and psychological development. Academies are subsequently awarded a categorization of 1 to 4 (1 being the highest), which then dictates the level of provision that is expected of them. The categorisation is dependent on a number of factors, including the academy's facilities, coaching, education programme, and their level of productivity—such as the number of players making it through the academy process and playing at first team level (The Premier League, 2020). As part of the EPPP guidelines, academies must make a sport science and medicine programme available to all players. Such programmes include physical testing and measurement, physiotherapy, medical services, nutrition, performance analysis, and, of particular interest to the present study, psychology (Dean et al. 2022).

Historically, researchers (Heidari et al. 2019; Konter et al. 2019) have noted that the integration of psychological services within the preparation of football players has tended to lag behind physical, technical, and tactical aspects. At the same time, other researchers (Barker et al. 2020; Hings et al. 2019; Sly et al. 2020; Schinke et al. 2024) have reported that sport psychology has become increasingly recognized and accepted within football, as well as in sport in general. Somewhat mirroring this debate, in a study with psychology practitioners from six English academies (from Categories 1-4), Dean and colleagues (2022) observed a far from universal deployment of the psychology framework of the EPPP. The practitioners in the latter study noted that

knowledge of psychology principles within the academies varied widely, with most simply relying on the expertise of the sport psychology practitioners. There is a concern that without widespread buy-in across an academy, sport psychology provision is likely to be of only limited effectiveness (Steptoe et al. 2019; Feddersen et al. 2023). Steptoe and colleagues (2019) suggested that the use of sport psychology should be optimal when it extends beyond direct support for athletes to supporting the delivery of all aspects of sport science, coaching, and parental education. Unfortunately, however, these areas often exist as stand-alone disciplines within talent development programs (Glazier 2017). As such, there is likely to be great benefit in understanding how sport psychology service provision can best support holistic athletic development (Collins et al. 2019; Henriksen et al. 2010; Wagstaff and Quartiroli 2023)—a form of 'life coaching' (Beckmann et al. 2019, p.283) developing the whole athlete.

Coaches have long been considered a key source of support (Rees et al. 2012), who are often the "first line of defence" (Dean et al. 2022, p. 2) in dealing with psychological concerns. Previously, however, Pain and Harwood (2004) observed a clear lack of understanding of sport psychology by coaches and support staff working within English football academies, which meant they were potentially unable to assist with the psychological aspects of player development. In this respect, there has recently been an increased interest in the need for the development of psychological literacy among coaches and support staff in sporting organizations (Murdoch 2016; Newell et al. 2020). The importance of psychological literacy, defined by Murdoch (2016, p.189) as "the ethical application of psychological skills and knowledge" should not be

underestimated, and a key goal would be to increase the reach and impact of psychology through other individuals in the organization (not just trained psychology practitioners).

The overarching aim of this research was to examine, from the perspective of coaches and support staff, the current provision of psychology at a Category 3 football academy, and to identify and discuss ways in which the academy might develop and improve its psychology provision.

6.2. Method

6.2.1. Participants

Participants (8 males and 2 females—see Table 1) were selected from one EPPP Category 3 football academy at an English Premier League (the highest-level league in England) club. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 64 (mean = 35.8). The number of years working at the club ranged from 3 to 20 years (mean = 5.7). Of the ten participants, four held their Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) A Licence, one held their UEFA B Licence, and five held the Advanced Youth Award (AYA). Five participants held a Bachelor of Science undergraduate degree, three of whom also held a Master's degree. Additionally, one participant had completed a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in safeguarding; one participant had completed a Level 4 Psychology for Football course; one participant held their Level 4 Intermediate Trauma Medical Management in Football (ITMMIF) Award and was a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS); one participant held their Advanced Trauma Medical Management in Football (ATMMIF) license; and one participant held a Football Association Academy Managers Licence.

Table 6.2.

Participants and Qualifications

Participant	Age	Department	Academic Qualifications	Applied Qualifications
James	29	Coaching	BSc; MSc.	A Licence; Level 4 Psychology for Football; AYA.
John	32	Sport Science	BSc; MSc.	ITMMIF; CSCS
Katie	57	Education	Safeguarding NVQ; PGCE	
Stuart	25	Coaching		AYA; B Licence.
Gemma	26	Medicine	BSc.	ATMMIF
Andy	43	Coaching		AYA; A Licence
Jack	64	Coaching		AYA; A Licence; FA Academy Managers License.

Alex	26	Administration	BSc.	
Ken	25	Sport Science	BSc; MSc.	
Chris	37	Coaching		A Licence; AYA.

Note: BSc = Bachelor of Science; MSc = Master of Science; NVQ = National Vocational Qualification; PGCE = Post-Graduate Certificate of Education; AYA = Advanced Youth Award; ITMMIF = Intermediate Trauma Medical Management in Football; CSCS = Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist; ATMMIF = Advanced Trauma Medical Management in Football.

6.2.2. Sampling

For inclusion in the study, participants had to be working as a full-time member of staff (i.e., as a coach, sport scientist, medic, educator, or a member of operations) at the Category 3 Academy. To ensure a robust sample that could provide both deep understanding and diverse perspectives on the topic, we employed purposive sampling (Hennink et al. 2020; Jones, 2015). Although more staff are employed at the Academy, at the time of the study, access to and availability of staff was affected by restrictions placed on staff as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Staff who were available to contact were full time members of staff, with significant roles and experience within the Academy programme, and who continued to work although the Academy was closed. In total, we approached 12 participants; ten responded and gave written informed consent to participate. Each participant is represented with a pseudonym, to maintain anonymity.

6.2.3. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used, ensuring participants were free to clearly explain their perspective and experiences, but with the interview still guided by pre-determined questions (Jones, 2015; Hennink et al. 2020). Initial questions focused on demographic information—participants' roles, qualifications, and years of experience in the field. Questions such as "Can you tell me about your career in football and youth sport?", "Can you tell me about the academy structure at your club and where you sit within it?", and "Can you comment on the acceptance and understanding of sport psychology at the Academy?" were also used. The guide also made use of probing questions, in order to gain a deeper insight into staff perceptions of the Academy's psychology provision, and of ways in which the provision could be improved. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if there was anything else that they would like to add that had not already been discussed.

6.2.4. Procedure

Ethical consent was received from the University Institutional Ethics Panel (24743, 7th July 2020), and interviews were conducted on-line between July and October 2020, with interviews lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. The first author (operating at that time as a practitioner-researcher, with responsibility for delivery of the psychological development programme) conducted the interviews. As such, the first author should be considered an "insider researcher" (Saidin, 2017, p. 849), with prior knowledge and understanding of the culture and setting for the present research, potentially providing additional insight not necessarily amenable to "outsiders", albeit this "insider" status may be criticised on grounds

of being too closely involved to provide useful, objective, and unbiased reports (Saidin, 2017).

6.2.5. Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the judgement criteria proposed by Smith and McGannon (2017) were followed throughout the design and implementation of the study—i.e., dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability. For example, through prolonged engagement with the Academy, the first author was able to develop a strong rapport with the study participants, allowing for a potentially deeper understanding of their perspectives and the context surrounding them, thus increasing the study's credibility. With regard to transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the study findings should be of interest to other football academies associated with professional football clubs but might be less transferable to grass roots or recreational football. Dependability was addressed through the use of a detailed audit trail, documenting the research process, including decisions made during data collection and analysis, to ensure transparency and allow for external scrutiny. In addition, consistent supervisory engagement provided regular opportunities to critically reflect on methodological choices and interpretations. Confirmability was strengthened by the maintenance of a reflexive journal, in which the first author recorded thoughts, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process. This practice, combined with peer debriefing, supported a more transparent and reflexive approach, ensuring that the findings were shaped by the participants' accounts rather than the researcher's preconceptions. Regardless, we provide detailed and rich descriptions, with extensive exemplar quotes, from a range of Academy staff, so

that readers can assess how the findings might be relevant to similar scenarios (Creswell and Poth 2018; Nowell et al. 2017).

6.2.6. Data Analysis

In line with an interpretivist approach, the analytical framework was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Herzog et al. 2019). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed. Irrelevant data such as pleasantries and inaudible audio were removed from the transcription, to ensure relevant and meaningful data were collected. In line with the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2020), a six-phase thematic analysis approach was taken: (a) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes, through listening and transcribing each interview; (b) systematic data coding, achieved by grouping common themes that were derived from the raw data; (c) generating initial themes from coded and collated data, through the re-examination of data and identifying patterns; (d) developing and reviewing themes was achieved by comparing the identified themes to the raw data, and further discussing with the supervisory team to ensure they were appropriate; (e) refining, defining, and naming themes occurred once the themes were agreed upon; and finally, (f) writing the report.

6.3. Results and Discussion

The data analysis generated 45 raw data themes, which underpinned seven key areas: (a) the academy environment, (b) sport psychology is a multi-faceted discipline, (c) technical/tactical corners are still on top, (d) psychological literacy within the academy, (e) the EPPP and how it influences the academy on a day-to-day basis, (f) barriers to implementation, and (g) facilitating factors for enhanced psychological services.

6.3.1. The Academy Environment

Participants were asked about their experiences of the academy football environment, their perception of its main focus, and their sense of whether it had changed in the years they had been working in it. Here, two subthemes were created: the academy environment is more ruthless than it needs to be; and the academy focus is performance-orientated.

It's More Ruthless Than It Needs to Be

Results demonstrated that the academy environment to which players are exposed is considerably ruthless. As Alex explained:

> It's tough, because we ask a lot of the players and the parents, for what can be seen as a very difficult task. So, we would ask them to give up a lot of hours, drive a long way, drive to away games, all this sort of stuff, for the percentage rate, they know it's a low success rate.

Additionally, Katie stated that not only does the academy put pressure on players, but also their parents have high expectations of what they want their child to achieve:

> Yes. So, I think it is quite an elitist environment, but I think it is quite a high-pressure environment, as well. And I think parents, especially, have great expectations of their child, and how they want them to do, and where they see their future going.

James suggested that the environment should not be as ruthless as it is, and that, too often, players are treated as assets rather than children and young adults:

> I would say it is way more ruthless than it needs to be. I think there is a misperception of what we are actually working with. I think, as a result,

people treat it as elite sport, which it isn't. It is obviously youth development. So, I think it is way more ruthless than it should be, in terms of the processes that we have in place, like retain/release and those meetings, in terms of the way players are discussed as assets, when again they are children and young adults. I think, for me, the environment is very debilitative compared to where it probably should be for not only performance but also wellbeing outcomes.

These findings show that the academy environment places a great level of pressure on young players, with these pressures being multifaceted, and the players' ages often forgotten. This is supported by John who expresses his disagreement on the amount of pressure that is placed on specifically the younger players within the academy environment:

> What I will say is, I am not sure about the need for the younger boys to be in the environment as early as they are. So, for me, 9s, 10s, 11s, 12s don't necessarily need to be in such a structured environment. And the word "elite" for 9s, 10s, 11s, 12-year-olds is one for me that doesn't really need to be used. So, yes, for me, the environment could be different in that sense for the younger boys- like for them to go and play with their friends and play as much football as they can, do different sports at younger ages, and then maybe when they start to specialise at sort of 13s, 14s to come into us, and then to get into a bit more of a structured environment may allow them to have more free- I don't know whether "free" is the word, free, open childhoods that will allow them to experience different things and have different opportunities. And then if football is still what they want to do at 13, 14 and they are good enough,

> then they have had a lot of varied experiences before that, and then it is time for them to come and specialise with us. Then, for me, that would be the ideal scenario. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. I don't see the need for 9 and 10-year-olds to be driving 4 and 5 hours for a game on a Sunday morning. But that is the programme we are in and that is what we are working with at the moment.

So, although there are concerns around the pressures that are placed on the academy players, it is understood that this is something that is unlikely to change in the near future, and it is simply accepted as the football environment. However, these findings would suggest that in order for players to benefit from the process, academies should be mindful of the age of the players and focus on the development of the individual rather than the outcome goal of good results and financial gain. Therefore, as suggested by Dean et al. (2022), the academy environment should place more emphasis on understanding the emotional and cognitive maturation of the players, using a player first approach to accommodate each phase of the players (player) lifespan.

The Focus is Performance-Orientated

Participants reported that, although the stated purpose of academy football is on the development of young players (Premier League, 2011), the focus remains primarily on performance, with an overall objective of developing players for the club's first team. James explained:

> The main focus ends up being performance, and no, for me it is not the right focus, because it is very focused on the players performing all the time, or even worse, winning games. And I think we should be focused on

development. But I think the issue you have is the culture of judgement, and I think that culture of judgement then drives these issues.

James explained that there is a constant level of judgement in relation to how the players are performing, Andy conceptualised this as an extended trial:

> Basically, if you're in an academy, you're on an extended trial. Let's be honest. You're on an extended trial. Whether you've got a two-year contract, or a one-year contract, at some stage we're going to make a decision on you over whether you stay longer. So that's the fact of the matter. The brutal fact of academy life is you're in an extended trial.

When discussing this issue, Ken stated that there is a clear aim in academy football, but, quite often, this is not honestly communicated:

> Then in terms of staff members and coaches and the environment, I guess the aim is to produce elite-level footballers, but often people will say, "Oh, we're just trying to produce good people." I think that's a load of b******* because you wouldn't pay and fund an academy to produce good people. If you want to do that, you'd just donate your money to charity, wouldn't you … You're not trying to help some 13-year-old be a good person. You're trying to get him to play in the first team. That's b******* really.

This was particularly interesting, as it highlighted a perceived underlying truth — that while the focus on performance and producing first-team players is widely understood, it often goes unspoken or is rarely acknowledged openly. Overall, these results show a clear emphasis on performance within academy football. Although each participant presented a different example of performance, there was a common understanding that the academy environment places pressure on players to perform at their highest level, in

order to continue progressing through the academy process, ultimately making it to the first team. While participants recognised that this is the reality of academy football, it was suggested that more attention should be given to the development of players within the programme, not simply their performance and progression to the first team, but their development as a whole person as well.

6.3.2. Sport Psychology is a Multi-faceted Discipline

Football psychology is multi-faceted, incorporating social psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, health psychology, and the psychology of coaching (Konter et al. 2019). Exposure to such a variety of psychology disciplines may influence how non-expert practitioners (i.e., coaches and support staff) interpret the purpose and meaning of sport psychology. For example, John said:

> My general thoughts around psychology are, it is one of those things that runs alongside everything that happens. So, every training session has elements of sports science, the technical, tactical stuff, and then psychological social stuff, as well. And even if we haven't pinpointed psychological elements in the training session, the boys are having their psychological skills tested with whatever they are doing anyway. So, whether it be concentration in drills, focusing drills. Whether it be determination to get through a drill that is hard. Whether it be communication with the boys—because, constantly, they are having to communicate to become better players and a better team.

John explained that sport psychology is embedded in all elements of football, even when not actively considered. He explained that although the psychological skill element is not deliberately targeted, naturally emerging

challenges, such as the need for increased concentration or communication, test and develop an individual's psychological skills during training and matches.

Katie similarly explained that there was now greater emphasis on sport psychology in academy football, with a greater need for strategies and mechanisms to help players with their mental game:

> For me, sports psychology looks after a player's sort of thoughts and processes within their mindset within how they play football. So, obviously, there is a big emphasis … and there always was a big emphasis on the physical aspect of the game, and the technical, and tactical aspect of the game, but what has been really noticeable over the years since I have been teaching the players is that now psychology has become part of that. And when I speak to players, it is very obvious to me that some of them struggle more with the sort of mental side of things than they do with the other sides of things. So, it is having strategies and mechanisms in place for every individual to help them have that sort of mental wellbeing and work towards how they play on the pitch. So, it is an added thing really to help them become a better player.

Alex also believed that the main purpose of sport psychology is to assist players in overcoming obstacles and setbacks that may occur during their football career:

> I would say it's what we teach the players, to help them overcome problems. So, coping mechanisms to overcome problems, to optimise their performance, ultimately. So, that might be micro problems, such as getting subbed, missing a game, missing a shot, a bad touch. Or macro problems,

such as injury, release, etc., etc. So, it's ways that we make them overcome those problems, to benefit their performance. That's what I would say.

Here, Alex shifted the focus away from players' general wellbeing, suggesting that the primary role of sport psychology is to optimise performance. This perspective may reflect his administrative role within the academy, which centres on managing issues such as injuries and player absences, in contrast to Katie's background in education and safeguarding. According to James, psychological profiling was a key tool here:

I would very much see it as the development of psychological skills. I would see it as probably psychologically profiling individual needs. I would see it also on a team level, probably, creating the appropriate environment to facilitate learning. They probably are the main things.

More broadly, Jack reported that, ultimately, the purpose of sport psychology is to provide players with strategies to improve their mindset and performance:

Probably the simplest format is about behaviour and obviously people's mindset around that in preparation for performance if that makes sense. And there are obviously various strands around that in terms of communication strategies and how you operate as a team or, if you're an individual participant, how you can obviously focus on performance. And utilise support mechanisms to increase your levels of performance and participation. And I suppose, ultimately, longevity in the sport.

These findings show that coaches and support staff believe sport psychology to be of importance beyond just the work that is completed with the

sport psychologist, however, it is apparent that their reasonings for this differs. This may be because of the different areas in which the participants' expertise lies, the coach and administration based participants focussed more on the purpose of sport psychology in relation to a player's performance and the mechanisms/strategies that will enhance this, whereas the education and sport science based participants looked at the value of sport psychology on a more holistic level, how it is relevant to every aspect of the academy programme, from training sessions, to the overall wellbeing of the players.

Collectively, it was reported that sport psychology is largely performance-based, though not isolated to the pitch. That is, while sport psychology focuses on optimising a player's performance, it can also include helping the player overcome obstacles and adversities that may occur off the pitch, as well as developing skills and strategies to assist the player on the pitch. In addition, participants expressed value in both team and individual support, creating an environment where players are able to learn and develop their psychological skills, helping improve their mindset and overall performance, both as an individual and as a team.

6.3.3. Technical/Tactical "Corners" Are Still on Top

Here, participants commented on implementation of the four "corners" (technical, tactical, physical, psychological) of performance from the English Football Association (Simmons 2004). There appeared a greater emphasis on technical and tactical aspects of performance. As Jack noted:

> I think we have quite a technical bias. There are obviously the tactical elements to the training sessions and obviously how we play in the game on the Sunday. I think the physical programme has developed a lot more

of late, purely because of having manpower. It's not ideal; we still have little gaps here and there.

This was supported by Stuart, who explained that when on planning training sessions, the focus is on technical and technical aspects:

When I plan a session, the main focus a lot of the time is on, like, technical stuff. And the sport science will have a focus on the physical stuff and maybe give some recommendations on pitch size and adding in, like, a sprint or that kind of stuff. But a lot of it is around the technical and tactical stuff with an idea of the psych and the social but isn't necessarily something that you would really do a massive amount of planning for. Sometimes you would, because certain players might need some sort of psych challenge.

Although Stuart explained that there is a level of psychological and social impact on sessions, it he suggested that this tends only to be when there are players who face a particular psychological challenge. Alex explained that this likely reflects the situation in all football academies:

Obviously, as I said earlier, I think with any club, not just [the academy] , the technical and tactical side ... Technical first, it will always be the one that gets the most hours. If you look at our programme now, apart from the 16s, it's pretty much purely technical stuff. And the 18s. I'm looking at the younger ones, but even the 18s are doing pretty much purely technical stuff.

In relation to this, Andy provided an explanation as to why he thinks there is such a bias towards technical and tactical skills development in academy football:

> There's such a big emphasis on technical/tactical from the coaches that you're almost under pressure to focus massively on tech tac (sic.). Well, technical more than tactical. What essentially happens is the first team say the reserves aren't good technically. The reserves say the youth team players that come up aren't good enough technically, and the youth teams say well the 16s that come up aren't good enough technically. So, it just filters down like that, so their focus becomes, let's zoom in on the red [technical] corner.

Overall, there still appears to be a strong bias towards technical and tactical aspects of performance within the academy. To better integrate sport psychology into the academy, there would need to be a shift in mindset to promote a focus on the psychological and social aspects of the academy program, with more time allocated.

6.3.4. Psychological Literacy Within the Academy

Here, participants described their perception of how well sport psychology was understood across staff and players at the Academy. Two main subthemes were generated: staff and players' level of understanding of sport psychology; and the integration of sport psychology.

Staff and Players' Level of Understanding of Sport Psychology

Here, James explained:

> Yes, so I think everyone knows that there is a mental side to the game and there are psychological attributes that contribute to it. Whether everyone understands how psychology can affect players and also how their own influences can affect the psychological aspects that they see, I would disagree with. I think that everyone goes, "Oh yes, we're considering the

psychology in this," but they don't. First off, so specifically talking about coaches, they don't understand the majority of the time. They're given some education through the FA [Football Association]. I think that's excellent, because at least they're not just disregarding it completely. But in terms of actually, can they acknowledge what they are doing personally but also their effect on the players, probably not to the extent that they should with the majority of them.

James felt that his own understanding of sport psychology was more advanced than that of other staff members, perhaps because James had completed a course in *Psychology for Football*:

I think there is a lack of understanding. It is easy for you [the interviewer]. It is easy for me. It is easy for people who have a basic to good to really high level of understanding. But I think, as a coach, if I have just done my badges, there is no reason why I would have a really good understanding of psychological concepts … I don't think the coaches understand what psychological skills are. If you were to go, "Right, goal setting, imagery, composure, cue words," all that jazz, I don't think the coaches would be able to understand that. For example, an issue is if we have got a lad who we want to work on, let's say, confidence, they wouldn't understand how you might implement an imagery programme to help that player develop confidence through increasing their feeling of performance accomplishments, as an example.

John similarly explained that understanding of psychology varied across the academy, with those exposed to psychology in their previous studies at an obvious advantage:

> Like I said, there are certain people that have a really good understanding, I think. And others that, maybe not, but they would still be receptive to it. I think from a sports science and medicine perspective, I think people have a good handle on it because a lot of us have learnt about it during our degree programmes. And that doesn't make us a psychologist. It just means that we have got an understanding of certain aspects of psychology.

Stuart felt that the academy players know what sport psychology is, but their understanding of its application is limited:

> I think some players don't understand the reasons why they feel maybe like they feel. And when they've had a bad game, they might not understand how to control their emotions and they may lose a bit of confidence, because they feel like they've had bad games. So, it's them understanding what psychology is, but then also how they can use it to benefit them. I don't think all the players necessarily understand how that works. They know what psychology is, but I don't think they would necessarily know how to use it to benefit them.

These findings show that, overall, knowledge of sport psychology across staff and players is under-developed, albeit those individuals with previous exposure to the discipline displayed a more advanced level of psychological literacy. As others have noted (e.g., Dean et al. 2022), the academy would likely benefit from further education regarding sport psychology and its application to football, perhaps via implementation of Continuing Professional Development workshops.

The Integration of Sport Psychology

The second subtheme was the idea that sport psychology is not being integrated into training effectively, particularly by the coaching staff, this is expressed by Chris:

> I think it's improved, but very, very slowly. I genuinely, when I said white coats, I think obviously I was taking the mick, but I think that is the perception still, slightly, it's sort of very 'doctory' and very medical, should I say, rather than actually sort of integrated into what it is, an on-field practice; that would be my opinion on what I've seen within this country. Yes, I guess that would be - without going too far."

Such comments demonstrate the stigma that still appears to be attached to the discipline and perhaps exemplifies the challenges faced by sport psychology practitioners trying to integrate psychology into academy performance programs. This lack of integration is explored by James:

> I don't feel that is carried out particularly well to grass [out on the pitch], if I am honest. I don't feel that I then observe that as a coach as a real running theme. We have some areas that we deem … if we are working on overlaps, what is the mentality needed? An obvious one is the intent to run. So, I think there is a disparity between, "Right, okay. We have got lads doing overlaps. I want to see intent on this run." Which is a psychological concept. What does intent mean? Intent means running as if I am going to get the ball. So, I think there is a disparity there which could be better. … No, I haven't seen much evidence of that [coaches integrating sport psych into training]. If you hadn't told me that, I wouldn't know from seeing session plans. That is not a slant on the coaches. That is just honesty. I will watch training tomorrow night, and I won't see courage and

commitment come out at any point. The players might subconsciously pick something up tonight [in a training session] and do it tomorrow night, and that would be brilliant, but I won't see the coaches, "Guys, remember last night we did courage? So, what does courage look like in football? It means getting the ball off the keeper. Courage means giving it away and going and getting it again. That is what courage looks like in football".

Jack explained that there is an attempt to transfer sport psychology from the classroom to the pitch, but this can fade after a number of sessions, due to other pressures:

I am aware of it being used outside classrooms. The amount that it's used outside classrooms is very limited. For example - I'll use myself as an example - I have, before, understood where we are in terms of the Six Cs [Communication, Confidence, Concentration, Consistency, Control, Commitment], which C that the players are currently working on, and then related that to their physical sessions and providing them another opportunity to demonstrate or develop those qualities. Then, after doing that for a few weeks, you forget. You've got your own job to worry about and you think, 'Okay, I don't need to' well, you don't think, 'I don't need to do it anymore', you just forget to do it. You just don't do it until somebody reminds you again and then you think, 'Oh, what we could do is we could do this', then you continue doing it again. My perspective would be that the coaches are exactly the same, of when they're reminded, they'll do it for a short period of time and then they're not reminded. Then they just won't do it until they're reminded again.

Overall, although coaches may sometimes try to apply psychological skills to their sessions, this effort can diminish after a short time. To ensure greater integration of sport psychology will require a sustained effort on the part of coaches and sport psychology practitioners, to ensure that the psychological skills training can be transferred to the pitch during each training session.

6.3.5. The EPPP and How It Influences the Academy on a Day-To-Day Basis

Here, two subthemes were generated: the EPPP is a set of tight restrictions that must be met; and the top clubs benefit the most from the academy system.

The EPPP is a Set of Tight Restrictions that Must be Met

Here, John stated:

> So, it is the framework by which the academy system needs to be put into place. The rules have governed what we do, how we do it, what we should have in place for our category level, their sort of minimum standards for your category level. So, for us as a Category 3 Academy, there are certain rules we need to follow, certain things we need to do, and boxes we need to tick in terms of what we provide for the players, in terms of coaching hours, in terms of coaching support, performance support in terms of sports science and medicine, analysis and psychology, education provision. So, we are governed by them in terms of what we should be providing as a Cat 3 Academy.

This, therefore, means that the provision of sport psychology is also governed by the requirements of the EPPP. The statement from John that it is a tick-box exercise suggests that, as long as the psychological provisions meet

the minimum standard to attain the desired category status, little more is done to develop this area. This may prove problematic because the players may require a higher level of support than that required by the EPPP audit. In addition to this, there were a number of participants who compared the EPPP to Ofsted (the UK's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), with regard to the way it assesses the standards of each academy. Stuart explained that clubs must meet the criteria of the EPPP in order to pass:

> So, if you think, like, a school environment, they have Ofsted, so they have to meet certain criteria. It seems like that's what it is. You've got to meet certain criteria in order to pass. And you have to, yes, make sure that you're following the guidelines, really. And you can't just make up your own programme or make up your own staff and stuff, you've got to fall in with the EPPP.

James similarly explained:

> I think originally it was there to ensure that a minimum set of standards were adhered to. I think the problem they then had was they were judging clubs in a kind of Ofsted way, in terms of much softer processes that are probably more subjective. As an example, it is fine, probably, to judge a club on whether or not they have a building that they need. But I think to judge coaching styles there is not a cut-and-dried right and wrong. So, they have now moved to a twofold process, where you have compliance and then you have standards. The compliance part is, "Have you got this? Yes, or no?" And the standards are, basically, "Tell us what you do." I think it is very much a standard enforcing process, and overall, that has probably been useful, I think.

These findings demonstrate that, while there are benefits to having a set of a standards that must be adhered to, how academies are assessed has changed over time. Collectively, these participants portray a somewhat negative experience of the EPPP and the way in which academies are assessed, implying that the requirements of the EPPP can be restrictive. This means that, while individualisation is encouraged across academy football, the level of individualisation that is possible is governed by whether or not it still fits with the EPPP requirements for each category.

Top Performing Clubs Benefit the Most

A common perception among participants was that, while the EPPP is designed for all academy categories, the "top" clubs (those at the top of the Premier League, with the most income and resources) are far better placed to meet the demands of the EPPP. As Jack noted:

> I personally think it was created for what should have been the top. I think they wanted only nine Category 1 academies; I think that was the intention. And that morphed into, I think we've got 25 or something now. So, I think they wanted to give those top-performing academies . . . more investment, to become better.

In addition to investment and resources, Stuart explained that the higher category clubs also benefit from having the best players in their area:

> I think probably the biggest problem is though that the top clubs end up just hogging (sic.) the best players. And they can go and get the best young players and pay a small fee to get them into their academy, so they have the best players within their area. So, it has definitely helped to get better players through, but probably more the top clubs bringing them

through rather than some of the other clubs that their best players end up getting taken from them.

In relation to this issue, Jack lent an explanation as to why it may be that some clubs benefit from a better selection of players than clubs in other areas:

> If you look at the demographics of [the academy] and the types of young people that live here, it's not the same as an inner-city London, so the types of players you're going to get are different. And consequently, there are probably more players that would make the grade at a good level of football in London than maybe there would be in [the academy]. So, we're disadvantaged in some way, in terms of some elements of the EPPP, with regards to travel. We've got an hour and a half travel distance, when [the academy] has got the sea behind them and forest either side, and not a lot of people in between. So, it disadvantages some clubs automatically, I think.

These results show that due to demographic and funding confinements, some clubs will always find it easier to maintain a higher academy status, due to the financial situation of the academy, as well as the area in which the academy is situated, thus receiving a higher level of EPPP investment from the Premier League. This in turn means that it will prove difficult for less advantaged clubs to break the chain and achieve a higher academy status.

6.3.6. Barriers to Implementation

As part of the interview, participants were asked to comment on any barriers that they feel inhibit the implementation of sport psychology into the academy setting. Two key barriers were raised: A lack of resources allocated to sport psychology; and the level of "buy-in" to the discipline.

Lack of Resources

The first barrier to be identified by participants was the lack of resources available for the integration of sport psychology—in particular time, finances, and staffing. John explained that the club should provide the finances to increase the number of sport psychology practitioners working in the academy:

> It is accepted that it has a bearing on development for players. The one thing that we haven't been able to push through is, obviously, the levels of staffing that are required to make it even more prominent in the programme, which I guess means it is accepted to a certain point, but the club hasn't fully put finances towards that at the moment. So, like I have said, it is accepted on our level. If we look higher in terms of being allocated resources for it, then maybe there is still a bit of work to be done.

Additionally, Ken discussed the need for more sport psychology staff members, in order to increase the level of psychological support available to players. He explained that, although the club may not need to fund specific psychological resources, such as specialized equipment, it does need to provide funding to the employment of additional staff members in order to provide sport psychology education:

> Time and money for the psychology department. If you had more members of staff, those members of staff are freed up, because they can share the administration or menial tasks. Then they would have more time to provide that highest level of support or that one-to-one care or whatever is required for that player at that time. If you're spending all of your time chasing your tail and trying to educate coaches, it means you can't have any direct impact on players. Anything else? Yes, so the money, I'm not

sure you even really need to pay for psychological resources or specific knowledge. I think it's more you just need to pay for more members of staff to provide a greater breadth of support first. Then I'd imagine the quality would be there anyway, if that makes sense.

On top of the monetary and staffing issues, Stuart explained that there is also a lack of time dedicated to the delivery of sport psychology at the academy:

Probably the time you have available because … like last year for example, the 9s and 10s would do a Footsal every two weeks. And they would do analysis after one of those and psych on the other. So, you'd only get one a month. So, they wouldn't get a massive amount of time focusing on that. And like within training on a Tuesday and Thursday, we wouldn't necessarily talk that much about the psych stuff. I think the day release programme, having the psych every week really helps.

Although three separate issues were discussed within this subtheme, it could be argued that each issue is, in fact, impacted by the other. That is, without the funding to expand the sport psychology department, there will be an inadequate number of staff to provide support to each age group, therefore decreasing the amount of time that each age group is exposed to sport psychology. Thus, there will not be enough evidence of the benefit of sport psychology to warrant the allocation of more funds to the department. Therefore, each aspect needs to be addressed in order to successfully integrate sport psychology into the academy programme.

Receptiveness to Sport Psychology

The second subtheme was that of the level of receptiveness towards the sport psychology programme at the academy. The overall perception from

participants was that there is still a lower level of “buy-in” from the coaching staff. Andy stated that, although there is an openness to learn, there is still a level of hesitancy around the discipline, particularly from those coaches who are former players:

> I think that ex-players [former players] view it with a bit of suspicion, because I think that they were still, albeit a bit younger than me, almost my era, where it was, if you’re struggling for a bit of confidence, you go and see a sport psychologist. So, my interpretation is, certainly within my coaching department, I think there’s an openness to learn more about it, but I think there’s still a fraction, maybe suspicions is the wrong word. But, just where they’re aware that they’re not experts in that area, they’re not as comfortable doing it, so there’s more of a hesitancy to openly kind of go, “This session is on confidence.” That would be my take on it.

In a similar vein, Jack discussed the idea of measuring the success of sport psychology strategies, and the fact that the success may not be quantifiable has an impact on the level of buy-in from staff:

> It will be opinion, it will be a buy-in, if that’s not the same thing. It will be probably seeing the output or the outcome, how can you measure it’s been successful? That would be an interesting one for me, to have a case study of somebody who has had whatever issue it is, and how that has been developed and supported and enabled, to actually get through that, to get to a point of, out the other end of it, if you like.

More broadly, however, Alex suggested that the level of buy-in towards sport psychology is dependent on one simple factor, that “coaches want to coach:”

> I think the problem with anything in football is, the coaches want to coach. So, ultimately, grass time, as it is in the rules, is the goal, and the goal sort of … that's what everyone wants. So, the minute you try and get 30 minutes doing anything, whether it's from my point of view, trying to get photos for the players, which everyone doesn't care about, or try and get them to sit down in a classroom and do psychology or analysis, it's tough to get that time with the players.

From these responses, it is evident that there is still a limited level of buy-in around sport psychology, particularly among coaching staff, which supports previous literature. This may be due to the perceived subjective nature of sport psychology, or simply because it takes time away from playing football. Regardless, these aspects still appear to be barriers to the implementation of sport psychology at the academy.

6.3.7. Facilitating Factors for Enhanced Psychological Services

Participants discussed the factors that they felt would facilitate an enhanced level of psychological services at the academy, from which two key recommendations were developed: the need for full time psychology staff; and the need for regular psychological education for both academy players and staff.

Full-Time Psychology Staff

Participants expressed the need for a larger sport psychology department. It was a common recommendation that the club should employ a greater number of sport psychologists, as noted by John:

> Eventually, down the line somewhere, we need to … the club needs to put its hand in its pocket and decide to really back psychology and go down

that route because, I think, if you speak to anyone in the Academy, and they will tell you that psychology has value, but the club hasn't resourced it. Like I have said, for us to have you [interviewer, first author], for example, in full-time would allow them to have a resource to support them in that aspect, and I think that would make them more confident about it.

More specifically, Gemma suggested that there should be several sport psychologists supporting the three development phases:

If I'm honest, I think there should be one full-time for 18s, and that should be accessible. And probably two for the younger, well I say one for YDP (Youth Development Phase) and one for FP (Foundation Phase). If you're really going to utilise it. Um, I think that would be manageable, but again it depends how much you want to get through and how much the club is willing to promote the support staff in terms of doing their job rather than relying on the coaches to get them through.

Gemma also stated, however, that this recommendation would only be followed through if the club decided they were willing to invest and promote the sport psychology department. In a similar vein, James discussed the minimum he would expect the academy to have in terms of the sport psychology department:

I think the first port of call is bringing in a full-time head of psychology. That would be massive. And that person would obviously have to work closely with me, because we would need to work out a way of doing it. Then, obviously, the idea would be at very least you have Phase Leads. At very, very least. If not, even better, one per age group, or one per two age groups. So, you would need someone full-time on that, no doubt.

From these statements, it is evident that the academy staff do see value in the integration of sport psychology, and thus, building and expanding the sport psychology department. Therefore, this recommendation would be beneficial to the Academy and would likely be supported by a majority of the staff.

Regular Psychological Education for Players and Staff

The second recommendation is the need for players and staff to take part in regular psychological education sessions. Chris described the way in which he believes this should work:

> I would say, keep it basic and continual messages, so similar to our tech literacy really is little and often, I'd say, for the players and the staff. And I think if, in every … as part of every session there was one overriding psychological trait that we were to look at in every session. But it was very basic, right, that's what we're looking at, keep mentioning that, make sure you mention that alongside some tech tac (sic.) stuff, keep mentioning this. I think then it gets the coach actively focusing on something psychologically, and then the players, and then that will filter across the board, I think.

Similar to Chris, Andy believed that the sport psychologist should be responsible for delivering these sessions, and then should be there to implement the content into practical training sessions after that:

> So, I think that what we need to do is sit down with you [the interviewer] and come up with almost like a targeted session where you'll regularly be available in that session on the grass, in order to either reinforce what we're doing in the classroom or, better for me, because we're individualised and we've already talked about the different types of

psychological needs that some players have got. You'll always be in this session but you might target two players a week or three players a week and you and I, or you and the coach, need to liaise over like, what does that player need, and I hope that it will make the other coaches, if they don't already realise, that they need to know their players by now.

In contrast, however, Ken believed that the education provided to the coaches should provide them with the tools to then be able to apply the sport psychology content to their coaching sessions:

I would then also say, like I said before, I think that the education, the coaches have a larger impact, particularly matches and training, on a player's psychology or their mental attributes or whatever you want to call it. Observations of them and how they act towards players and reflecting on that would be the first thing. Instead of going to a training session and watching how do the players do certain things? How does the coach react? When? How do the coaches react differently to different players, but also differently to positives and negatives? Also, how do they react in terms of the themes?

It is clear from these findings that there is perceived value in further educating the players and staff around sport psychology and how to apply it. As the players already receive regular sport psychology workshops, the focus would be on educating the staff around the benefits of sport psychology and providing coaches with the tools to apply that knowledge to their training sessions. Additionally, it is clear that, in order for the integration of sport psychology to be successful, the academy needs to employ a full-time sport psychology department, in order to provide a greater level of education to both

coaches and players around the benefits of sport psychology and the way in which it can enhance performance. Therefore, there would be benefit in further education around the use of sport psychology and how it can be integrated into the training sessions, meaning that there would be no time taken away from coaches.

6.4. Conclusion

This study examined, from the perspective of coaches and support staff, the current provision of psychology at an English Category 3 football academy, generating seven key themes: (a) the academy environment, (b) sport psychology is a multi-faceted discipline, (c) technical/tactical corners are still on top, (d) psychological literacy within the academy, (e) the EPPP and how it influences the academy on a day-to-day basis, (f) barriers to implementation, and (g) facilitating factors for enhanced psychological services. One striking finding is that, although staff understand, value, and appreciate the role of sport psychology, there is still a somewhat limited level of “buy-in” from coaches, driven largely by lack of resources (staffing availability and time). For coaches, and in line with previous research, it still appears that efforts to incorporate sport psychology are seen to compete with time spent on technical (and to a lesser extent, tactical) aspects of football practice (Aoyagi et al. 2012; Champ et al. 2018; Champ et al. 2020; Dean et al. 2022; Kremer and Moran 2013; Ong and Harwood 2017; Thrower et al. 2023). Helping coaches (and the academies) to overcome these resource pressures is clearly an avenue for sport psychologists (Dean et al. 2022). Working closely with the coaches to plan, integrate, and implement sport psychology into training sessions, transferring education in psychological skills training to the pitch, is an obvious need. Regular education

to coaches and performance staff with regard to sport psychology and how it can best be integrated it within training sessions, while ensuring that technical coaching time is not adversely affected, would be another key area (Mitchell et al. 2022). In the present study's specific use case, there appears appetite for appointment of a full-time sport psychologist, which would help to maximise the support available to staff and players—rather than the current part-time provision spread across all players aged U9-U23.

Key strengths of the present research include the access gained—a result of the first author's position within the Academy, providing psychological support—allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiential realities (Champ et al. 2020) that coaches and support staff hold regarding sport psychology and its role within the academy. Additionally, with data collected from ten (male and female) participants, working across a range of academy disciplines, the data are representative of the experiences and perceptions of the academy staff as a whole. The latter notwithstanding, we should note that this research was conducted with just one Category 3 Academy, meaning that, although the results provide valuable insight into the Academy's psychological provision, whether these findings would transfer to other academies is unclear (Smith 2018). Although, as we have noted, there was some alignment with previous research, future research at a variety of academies would of course enable greater confidence in the universality of the study's findings. Finally, an obvious future research avenue would be to seek to apply the recommendations from this study, in particular regarding greater integration of sport psychology, over a prolonged period of time, in order to assess its real-world impact. If successful, this could generate the sort of

evidence that would lead to a shift in attitude and priority for football academies, and ultimately to the greater prominence of sport psychology within them.

CHAPTER 7: An Autoethnographic Study of Experiences of Working within the Academy Environment.

7.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore my experiences of applying the research from Chapters 5 and 6 to the academy environment in which I am situated. Autoethnography is an autobiographical style of academic writing which seeks to interpret the lived experiences of the author, in order to include the researcher's insights into the topic of study (Poulos 2021). Autoethnographers use self-reflective writing as an integral method of inquiry within the research process, drawing on their experiences within social-cultural contexts, in order to highlight different forms of human social-cultural practices (Poulos 2021).

One approach to autoethnographic writing is the collection of personal memory data—recalling one's past in order to give context to the present and provide a detailed account of one's experiences and interpretations of such experiences (Chang 2016). For the purposes of the current chapter, personal memory data collection is the primary source of information contributing to the research (Chang 2016).

In addition to personal memory data, self-observational and self-reflective data that had been recorded over the five seasons was used in order to inform this autoethnography chapter. This approach considered my own thoughts, behaviours, emotions, and interactions as they occur (Chang 2016). While Chang (2016) understood that being self-aware of the research purpose can impact data collection, they also stated that the collection of raw data from the present is useful to autoethnographic research, because it enables the preservation of specific details and fresh perspectives, emotions, and interpretations, that is, live

accounts are documented at the moment they occur, ensuring greater accuracy compared to retrospective accounts, which rely on the researcher's memory of past experiences.

In autoethnography the researcher becomes the primary research participant, and their personal account becomes the primary research data (Jones 2015). Anderson (2006) presents five key features of autoethnographic research: (a) the researcher is a ‘complete member’ of the social context being explored—in this case, the researcher is embedded in the staffing structure at a football academy; (b) analytic reflexivity, the researcher’s ability to locate themselves within the research and the subsequent impact they will have on the results and analysis; (c) the researcher should be a central part of the reporting and be a visible part of the analysis; (d) although the researcher is the primary source of data, dialogue with others can help to develop a more detailed narrative and broaden one’s knowledge around the chosen context; and (e) an ‘analytical agenda’, meaning that the research should not simply report experiences but attempt to analyse and interpret the deeper meaning of such experiences.

7.2. Research Approach

In line with the overall assumptions of the thesis, this chapter adopts a relativist ontology (Ryan, 2018), and a subjective epistemological stance. That is, ontologically, reality is defined by interaction, and existence is not absolute (Rassokha, 2021). This means that for an entity to be perceived as existing by an individual, they must have engaged with it in some manner, and such knowledge is acquired from experiences and the meaning behind behaviour (Hiller 2016). With this in mind, and subsequently the primary focus of this chapter, I felt that there was much to learn from my own personal experience of

working within the academy system delivering sport psychology provisions. Therefore, this chapter will document and attempt to make sense of my personal experiences (personal memory data, self-observational data, and self-reflective data) over the course of five seasons, delivering sport psychology provision within the Premier League Academy.

7.3. Season One

I started at the Premier League Academy in July 2018, at the start of the 2018-19 football season, having just completed my undergraduate degree in sport and social sciences at Bath University. Aged 23, I began my professional journey in applied sport psychology with great enthusiasm. My first two months were that of unpaid work experience, shadowing and supporting the existing sport psychology practitioner and essentially 'learning the ropes' and getting an introduction to the academy football environment. I was given a set curriculum to follow, which was based around Harwood and Anderson's 5C's model (2015). This curriculum was agreed upon by the Head of Sport Science and the sport psychology practitioner who preceded me—the workshop presentations had already been created, and my role was simply to deliver them to the relevant groups. The 5Cs—Commitment, Communication, Concentration, Control, and Confidence—offered a flexible and practical way to promote a consistent message about key psychological traits (Steptoe et al. 2019; Harwood 2008), by providing a framework to follow in terms of the topics that would benefit performance, while still allowing individualisation by the practitioner when it comes to the way in which these topics are delivered and the strategies that are included (Steptoe et al. 2019). These areas highlight important motivational, interpersonal, and self-regulation skills that young athletes can develop and

showcase throughout their athletic journey (Chandler et al. 2020). It also gave us a starting point to talk about and recognise both good and bad examples of each of the Cs (Chandler et al. 2020), in order to either promote that behaviour/strategy further or attempt to adopt and develop a more appropriate behaviour/strategy.

During this period, my role within the academy was extremely isolated, with very limited interaction or integration with the wider staff team, as noted in the findings from chapter 5. My routine typically involved arriving shortly before my scheduled psychology sessions, proceeding directly to the classroom to deliver workshops or one-to-one sessions, and then leaving immediately afterwards, with little opportunity for informal conversations, collaboration, or relationship-building with coaches or other performance staff. As a result, there was no alignment between the sport psychology provision and the broader performance programme; no planning meetings or discussions took place to integrate psychological principles into the wider development framework or to ensure that what I was delivering complemented technical and tactical work (Keegan et al. 2020). Coaches and performance staff were rarely present during my sessions, meaning they remained largely unaware of the content, approaches, or tools being introduced to players. Consequently, there was little opportunity for them to reference or reinforce key psychological concepts in their own coaching practices, and the overall impact of the sport psychology programme was significantly diminished by the lack of coordination and shared understanding across departments.

In September of that season, I enrolled in my PhD programme, which was match-funded by the Academy and Bournemouth University. This opportunity allowed me to apply what I was learning in an academic setting directly into a

real-world, professional environment, supporting the development of young athletes across different age groups. The collaboration between the University and the club was hugely valuable, not only for my own professional growth but also in strengthening the psychological support available within the academy, helping to create a more holistic approach to player development.

Internal Battles

Upon joining the club in 2018, I encountered significant challenges in presenting and advocating for my ideas immediately, primarily due to my unfamiliarity with the coaching staff. During my initial week at the academy, I was frequently asked by several players, *'What do you actually know about football?'* Although in a literal sense, this question could appear innocuous and a genuine attempt to gauge my initial knowledge base, it sparked an internal dialogue for me: 'why am I being asked this? Is it because they can tell I'm new to football? Is it because I'm female and they just assume that I wouldn't know anything about football?' The previous practitioner in my role was also female but was contracted on a casual basis and was not embedded into the programme in the same way as me. This made me question whether these questions were because they were unfamiliar with having a female so involved in their performance programme rather than on the previous, more ad hoc basis. I was also very aware that I may have appeared young and inexperienced because I had only just finished my undergraduate university degree and was 22 years of age. I felt myself questioning everything I did, in fear that I would be looked down on or ignored by other, more experienced members of staff, or that players and coaches would not see me as someone to whom they could legitimately look to for professional (psychological) support. Previous research by Champ et al. (2020) explored the

identity development of sport psychology practitioners through ethnographic data collection over the course of three seasons. They found that the development of identity is not a linear path and can be defined by ‘a series of culturally specific critical moments’ (p.847). In my experience, I found myself battling with my own identity as a trainee practitioner/researcher. Upon reflection, I believe that the main reasoning for the questions I faced was not because I was female but because I was new to the environment, and those at the academy were still unfamiliar with the idea of sport psychology being embedded within the development programme, particularly my presence within coach meetings and regularly in and around the office and training sessions.

As the season progressed and began drawing to a close, and as I became more familiar with both the staff and players, I was able to settle more fully into my role and begin developing the psychological skills programme in a way that more effectively aligned with the needs of the academy. Increasingly, I sought to individualise the programme to better support players' specific performance demands and developmental pathways. I recognised that this would be a gradual and ongoing process, requiring sustained effort over multiple seasons. Nonetheless, I viewed this as an important opportunity to build a more targeted and impactful psychological support system, drawing on both practical experience and insights emerging from my own research to inform and strengthen its design.

7.4. Season Two

When the second year of my PhD programme began, my academic work was progressing smoothly. Concurrently, I had increased my involvement with

the football club; this required me to allocate more time to the club's activities, blending my academic pursuits with practical applications in sports psychology.

My main role was conducting workshops that focused on psychological skills training for two distinct groups: the youth development phase (U13-U16) and the foundation phase (U9-U12). My work with these young athletes was aimed at enhancing their psychological skills, mainly focusing on confidence, communication, concentration, commitment, and (emotional) control (Harwood and Anderson 2015). These sessions were designed to equip them with skills that are crucial not just for sport, but for life in general.

In addition to these workshops, I spent significant time in the sport science and medicine office. My integration into this department was part of the club's strategy to have a greater presence of sport psychology within the Multidisciplinary team, contributing to various projects and initiatives within the department. This hands-on experience was invaluable, offering me insights into the practicalities of sports science and medicine in a real-world setting.

As part of my evolving role, I began attending the weekly multi-disciplinary meetings for the Foundation Phase and Youth Development Phase age groups (9s-16s); these took place in the meeting room at the Academy offices and involved the lead coaches, medical personnel, sports science, analysis, education/player care, academy operations and me (psychology). These meetings were pivotal for the coordination and planning of player development strategies. However, my initial contributions were minimal. I was still getting to know the players and staff, and the environment was quite daunting. The room was filled with male coaches who had extensive experience in football, far more than I did. This disparity made me hesitant to voice my opinions, fearing that I

might say something incorrect or irrelevant. On several occasions, when I did attempt to share my thoughts, I found myself being interrupted, spoken over, and overlooked, which added to my sense of intimidation. Due to my lack of knowledge, expertise, and experience in (the technical and tactical side of) football, I experienced imposter syndrome (Clance and Imes 1978; Heslop et al. 2023; Para et al. 2024). On many occasions, I felt that I did not deserve to be in the coaches' meetings, because I lacked confidence to contribute in the same way that the coaches did. There were coaches with over three decades of experience in academies (i.e., they had been coaching for longer than I had been alive), who would make comments and occasionally even laugh at my contribution to the meetings. One coach commented: *'we never had all of this emotional stuff in my day; we all just got on with it'* and *'that's just football'*. These challenging experiences were common, and initially I found myself doubting my relevance and to some extent, feeling embarrassed of my discipline, fearing that this (i.e., a somewhat unimportant and tangential contribution) is how everyone saw it.

It quickly became evident that sport psychology was not fully integrated into the coaching programme - the knowledge and understanding of its principles were limited among the coaching staff, and there was a noticeable lack of buy-in. Most coaches were either sceptical about the value of psychological training or simply unaware of how it could benefit their players (Dean et al. 2022), which is something that was reported in the findings of chapters 5 and 6. This realization was disheartening, but it also highlighted the importance and necessity of my work. It was clear that I had a substantial task ahead of me: to earn the respect

of the coaching staff and to firmly establish the role of sport psychology within the academy's programme.

My strategy to tackle this challenge was multifaceted. Firstly, I needed to build strong relationships with the coaches and players. I started by spending a significant amount of time observing training sessions and matches, which helped me understand the dynamics of the team and the individual personalities within it. This also allowed me to identify specific areas where psychological training could have the most impact. By demonstrating a genuine interest in the sport and the well-being of the players, I began to gain the trust of the coaches and athletes. For example, the coaches started to approach me for advice and to talk about their sessions and players that they had concerns over; likewise, players were beginning to ask for individual support rather than waiting until I approached them.

I also focused on educating the coaching staff about the benefits of sport psychology. I organized a small number of informal sessions and presentations where I explained how psychological skills training could enhance performance, improve focus, and aid in the recovery from injuries. I shared case studies and research findings that illustrated the positive outcomes of integrating psychological principles into training regimes, drawing upon the work of Camiré and Trudel (2013) who provided insight and suggestions for helping coaches to integrate psychological skills into their training sessions. I also educated the coaches around each of the 5Cs and the way in which these can be used to help the performance of their squads, as supported by Harwood and Steptoe (2017), and gradually, some coaches started to show interest and became more receptive to my suggestions. That said, there was still evidence of resistance and

a lack of psychological literacy from a small handful of coaches, demonstrated by comments made by those individuals, such as: ‘do we really need to mollycoddle them? They get enough of that at school’, ‘won’t that [having a one to one with a player] just encourage it [the lack of resilience they show in relation to any adversity on or off the pitch]?’, and ‘what difference will that [the psychological strategy] actually make if that’s just what he is like?’.

One of the key aspects of my approach was to tailor my workshops and training sessions to the specific needs of the players and coaches. These were identified through discussions with the coaching department of each age group, as well as through needs analysis questioning and discussions with players to find out the areas in which they wanted extra support with. I developed individualized programmes that addressed the unique challenges faced by different age groups and skill levels. For the younger players in the foundation phase, I focused on building basic psychological skills such as concentration, confidence, and teamwork. For the older players in the youth development phase, I introduced more advanced techniques like goal setting, stress management, and visualisation, as recommended by the EPPP (Premier League 2011).

In parallel, I sought to integrate psychological training into the daily routines of the academy. I worked closely with the sport science and medicine team to create a cohesive approach that combined physical and mental training. We developed a series of exercises and drills that incorporated psychological elements, making them an integral part of the overall training programme. An example of this would be adapting team warm-ups to include psychological skills training, such as developing communication within the group. One approach involved allowing only certain players to speak at specific times. This was

designed to encourage quieter team members to become more vocal and present on the pitch. Alternatively, obstacle courses were incorporated into the sessions. In these exercises, players worked in pairs, with one blindfolded and the other responsible for guiding them using only verbal communication. The aim was to develop the players' ability to give clear, instructional communication—an essential skill that could then be transferred to the football pitch (Fisher, 2005; Kramer-Johansen, 2015). This meant that coaches were more open to the use of psychological skills training within the football sessions, because it did not take time away from the coaches as it was included in the warm-up and/or embedded in the drills that were already being used as part of the training session itself, this is supported by the findings from chapter 5.

Over time, I began to feel that my efforts were bearing fruit; coaches who were initially sceptical started to acknowledge the positive changes in their players' performance and attitudes, for example, players that would normally become easily frustrated and often end up fouling, were now learning to control their emotions on the pitch and would use strategies in order to stay focused – players reported feeling more focused, confident, and resilience, or in their words ‘better at bouncing back from mistakes’. The weekly multi-disciplinary meetings became more collaborative, with coaches increasingly seeking my input and valuing my contributions. The integration of sport psychology into the academy's programme was gradual, but I came to feel that it was beginning to have real impact.

On reflection, my journey to this point had been challenging but ultimately immensely rewarding. I learned that building respect and trust in a new environment requires patience and persistence. By remaining committed to

integrating sport psychology into the academy and continuously demonstrating the value of sport psychology, I felt I was beginning to make a meaningful impact on the academy and its players and was looking forward to further developing this during the following season.

The Arrival of Covid-19

In the March of 2020, the UK saw the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent countrywide lock down. Moreover, the furlough scheme introduced by the UK Government to mitigate economic impacts during the pandemic further complicated matters. Under the scheme, many employees, including sport psychologists, were not allowed to work – At that time, the Academy Manager came into our office and informed us that we had to pack up all of our things and go home immediately, because the Academy had to go into lockdown and therefore business would cease for the foreseeable future (there were no specifics around how long this would be because no one knew the extent of the pandemic yet). The only people who were allowed to maintain some kind of work schedule (i.e. virtual communications and admin) were the AMT (Academy Management Team) which included: Academy Manager; Head of Education and Player Care; Head of Sport Science and Medicine; Head of Operations; Head of Coaching; Head of Recruitment. For the rest of the staff, this prohibition extended to planning, conducting virtual meetings, or any other form of professional activity; however, the management team would send updates in relation to the academy closure and any changes to these circumstances. Consequently, there was a cessation of structured psychological support programmes within the football academy. The absence of regular psychological check-ins and sessions left a void, particularly when athletes needed support the

most due to the stress and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic. The academy remained closed until the end of the 2019/2020 season.

7.5. Season Three

At the start of the 2020/2021 season, the UK remained heavily affected by Covid-19, with strict lockdown measures still firmly in place. This had a significant impact on the day-to-day running of the football academy, and the way in which content was delivered to the academy players, including the psychological provisions, such as workshops or individual support (Black and McCarthy 2022). Navigating the provision of sport psychology into a football academy during the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges, primarily due to the enforced lack of physical contact and the constraints imposed by the furlough scheme, such as the academy closing, all contact having to be remote, and a limited amount of staff still able to work. These hurdles disrupted the usual methods of delivering psychological support during training sessions and in face to face meetings, creating a landscape where adapting to virtual environments became essential, however this proved difficult to navigate.

The predominant challenge was the sudden need to shift to remote interactions, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom (Lundqvist et al. 2021; Black & McCarthy 2022). Sport psychology often relies heavily on face-to-face contact, as building trust and rapport with athletes is crucial (Fifer et al. 2008). The transition to virtual platforms made it difficult to maintain the same level of connection with the players because of the inability to read the players' body language and reactions to the conversation as video calls only allow you to see the person's face. Athletes, particularly young ones in a football academy, might have found it harder to open up about their mental health struggles in a virtual

setting. This lack of direct engagement potentially diminished the effectiveness of psychological interventions and support.

The restrictions on physical presence also meant that I could not be part of the office environment, which traditionally allowed for impromptu meetings between myself and the coaches around specific players and how to adapt training in order to promote the development of a certain psychological skill or requirement. The informal interactions, such as hallway conversations or quick consultations, which often play a crucial role in the holistic support system, were entirely missing. This disconnection from the physical workspace hindered the collaborative efforts between coaches, medical staff, and psychologists, disrupting the multidisciplinary approach essential for comprehensive athlete care.

Turning To Virtual Platforms

During this season, staff were gradually permitted to work remotely; a series of staff meetings were held to strategise and determine how the Academy could effectively deliver its services to players through virtual platforms while adhering to the country's lockdown regulations (Lundqvist et al. 2021; Black & McCarthy 2022). Adapting to the virtual mode of working posed its own set of technical and practical challenges. Ensuring that both staff and athletes had access to reliable internet connections, suitable devices, and private spaces for confidential discussions was not always straightforward. Additionally, the digital divide meant that some players or staff might have struggled more than others, leading to inconsistent access to psychological support across the academy. There were frequent instances where parents contacted me to explain that they were unable to access Microsoft Teams, that their computer was not working, or

that there were issues with their son's camera—ultimately meaning that he could not attend the meeting or workshop scheduled for that day. In addition to these access issues, a number of players arrived late to sessions due to technical difficulties in logging in or navigating the weblink. Naturally, this became a source of frustration for all involved.

As someone who would not consider themselves particularly tech-savvy, I found myself needing to upskill rapidly in digital communication tools and platforms. With no formal training, I had to develop new, practical strategies for engagement to ensure the support I was offering remained purposeful and beneficial, despite the fact that the environment felt very different from what the players were used to. Research around the use of digital platforms has shown that the effectiveness of online psychological interventions is still a subject of ongoing exploration, and during the pandemic, these methods were being tested in real-time (Van Agteren, 2021; Rodríguez-Prada, 2023).

It is clear to see that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant barriers to the provision of sport psychology within the academy. The lack of physical contact weakened the quality of psychological support, while the furlough scheme's restrictions hindered the ability to maintain structured programmes and collaboration. Adapting to a virtual environment, though necessary, brought its own set of challenges, highlighting the importance of flexibility and innovation in continuing to support athletes' mental health during unprecedented times (Keegan et al. 2020).

Towards the end of season three, lighter COVID-19 lockdown measures were still in place, and we still had to work remotely, however, we were beginning to get used to this new normal and found ways to continue functioning to the best

of our ability. We were now attending regular multidisciplinary meetings over Microsoft Teams, where we discussed the players and the various provisions we could offer them during this unprecedented time.

Our primary focus was to ensure the players continued to receive comprehensive support, even from a distance. These Teams meetings were crucial for coordinating our efforts and sharing updates on each player's progress and needs. We explored new and adaptive ways to maintain the quality of our support services, acknowledging that the pandemic required us to think outside the box; this included providing a folder of saved online workshops (which covered the psychological topics that would have been delivered if we were in the normal academy environment) that had voice overs attached to them so that players and staff could access them from home whenever they needed to.

Additionally, I was tasked with delivering performance psychology workshops to various age groups within the academy via Microsoft Teams during the COVID-19 lockdown period. These sessions became an important component of the academy's remote support strategy, aimed at safeguarding the players' psychological well-being during a time of considerable disruption and uncertainty (Lundqvist et al., 2021; Black & McCarthy, 2022). The workshops were delivered in both group and individual formats, with the latter offered on a needs basis to ensure that more tailored psychological support remained accessible despite the limitations of remote delivery.

The group-based sessions were structured around core psychological skills training themes, such as emotional regulation, focus, and resilience. Beyond this, the sessions created a space for players to articulate their experiences, concerns, and anticipations regarding both the ongoing lockdown

and their eventual return to the academy. From a practitioner perspective, these forums appeared to serve dual purposes: they facilitated the development of psychological competencies while also helping to sustain a sense of social connection and continuity within the academy structure.

Critically reflecting on this experience, however, I observed that player engagement with the additional one-to-one support remained relatively low. The majority of players expressed minimal concern about the lockdown itself and were largely enthusiastic about returning to football. This response prompted me to question some of the assumptions that often underpin sport psychology provision during periods of disruption. While the value of structured psychological input is well documented, this experience suggested that young athletes may not always perceive a clear need for formalised support, especially when their identity and motivation remain firmly anchored in the desire to resume training and competition. It also raised broader questions about how sport psychologists might better tailor their approaches to align with athlete perceptions, particularly in high-performance environments where resilience and self-reliance are frequently normalised. This insight has since informed my ongoing reflections on practitioner-athlete dynamics and the importance of contextual sensitivity when designing and delivering psychological interventions in elite youth sport.

7.6. Season Four

Season four (2021/2022) saw lockdown measures began to lift, and the academy then faced new challenges with the return to training. Initially, our work was restricted to outdoor activities on the pitch, with no access to indoor facilities such as offices or classrooms. This limitation presented a unique set of obstacles, particularly for delivering one-on-one psychology sessions, which require privacy

and a controlled environment. To adapt, I shifted my approach to providing psychological support directly on the pitch. This meant that much of the psychological work had to be integrated into the training sessions themselves. Live feedback became a crucial component, allowing me to offer immediate, on-the-spot psychological guidance and support. This method, while less private, ensured that players still received the necessary psychological input in real-time, which could be very effective in the dynamic environment of the training pitch, as suggested in chapter 5 and further supported by Henriksen (2015). While this began as a strategy to adapt to Covid-19 restrictions, findings from chapter 5 suggested that there was in fact a need for the transfer from classroom-based provision to a more practical application on pitch. For any 1-2-1 sessions, the player and I would just take a walk around the pitches to ensure that we had privacy but also were adhering to the social distancing rules – I actually still use this approach now occasionally because it provides a relaxed environment for the player to open up without the session feeling too formal. Supporting the coaches also became a key part of my adapted role, by working closely with the coaching staff, I began integrating psychological principles into the broader training plan, ensuring a holistic approach to the players' development. This collaboration helped bridge the gap caused by the lack of indoor facilities whereby team psychology sessions could take place - psychological skills training continued to be a focal point, with an emphasis on applying these skills in a live setting. The players practiced techniques such as visualization, goal-setting, and self-talk during their training drills. This practical application not only reinforced their learning but also demonstrated the relevance and utility of psychological skills in their athletic performance.

Despite the difficulties posed by the ongoing pandemic and the restrictions on our working environment, I was able to maintain a high level of psychological support for the players by utilising the adapted methods of delivery and communication. The lockdown and return to work experience underscored the importance of flexibility and creativity in overcoming obstacles, ensuring that our players continued to develop both on and off the pitch, I felt that I learnt a lot about the different ways in which I could connect with players and staff that best suited them, being able to adjust to these changes has also helped me to adapt and overcome the unpredictable and ever changing schedule of academy football. I now find it easier to find alternative ways to work with players that best fits around their training day and individual needs, whether that be taking a walk with them so that they feel more comfortable talking with me or carrying out meetings on Microsoft teams if that is easier for them to fit into their schedule.

In summary, season four was marked by significant challenges due to the COVID-19 lockdown. However, through regular online meetings, remote workshops, and adapted on-pitch support, we continued to provide essential psychological services to our players. This period highlighted the critical role of mental resilience and adaptability in both sports and life, setting a foundation for continued growth and development in future seasons.

7.7. Season Five

In 2022/2023, my fifth season at the club marked a complete return to normalcy after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With restrictions lifted, I was able to focus on integrating sport psychology into the academy coaching programme, focusing on providing real-time feedback and support to both players and coaches on the pitch – the findings from chapter 5

suggested the need for more application from classroom to pitch based provision. Each session was an opportunity to work closely with a different age group, offering tailored psychological insights and strategies. My mornings and afternoons were dedicated to the Professional Development Phase (PDP), where I provided one-to-one support to players aged 17 to 21. This direct engagement was crucial for addressing individual psychological needs, alongside helping players enhance their mental resilience, focus, and overall performance.

A cornerstone of my weekly routine was attending coach meetings—these were pivotal for embedding sport psychology into the fabric of the Academy's coaching philosophy. During these meetings, I delivered mini workshops designed to help coaches integrate various psychological principles into their training sessions. Topics ranged from goal setting and motivation techniques to managing performance anxiety and fostering team cohesion. These workshops were interactive, allowing coaches to ask questions and discuss specific challenges they faced with their players. In addition to these workshops, I consulted with coaches with regard to individual players within their age groups. This consultation process was invaluable for tailoring psychological strategies to the unique needs of each player, ensuring that our interventions were as effective as possible. By collaborating closely with the coaches, we could create a cohesive support system that addressed both the physical and mental aspects of player development. Monday evenings were reserved for working with the U15 and U16 squads at club's stadium. These sessions involved a mix of one-to-one support and assisting coaches with team dynamics and psychological skills training. The focus was on building a strong psychological foundation for these young athletes, equipping them with the tools they needed to navigate the

pressures of competitive sport (Lauer et al. 2017). On Wednesday evenings, my attention shifted to the U9 to U14 age groups, working with them on a rotational basis. This approach ensured that every player in the academy had access to sport psychology support. These sessions were designed to be engaging and age-appropriate, helping younger players develop essential mental skills while also enjoying their training experiences.

Despite this progress, one significant challenge remained: my contract only allowed for 20 hours of work per week, alongside my PhD commitments. This limitation made it difficult to provide the comprehensive support I envisioned. To address this, I shifted my focus towards empowering the coaches. By "coaching the coaches" to deliver basic sport psychology principles within their own sessions, I could extend the reach and impact of our psychological support. Training the coaches involved providing them with the knowledge and tools they needed to incorporate psychological concepts into their everyday interactions with players. This included practical strategies for fostering a positive training environment, techniques for building player confidence, and methods for helping players cope with setbacks and challenges. By embedding these principles into the coaching framework, we created a more holistic development environment for the players. This approach allowed me to concentrate on the more complex, individual needs of players, providing them with tailored psychological support that addressed their specific challenges and goals. The synergy between my direct work with the players and the coaches' enhanced ability to integrate psychological principles into their sessions created a robust support network.

Reflecting on this season, the return to normality after COVID-19 presented both opportunities and challenges. The ability to work on the pitch and

interact face-to-face with players and coaches was immensely beneficial to both players and coaches and meant that I could continue to apply the suggestions from chapters 5 and 6. It allowed for real-time feedback, immediate application of psychological strategies, and stronger relationships built on direct interaction (Larsen et al. 2014; Mitchell et al. 2022), however, the constraints of my contract highlighted the importance of efficiency and the need to maximize the impact of every hour worked. By focusing on coaching the coaches, I not only extended the reach of sport psychology within the Academy but also fostered a culture of psychological awareness and support that permeated every aspect of our training programmes. Ultimately, this season reinforced the critical role of sport psychology in player development and the value of collaboration between psychologists and coaches, as supported by Green et al. (2020) who emphasize the need for a psychologically informed environment in football academies to enhance player performance and development. By working together, we were able to create an environment that supported the holistic growth of our players, preparing them not just for the physical demands of their sport, but also for the mental challenges they would face on and off the pitch.

This season was successful in many ways, but there remain noticeable gaps in the integration of sport psychology within the academy structure, as supported by the findings from chapter 5. While many staff members actively consider sport psychology in their daily work, I continue to be excluded from key discussions related to player development and support—conversations where my input would be both relevant and beneficial. In some cases, this is understandable due to the limitations of my 20-hour-per-week contract, which reduces my availability. However, I am often not included in all relevant email

chains, which further limits my ability to stay informed. Additionally, coaches still do not consistently seek my advice when planning their sessions, missing opportunities to integrate psychological principles that could enhance player performance and development. The lack of follow-up or formal communication means I am often unaware of ongoing issues that could benefit from my expertise.

7.8. Conclusion

This chapter draws on autoethnography, blending personal experience with research, to reflect on how I have applied academic knowledge. By connecting theory with practice, this approach offers deeper insight into how research plays out in real-world settings. Sharing my own experiences brings to light the challenges, tensions, and growth I have experienced.

My journey at the Academy has been transformative, filled with both challenges and significant growth. By my fifth season, the return to normalcy allowed me to better integrate sport psychology into the academy's coaching programme. Working closely with players and coaches across various age groups, I provided one-to-one and group support to help athletes strengthen mental resilience, focus, and overall performance. Additionally, my involvement in coach meetings and workshops played a key role in embedding psychological principles into the coaching philosophy, enabling coaches to apply strategies such as goal setting, motivation techniques, and performance anxiety management within their sessions.

Despite these strides, challenges remained - as a young, female practitioner in a male-dominated football environment, I initially struggled to establish credibility. However, over time, building and developing relationships and demonstrating the value of sport psychology helped me to overcome these

barriers. It was evident that my part-time role limited my availability, and while psychological principles became more integrated into daily practices, gaps in communication and collaboration persisted - exclusion from key discussions and missed opportunities hindered the full impact of my expertise.

Nevertheless, this journey reinforced the importance of coaching the coaches, extending the reach of sport psychology by fostering a culture of psychological awareness within the academy - by equipping coaches with psychological strategies, I contributed to a more holistic development environment for players. While challenges in communication and integration remain, this experience has underscored the vital role of sport psychology in player development. Moving forward, I am committed to strengthening collaboration between sport psychology and coaching staff, ensuring that the mental aspects of player development continue to thrive alongside the physical, providing athletes with the comprehensive support they need to succeed both on and off the pitch.

CHAPTER 8: Conclusion

8.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the provisions, delivery, and experiences of sport psychology within UK football academies. This was to be achieved through three key objectives:

1. Explore the perceptions and experiences of practitioners delivering sport psychology within the UK academy system, in order to map current trends of sport psychology within the football academy environment.
2. Critically assess the provision of sport psychology within a Premier League football academy from multiple perspectives (coaches and support staff), to map the current perceptions and attitudes of sport psychology.
3. Present an auto-ethnographical account of the lived experiences of working within a premier league academy delivering sport psychology services.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews and an autoethnography conducted over the course of five seasons, encompassed in a qualitative approach, these objectives have been addressed. Prior to this research, literature has failed to explore the provision of sport psychology from such a wide range of perspectives, with consideration of both, the practitioners responsible for delivering sport psychology, as well as the multidisciplinary team that subsequently aids the application of the discipline into the development programme. Therefore, this research is unique in its own right as it combines both of these populations, alongside a first-hand, auto-ethnographical account of working within the academy system, to better establish the overall integration of sport psychology into academy football.

Overall, this research has helped to unpack the role and experiences of practitioners responsible for delivering sport psychology within the UK football academy system, as well as providing a unique insight into the perceptions and experiences of coaches and support staff around sport psychology at a category three academy.

8.2. Summary of Key Findings

This chapter of the thesis seeks to provide a synthesis of the key research findings that have been discussed in previous chapters (5,6,7). The research provided several valuable results, however, there were five profound findings that were prominent across the studies conducted as part of this thesis.

1) The provision and integration of sport psychology across English football academies is still inconsistent. That is, the way in which sport psychology content is delivered ranges from simple tick box, basic psychoeducation, to holistic, integrated sport psychology programmes, meaning there is no standardisation for the way in which the sport psychology programmes should be delivered. Additionally, the integration of sport psychology content into training sessions by coaches is also inconsistent, it was found that coaches do include the newly discussed sport psychology content, however this only lasts for a short amount of time before it is forgotten about, and the focus of the training session reverts to the technical, tactical, and physical aspects of development. One explanation for this is the persistent misconception that sport psychology must take place away from training, which is often seen as taking time away from coaching and player development. This reflects a narrow and outdated view of psychological support that fails to recognise its potential value when embedded within the training environment. What makes this particularly problematic is that

participants repeatedly identified pitch-side delivery as the most effective approach. This highlights a clear disconnect between perception and practice, pointing to a lack of coach education around how sport psychology can be integrated into on-pitch work. Equally, it raises questions about whether sport psychologists themselves are doing enough to adapt their methods and collaborate across disciplines. Without a stronger understanding of the demands of academy life, sport psychology risks remaining isolated rather than becoming a wholly embedded part of the performance environment.

2) There is still a level of resistance against sport psychology provisions and the role of the sport psychologist. Results revealed this may be due to the ever-present stigma around the discipline of sport psychology, and the idea that it is best suited to solving problems rather than being used as a regular tool for the players' development. However, it was also established that coaches and support staff within academy football do, in fact, see the value of sport psychology and state that a key reason for the lack of integration is the absence of resources dedicated to the discipline, such as time and staffing numbers.

These findings suggest that, while some resistance to sport psychology remains—often tied to outdated stigma—this is no longer the most significant barrier to its integration within academy environments. A more prominent issue is the ongoing prioritisation of technical and tactical development, which continues to dominate session planning. Participants reported that sport psychology is often overlooked during this process, with psychological support only considered when coaches are actively prompted. Without sustained reinforcement, efforts to integrate psychology tend to drop off quickly. This highlights a deeper cultural bias within academy football, where psychological

development is still seen as secondary, despite growing evidence of its relevance to performance.

The assumption that sport psychology requires separate, designated time away from training also reflects a misunderstanding of what integration actually involves. Embedding psychology into practice means delivering it alongside technical, tactical, and physical elements—not as a standalone component, and not solely by the sport psychologist. Instead, coaches must play an active role in applying psychological principles within their sessions. The persistence of this misconception points to a clear need for improved education: coaches require support to better understand how sport psychology can be applied on the pitch, and practitioners need to recognise the value of working collaboratively across disciplines. Without this shift in both understanding and practice, sport psychology will continue to sit at the margins of academy programmes rather than becoming a fully integrated part of player development.

3) A recurring theme across chapters 5 and 6 was the perceived need for greater investment in sport psychology provision within academy football. Participants consistently highlighted that without increased resources—particularly in the form of funding to support a full-time sport psychology department—effective integration into the daily routines of academy life is unlikely. The current model, where a single practitioner is responsible for all players across three development phases, was seen as inadequate, limiting both the consistency and depth of psychological support available to players and coaches. This lack of capacity not only restricts meaningful integration but reinforces the perception of sport psychology as an add-on rather than a core part of the programme.

Critically, participants linked this resourcing issue to a broader gap in psychological education—especially among coaches. The need for regular and ongoing education was a strong theme, with both studies identifying low levels of psychological literacy among coaches and performance staff. Despite growing recognition of the importance of mental aspects of performance, many coaches lacked the knowledge and confidence to apply psychological principles in practice. This suggests that integration is not simply a structural issue but also a cultural one, where sport psychology continues to be undervalued or poorly understood. Without both improved funding and targeted education, sport psychology is likely to continue to be implemented inconsistently and dependent on individual initiative, rather than embedded systematically within the academy's development framework.

4) The fourth key finding was that there is still a clear lack of psychological literacy amongst coaches, and a greater level of understanding is needed if the integration of sport psychology is to be successful. This finding supports the previous work of Murdoch (2016), who similarly found that the level of psychological literacy amongst coaches was considerably lower than perceived. As stated in previous chapters (5,6), this is potentially problematic due to the weight of impact coaches have on the players in their care (Mossman et al. 2021), providing a large aspect of their support system (Rees et al. 2012). Therefore, there is a need for further coach education around sport psychology and how best to apply it, thus ensuring that accurate psychological advice is being delivered by coaches, which mirrors that of the sport psychology practitioners.

5) Across five competitive seasons, the application of strategies outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 highlighted a critical need to expand the reach of sport

psychology beyond the players. Specifically, it became clear that meaningful integration required a stronger focus on developing the coaching staff—a concept often referred to as “coaching the coaches”. This finding highlights the importance of equipping coaches with psychological knowledge and practical strategies, enabling them to foster a psychologically informed environment that supports players’ holistic development. Rather than positioning sport psychology as a separate or specialist intervention, this approach embeds psychological awareness into the daily coaching process, thereby enhancing consistency and cultural integration across the academy. Coaches who are psychologically literate can more effectively model, reinforce, and adapt mental skills training in context, ultimately contributing to a more supportive, resilient, and high-performing player environment.

Combined, these key points provide rich new insights whilst also extending the previous knowledge around the topic. Additionally, there is a clear thread whereby each finding contributes to the next, rather than isolated points of interest.

8.3. Contribution to knowledge

Since the introduction of sport psychology, to the world of football, the barriers that exist have somewhat changed. Historically, the most prominent issue within sport psychology was the negative connotation and stigma that was attached to the term (Ravizza 1988), coaches pushed back against the practitioners because they simply did not value or trust the discipline (Martin et al. 2002). Sport psychology was believed to be too subjective and lacking in scientific underpinning (Pain and Hardwood 2004). Therefore, this thesis lends itself to the literature by offering evidence that the attitudes around sport

psychology are changing. The current research found that coaches and support staff understand sport psychology to be of great value, in relation to the performance and wellbeing of players, and is something that needs to be better integrated into the academy programme; however, it must be noted that there is still a level of resistance against the delivery of sport psychology. The presented findings demonstrate that, although there is still a level of resistance towards the delivery of sport psychology, a potential explanation for this is the lack of psychological literacy that exists amongst coaches and support staff. Additionally, coaches and support staff reported the issue of limited resources attributing to the low level of sport psychology integration. This demonstrates that the negative connotation and stigma attached to term are no longer considered to be the greatest inhibiter of the integration of sport psychology within the academy football environment. This supports the findings presented by Ford et al. (2022), suggesting that coaches held positive attitudes towards sport psychology and believed that is of great use, however they reported a number of barriers that inhibit the successful integration of such services, including limited resources and lack of knowledge around the role of the psychologist. Therefore, it is evident that the barriers to successful sport psychology are not limited to academy football, or in fact, English sport, but also exist internationally, further demonstrating the need for research, such as this, and the potential reach of the findings and recommendations that have emerged.

Another contribution from the findings is the evidence of the need for greater psychological literacy, defined by Murdoch (2016, p.189) as ‘the ethical application of psychological skills and knowledge’, amongst those working in environments where sport psychology is a key factor of interest, in this case,

academy football (Dean et al. 2022). Both studies within this thesis demonstrated the necessity of improved psychological literacy amongst coaches and support staff. An increased level of psychological literacy amongst coaches and support staff would help to overcome the issue of sport psychology integration within academy football by ensuring that all staff at the academy have a sound understanding of sport psychology services. Due to the weight of influence that coaches have on players (Mossman et al. 2021), they play an integral part in the successful integration of sport psychology across the academy. Coaches are considered a key source of support to players (Rees et al. 2012) and spend the greatest amount of time with them, therefore their knowledge and attitudes of sport psychology will naturally be filtered into the players in their care. It is therefore essential that the psychological literacy of coaches is at a good level to ensure that the information that they filter into their sessions is accurate. If the psychological literacy of coaches is sub-optimal, the information they transfer onto their players will too be inadequate and may cause players to develop negative psychological habits due to inaccurate psychological advice.

It is important to note that, although there is evidence that coaches' attitudes towards sport psychology are improving, and the discipline is becoming increasingly accepted within academy football (Heidari et al. 2018; Konter et al. 2019), there still remains a clear bias towards the technical and tactical aspects of the development programme. In support of previous literature (Kremer and Moran 2013; Ong and Harwood 2017; Champ et al. 2018; Champ et al. 2020), the technical and tactical aspects of performance continue to be favoured at the expense of other development aspects, such as the psychological development of the player. Therefore, in order for sport psychology to be successfully

integrated into the academy development programme, a shift in mindset needs to occur to increase the promotion of focus on the psychological aspects, thus decreasing the discrepancy between the time allocated to the technical and tactical aspects of performance, and that allocated to the psychological and social aspects.

The findings from across five competitive seasons clearly indicate that meaningful and sustained integration of sport psychology cannot rely solely on the sport psychologist. Instead, greater emphasis must be placed on “coaching the coaches” by equipping them with the psychological knowledge and applied strategies necessary to foster a psychologically informed environment. This shift would enable coaches to embed psychological principles into the day-to-day training process, enhancing both consistency and relevance for players. By raising the level of psychological literacy among coaching staff, the delivery of mental skills and psychological support becomes more frequent, contextualised, and aligned with the overall development programme. Ultimately, this approach supports a more resilient, adaptable, and high-performing player environment, while also promoting a cultural shift where psychology is seen as an integral part of football development, rather than an isolated or specialist intervention.

Finally, this thesis is important practically due to the current position of the Elite Performance Program (EPP) (Premier League 2011), in relation to psychological provisions at elite level football academies. The EPPP states the necessity of including psychology within the academy framework (Premier League 2011), in order to address the psychological needs of the player, as well as develop their performance. To date it is apparent that psychology is being

utilised within elite football academies, in accordance with the requirements of the EPPP (Premier League 2011; Steptoe, Barker and Harwood 2016).

The EPPP states that psychology should be used within PL Academies, however, at present, there is no structured guidelines as to what exactly should be included or how it should be delivered. Subsequently, there appears to be a lack of knowledge among coaches regarding psychological best practice and how to integrate psychology into their training practices. This thesis provides a clear understanding of the current use and delivery of sport psychology across academies within the premier league; this, in turn, will help to establish the impact that the EPPP is actually having on sport psychology and the perceived success of the framework in regard to the discipline. It is my hope that this will provide a platform for an updated version of the sport psychology section of the EPPP to be created and integrated into professional football academies across England.

8.4. Practical implications of the Research

The practical implications of this research are twofold. First, the findings will aid in the refinement of the EPPP as, at present, it is considered to be sub-optimal in its sport psychology guidance. Additionally, the research has provided a map of the current barriers to sport psychology integrations, as well as provide a number of recommendations in order to combat such issues.

The evidence from this research suggests that the EPPP document, as it is currently, provides inadequate guidance around the psychological content that should be provided and the way in which it should be delivered. Revision of the EPPP guidelines would help to expand the current minimum requirements of psychological provision and would provide a greater level of uniformity across the academies in each of the categories. In turn, this would assist in increasing the

focus on developing psychological literacy amongst players, as well as staff. Additionally, the revision of the document would benefit from being written by practitioners who are familiar with sport psychology and who have experience working within the academy football environment, as suggested by Dean et al. (2022). This would ensure that the document utilised the correct terminology and clear guidance that was relevant to the demands of the academy environment. This would include detailed guidance on developing a holistic, player-centred approach, focussing on both performance and player well-being (Champ et al. 2020; Keegan et al. 2020). In line with the recommendations from Dean et al. (2022), revising the guidance to consider the emotional and cognitive maturation of players, as well as an understanding of the psychological development of adolescent athletes, will help ensure that the delivery of sport psychology services cater for the everchanging needs of academy players throughout their (player) lifespan. With such revisions, the EPPP has the potential to provide psychological services that support youth players throughout their footballing careers, and into their lives outside of the sport.

In addition to the revision of the EPPP, there would be benefit in better preparing future practitioners for the demands and challenges of the elite sport context. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of elite sport, and the need for great sport psychology integration into the academy football environment, greater education for undergraduate and postgraduate students wishing to pursue a sport psychology role within such environments would be beneficial. That is, educating future sport psychology practitioners on the realities of working as part of a multi-disciplinary team within elite sport organisations (Eubank et al. 2014), by incorporating experience opportunities and applied literature from those with

experience within elite sport contexts (Parker 1995; Roderick 2006), in order to provide students with a better understanding of the environment that they wish to work in (Champ et al. 2018).

In a similar vein, the current research provides evidence for the need of greater sport psychology education for coaches and support staff. Specifically, the practitioners responsible for delivering the sport psychology programme should have an integral role in providing education to coaches and support staff around sport psychology, its benefits for performance, and the importance of the delivery of sound, accurate psychological advice, as supported by Henriksen et al. (2014). Such education would help to combat the knowledge gap and the "fear of the unknown" (Dean et al. 2022) that exists amongst coaches and support staff, which subsequently contributes to stigmatised thinking and resistance against the implementation of psychological services (Souter et al. 2018). Further, it is recommended that regular meetings between the sport psychology practitioner and the rest of the multidisciplinary team (coaches and support staff) are adopted, in order to plan holistic training sessions that include psychological skills, as well as the technical, tactical, and physical aspects of performance. Alone, this would ensure the integration of sport psychology into the training programme, whilst also avoiding additional time away from the training content that the coaches want to deliver.

Findings from the autoethnographic strand of this research underscore the critical need for structural and relational support in enabling meaningful psychological provision within academy football. As a part-time, early-career practitioner operating in a Category 3 environment, the researcher experienced significant barriers to integration, including unclear role boundaries, limited

access to players and staff, and exclusion from key decision-making processes. These constraints, while not always rooted in resistance, reflect broader structural limitations that continue to hinder the full integration of sport psychology (Sharp et al., 2023; Nesti, 2010).

A key implication is that employing a psychologist is not sufficient in itself; academies must work to embed practitioners within the cultural and organisational ecosystem of youth development. This includes ensuring role clarity, promoting cross-department collaboration, and providing access to the planning and delivery of player development. The relational positioning of the psychologist—how they are perceived, trusted, and engaged with—is fundamental to whether psychological support becomes a central, rather than peripheral, component of the academy system.

These findings align with broader calls for systemic, rather than individual, approaches to delivery (Keegan et al., 2020; Cruickshank et al., 2018), and are especially relevant for Category 3 academies, where resource limitations heighten the need for intentional, collaborative structures. By embedding psychological roles more deliberately into the everyday operations of academy football, organisations can begin to shift from fragmented provision to a more sustainable, integrated model of support.

8.5. Theoretical implications of the Research

The findings of this research present several key theoretical implications regarding the integration of sport psychology within elite youth football academies. Firstly, the inconsistent provision and delivery of sport psychology across English academies challenges the assumption that psychological support is uniformly embedded across the professional game. Existing frameworks—

often underpinned by linear or idealised models of integrated provision—fail to account for the uneven and context-dependent realities of academy systems (Harwood & Johnston, 2016; Ford et al., 2022). Instead, the findings of this study highlight the need for more flexible, adaptive models that are sensitive to the cultural, structural, and relational conditions shaping practice within individual academy settings (Nesti, 2010; Thelwell et al., 2018).

Additionally, this research exposes a significant gap between the theoretical aspirations of integrated sport psychology and its practical enactment in academy environments. The limited integration of psychological content into routine training sessions and the persistence of compartmentalised delivery models indicate that existing conceptualisations overestimate the operational feasibility of holistic support—particularly in lower-resourced academies (Fraser et al., 2016; Pain & Harwood, 2009). Misconceptions such as the belief that psychological work must occur in isolation from physical or technical training persist, revealing a disconnect between interdisciplinary ideals and entrenched cultural norms. These findings point to the need for revised models of applied sport psychology that give greater weight to the sociocultural and organisational barriers that affect implementation (Daley et al., 2020; Martindale et al., 2007).

A further theoretical implication is the urgent need to reposition sport psychology as a proactive and embedded element of player development, rather than a reactive, problem-solving tool. This reinforces the value of holistic models of performance, which advocate for the seamless integration of psychological principles into the daily rhythms of coaching and support (Dean et al., 2022; Harwood, 2008). The findings suggest that psychological provision should not be confined to the remit of specialists but rather seen as a shared responsibility—

delivered collaboratively by psychologists, coaches, and support staff (Keegan et al., 2020). This systemic perspective aligns with contemporary calls for interdisciplinary working and places emphasis on the relational dynamics that underpin effective integration.

The role of the coach also emerges as central to the success or failure of psychological provision. This research identifies a concerning lack of psychological literacy among coaches, echoing earlier work by Murdoch (2016), who reported that coaches often overestimate their understanding of psychological concepts. Given the influential position of coaches in shaping the developmental environment, this lack of literacy represents a serious limitation—both in terms of missed opportunities for psychological skill development and in the reinforcement of outdated beliefs about the role of psychology in performance (Mossman et al., 2021; Rees et al., 2012). These findings have implications for coach education frameworks, which must evolve to embed psychological competence as a core component of professional practice. The findings also support the relevance of social learning theory, given the extent to which players observe and internalise the attitudes and behaviours modelled by their coaches (Bandura, 1977; Harwood et al., 2010).

The influence of structural and cultural barriers—such as limited staffing, budgetary constraints, and the prioritisation of technical or tactical content—further highlights the relevance of organisational and implementation theories. These systemic issues not only restrict access to psychological support but also create inconsistencies in its delivery and visibility (Sharp & Hodge, 2013; Andersen, 2000). Unless these conditions are explicitly addressed, efforts to embed sport psychology into academy systems are unlikely to be sustainable.

There is therefore a pressing need for new, contextually grounded models of provision that are both adaptable to organisational realities and responsive to the lived experiences of those working within them (Champ et al., 2018; Nesti, 2012).

In addition to the findings concerning provision, this thesis offers unique insight into the challenges of conducting applied research during the Covid-19 pandemic. The reflection chapter provides a first-hand account of the adaptations required to meet the constraints imposed by government restrictions. Originally designed to include face-to-face interviews, the research process was restructured to enable virtual data collection via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These adjustments allowed for the continuation of the study without compromising ethical standards or participant wellbeing. As such, this research contributes to emerging literature on methodological adaptation and digitisation in qualitative research during global crises (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

This thesis is novel in its theoretical contribution, particularly given the limited literature authored by individuals with dual experience as both practitioners and insider researchers within the academy context (Nesti, 2010; Champ et al., 2018). It provides a multi-layered perspective on sport psychology provision by combining three vantage points: the perspectives of academy psychologists across different clubs; the lived experiences of coaches and support staff within a Category 3 environment; and the autoethnographic insights of the researcher-practitioner navigating these realities in situ. In doing so, the research offers a rare and valuable account of how psychological support is understood, delivered, and experienced within elite youth football—contributing

original knowledge to an underdeveloped yet critically important area of sport psychology.

8.6. Recommendations for Future research

Firstly, future research should focus on how to effectively deliver sport psychology education to coaches. This study highlighted that for sport psychology to be fully embedded within the academy environment, its reach must extend beyond the players. Developing psychologically informed coaches is essential to creating an environment where mental skills and psychological principles are consistently reinforced in day-to-day training. Future studies should explore the impact of targeted education programmes on coaching behaviours, including how coaches plan, communicate, and adapt their sessions using psychological strategies. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in understanding whether this education leads to sustained changes in coaching practice over time.

Secondly, a key finding from this research was the lack of psychological literacy among coaches and support staff, which remains a major barrier to the meaningful integration of sport psychology. Future research should look to explore this issue in more detail, focusing on why current levels of understanding are limited and how this can be improved across academy environments. Doing so would not only support the development of more psychologically informed staff but also provide practical strategies that can be implemented to raise standards of psychological literacy across departments. Alongside this, further research is needed to examine how psychologically literate coaches influence player development. While this study showed that coaches can play a key role in delivering psychological support, there is still limited evidence on how players

actually experience and engage with this type of coach-led delivery. Gaining insight from the players' perspective would help determine how effective this indirect approach is in practice, and where improvements may be needed. Taken together, these two areas of research would offer both theoretical and practical value—informing how sport psychology can be better understood, delivered, and embedded into the day-to-day coaching process.

There is also a need to explore the structural and organisational factors that support or restrict the integration of sport psychology. Participants in this research identified that limited resources—particularly staffing and funding—can significantly hinder the consistent delivery of psychological support across all development phases. Future research could compare academies with different resourcing models to better understand which structures and systems enable more effective integration of sport psychology.

In addition, research should examine how sport psychologists collaborate with other departments to support delivery. Interdisciplinary working was identified as a key strategy for improving adaptability and ensuring that psychological support aligns with the day-to-day demands of academy football. Studies investigating how psychologists, coaches, and wider support staff can co-design and co-deliver psychologically informed practices would offer useful insight into what integrated delivery looks like in practice.

Finally, as sport psychology becomes more embedded within coaching, there is a need to reconsider how success is defined and measured. Future research should explore the broader impact of integrated psychological support, including its influence on player wellbeing, long-term development, and the overall learning environment.

Based on these recommendations, future research should move beyond simply improving access to sport psychology and instead focus on how it can be embedded meaningfully into the culture, structures, and daily practices of academy football.

8.7. Limitations of the Research

What is true across this research is that, while a representative sample was achieved, of the participants that were approached, a number either a) did not respond to the initial invite or, b) responded but did not participate. Therefore, to an extent, it could be argued that the sample was somewhat self-selected. That is, the results may simply reflect the experiences of those who were willing to speak out (Sharma 2017). This may have caused a level of participant bias, which proves to be common in qualitative research. Although this potential risk was acknowledged, it was agreed that the use of purposive sampling remained the most appropriate for the nature of the research and would effectively assist in addressing the aim and objectives of the thesis.

Second, the dual role of the researcher as both practitioner and insider introduces the potential for interpretive bias. Although this positioning allowed for privileged access and deep contextual insight (Nesti, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2014), it also carries the risk of over-identification with participants or selective interpretation of data. Reflexive strategies—such as regular journaling, peer debriefing, and iterative data review—were employed to address this concern (Smith & McGannon, 2018), yet the influence of the researcher's subjectivity cannot be entirely removed.

The impact of Covid-19 on the research may also be considered a limitation, particularly regarding chapter 6. Due to the government restrictions that

were in place over the period of 2020/21, a large number of staff at the category 3 academy were furloughed, meaning that only a small number of staff were available to contact. This meant that, while a larger body of staff were employed at the academy, the sample only included those who were allowed to continue working during the time of the data collection. Although this issue was out of the control of the researcher, it is something that has been considered throughout the research and therefore required acknowledgement.

Finally, although the research provides insight into the experiences of coaches and practitioners, it does not include the perspectives of academy players themselves. This omission limits the extent to which the findings reflect the full spectrum of stakeholder experiences within the development environment. As Rees et al. (2016) and Holt & Dunn (2004) have emphasised, the voices of youth athletes are critical for understanding the impact and reception of psychological support. Future research would benefit from incorporating player perspectives to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of sport psychology provision across academy football.

7.8. Summary

This thesis explored the provision and delivery of sport psychology within professional football academies in England. This was achieved through a qualitative, three phased data collection process, underpinned by the philosophical stance of the interpretivist paradigm. The use of semi-structured interviews and autoethnography allowed for an in-depth understanding of the current psychological provisions within academy football, as well as the perceptions and experiences of those individuals working within the environment.

It is hoped that this thesis has helped to deepen the understanding of the current provision of sport psychology, as it currently exists, within academy football. The findings from this thesis are novel and provide an original contribution to the existing knowledge regarding the provision of sport psychology services. The research examined the experiences of sport psychology practitioners working within elite football academies in England, as well as provide a detailed insight, from the perspective of coaches and support staff, into the current provision of psychology at a Category 3 football academy. Combined, the empirical chapters provided an extensive pool of rich data, which translated into several key findings. A synthesis of these findings suggests that, while the provision of sport psychology is continuing to develop and improve, there still remains a number of factors that inhibit the full integration of the discipline into the academy development programme. One of the most significant findings was the need to shift the focus of sport psychology delivery beyond the players, and towards the development of psychologically informed coaches. The concept of "coaching the coaches" emerged as a critical area for future development, particularly in enabling more consistent and context-specific delivery of psychological support. This requires a move away from the perception of sport psychology as a separate or specialist intervention, and instead towards a model where psychological principles are embedded into everyday coaching practices. Additionally, the research highlighted a clear lack of psychological literacy among coaches and support staff. This not only limits the integration of sport psychology but also reinforces the idea that it sits outside the core training process. Addressing this through targeted education and interdisciplinary collaboration

would help foster a more psychologically informed culture across academy environments.

Finally, several recommendations have been made in order to combat these issues and ultimately improve the level of integration of sport psychology that currently exists within the professional football academies in England. These recommendations include increasing staff education, enhancing interdisciplinary delivery, and placing greater emphasis on the development of psychological literacy across all departments involved in player development.

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Appendix 1

Interview Script: Script for Phase One

The following interview will explore your perceptions and use of sport psychology, as well as identify the psychological needs and overall implementation of psychology at the club, that you believe to exist. It is important to remember that there are no right or wrong answers, I am simply interested in your opinions and experiences, you also do not have to answer if you do not want to and you have a right to withdraw at any point during the interview. You were emailed in advance the participant information and informed consent forms, following these do you have any questions? Are you happy to proceed with this interview?

Background information:

1. Can you tell me about your career in sport psychology?
    a) Can you tell me about your career in sport psychology?
    b) How many years of experience do you have?
    c) What are your qualifications?

Role:

1. Can you tell me about the academy structure at your club and where you sit within it?
    a) What is your role at the club?
    b) What department does sport psychology sit in?
2. From your experience, can you comment on the acceptance and understanding of the sport psychology profession?
    a) How do coaches and players interpret the role of the sport psychologist?
    b) Do you feel that the role of the sport psychologist is clear?

Sport Psychology: What is it? Why is it Important?

1. What does the term sport psychology mean to you?
    a) What do you feel the purpose of sport psychology is?
    b) What do you feel is the importance of it?

Elite Youth Football Environment

1. Can you tell me about your understanding and experiences of Elite Football Environments in general?
    a) I am interested in your perception of the elite youth football environment. Can you tell me about the climate you are working in at the academy?
    b) Do you feel it has changed in recent years? If so, how?
    c) How does this compare to elite youth football environments?
    d) What do you think the main focus of youth development academies is?

The EPPP – broader understanding of the guidance

1. Can you tell me about your understanding of the EPPP?
    a) What do you understand the function of the EPPP to be?
    b) Who do you feel the EPPP was created for?

c) How do you feel the EPPP informs the way in which player development programmes are delivered within UK academies?
d) The EPPP was introduced by the PL in 2012, how do you feel it has had an impact upon UK football academies, in general, since its introduction?

2. What impact, if any, do you feel the EPPP has had on the academy that you are working in?
   a) The purpose of the EPPP is to 'increase the number and quality of Home-Grown Players gaining professional contracts in the clubs and playing first team football at the highest level', do you feel that this is becoming more the case since its introduction?
   b) Why do you think this is/is not the case?

<u>Implementation of Sport Psychology</u>

1. <u>How do you implement the sport psychology programme at your club?</u>
   a) Do you have a framework or curriculum that you work from?
   b) Is the framework that you deliver within your club consciously written based upon the guidance outlined within the EPPP or is it developed from the academy's own philosophy?
   c) Who is the programme delivered to? Is it focused on the players? Coaches? Parents?
   d) How do you deliver you psychology provision?
2. Do the coaches integrate the psychology programme into their coaching sessions?
   a) If not, is there a reason for this?
3. Do you feel that there are barriers to the implementation of psychology?
   a) If so, what are they? How do you feel these could be overcome?

<u>Sport Psychology Provision under the EPPP</u>

1. Can you talk to me about how you interact with or follow the guidance concerning psychology provision within the EPPP?
   a) Since the introduction of the EPPP, do you feel that the psychological provision in UK football academies has changed? Probe If so, how?
   b) Do you have a clear understanding of the EPPP's requirements around psychology? For example, programme content and testing.
   c) How does the EPPP inform the practice within the academy?
   d) Are the coaches and other support staff aware of the psychology n programme content and schedule?
2. How do you feel the psychology guidelines compare to the other disciplines within the EPPP?
   a) If you believe it differs, How and why do you think this is the case?

<u>Psychological Literacy</u>

1. Can you talk to me a bit about the level of understanding of psychology amongst coaches and players at the club?
    a) In your opinion are coaches comfortable to discuss and implement psychological skills into their training sessions?
    b) from your experience do players transfer their psychological knowledge into their training sessions and games?
    c) How do you feel we could boost the level of psychological literacy across staff, players and parents?

Talent Development Environments

1. What do you believe are the fundamental characteristics of a successful talent development environment?
2. Can you talk to me about the talent development environment at your club?
    a) Do you think the football TDE is different from other sports?
    b) If so, how?
    c) How do you think football compares to other sports in terms of sport psychology provisions?

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix 2

Interview Script: Script for Phase Two

The following interview will explore your perceptions and use of sport psychology, as well as identify the psychological needs and overall implementation of psychology at the club, that you believe to exist. It is important to remember that there are no right or wrong answers, I am simply interested in your opinions and experiences, you also do not have to answer if you do not want to and you have a right to withdraw at any point during the interview. You were emailed in advance the participant information and informed consent forms, following these do you have any questions? Are you happy to proceed with this interview?

Background information:

1. Can you tell me about your career in Academy Football?
    a) Can you tell me about your career in Academy Football?
    b) How many years of experience do you have?
    c) What are your qualifications?

Role:

1. Can you tell me about the academy structure at the academy and where you sit within it?
    a) What is your role at the club?
    b) What department do you work within?
    c) If any, which other departments do you work closely with?

Sport Psychology: What is your understanding?

1. What does the term sport psychology mean to you?
    a) What do you feel the purpose of sport psychology is?
    b) What do you feel is the importance of it? If any at all?
2. From your experience, can you comment on the acceptance and understanding of the sport psychology profession?
    a) Do you feel that the role of the sport psychologist is clear?

Elite Youth Football Environment

1. Can you tell me about your understanding and experiences of Elite Youth Football Environments in general?
    a) I am interested in your perception of the elite youth football environment. Can you tell me about the climate you are working in at the academy?
    b) Do you feel it has changed in recent years? If so, how?
    c) What do you think the main focus of youth development academies is?

The EPPP – broader understanding of the guidance

1. Can you tell me about your understanding of the EPPP?
    a) What do you understand the function of the EPPP to be?
    b) Who do you feel the EPPP was created for?
    c) How do you feel the EPPP informs the way in which player development programmes are delivered within UK academies?
2. What impact, if any, do you feel the EPPP has had on the Academy?

a) The purpose of the EPPP is to 'increase the number and quality of Home-Grown Players gaining professional contracts in the clubs and playing first team football at the highest level', do you feel that this is becoming more the case since its introduction?
b) Why do you think this is/is not the case?

The Implementation of Content

1. Can you talk to me about the four corners of performance?
   a) On average, how much time do you allocate to each, in an average week?
   b) What would you say are the jigsaw pieces that make up a player?
   c) Can you rank them?

Implementation of Sport Psychology

1. How do you think the sport psychology programme is implemented/delivered at the Academy?
   b) Are you familiar with the framework or curriculum that is followed regarding the psychology programme?
   c) Who is the programme delivered to? Is it focused on the players? Coaches? Parents?
2. Do the coaches/you integrate the psychology programme into their/your coaching sessions?
   a) If not, is there a reason for this?
3. Do you feel that there are barriers to the implementation of psychology?
   a) If so, what are they? How do you feel these could be overcome?

Psychological Literacy

1. Can you talk to me a bit about the level of understanding of psychology amongst staff and players at the club?
   a) In your opinion are staff comfortable to discuss and implement psychological skills into their own disciplines/roles/sessions?
   b) From your experience do players transfer their psychological knowledge into their training sessions and games?
   c) What do you think about your own understanding of sport psychology?
   d) How do you feel we could boost the level of psychological literacy across staff, players and parents?

Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix 3

Participant Information Sheet: Phase One

Participant Information Sheet

The title of the research project

Exploring the provision of sport psychology services within elite youth football in England.

Invitation to take part

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the project?

The purpose of the project is to explore the current provision of sport psychology services to youth performers within professional football academies across England. The aim is to interview sport psychology practitioners working within professional academies in order to gain an understanding of their role and experiences of delivering psychology services at the academy in which they are working.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been identified as a sport psychologist working with youth performers at a football academy in England. Gaining an understanding of your experiences in this role would be invaluable to this project.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a participant agreement form. You can withdraw from participation during the interview at any time and without giving a reason. If you decide to withdraw, we will remove any data collected about you from the study. Once the interviews have finished you can still be able to withdraw your data up to the point where the data is analysed and incorporated into the research findings or outputs. At this point your data will usually

become anonymous, so your identity cannot be determined, and it may not be possible to identify your data within the anonymous dataset. Withdrawing your data at this point may also adversely affect the validity and integrity of the research. Deciding to take part or not will not impact upon/adversely affect your treatment/care.

What would taking part involve?

The study will involve a one-to-one, semi-structured interview. Participants will be required to answer a number of questions regarding their role, their experience of delivering sport psychology services to youth performance and their perceptions of the current psychological climate within their academy.

What are the advantages and possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will provide an insight into the current provision of sport psychology within professional youth football; thus, providing a platform for further development to be made within this environment.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and the transcription of the recording(s) for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

How will my information be kept?

All of the information we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly in accordance with current data protection legislation. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest, as part of our core function as a university. Bournemouth University (BU) is a Data Controller of your information which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it appropriately. BU's Research Participant Privacy Notice sets out more information about how we fulfil our responsibilities as a data controller and about your rights as an individual under the data protection legislation. We ask you to read this Notice so that you can fully understand the basis on which we will process your information.

Publication

You will not be able to be identified in any external reports or publications about the research without your specific consent. Otherwise your information will only be included in these materials in an anonymous form, i.e. you will not be identifiable.

Security and access controls
BU will hold the information we collect about you in hard copy in a secure location and on a BU password protected secure network where held electronically.

Except where it has been anonymised your personal information will be accessed and used only by appropriate, authorised individuals and when this is necessary for the purposes of the research or another purpose identified in the Privacy Notice. This may include giving access to BU staff or others responsible for monitoring and/or audit of the study, who need to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations.
Retention of your data
All personal data collected for the purposes of this study will be held for 5 years after the award of the research degree. Although published research outputs are anonymised, we need to retain underlying data collected for the study in a non-anonymised form for a certain period to enable the research to be audited and/or to enable the research findings to be verified.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact
Francesca Dean: fran.sylvia@btinternet.com or s5124845@bournemouth.ac.uk
Professor Tim Rees: trees@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Amanda Wilding: awilding@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Emma Kavanagh: ekavanagh@bournemouth.ac.uk

In case of complaints
Any concerns about the study should be directed to Professor Vanora Hundley as Deputy Dean Research for this faculty (vhundley@bournemouth.ac.uk) or by email to researchgovernance@bournemouth.ac.uk.

Finally

If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed participant agreement form to keep.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project.

Appendix 4

Participant Agreement Form: Phase One

Participant Agreement Form

Full title of project: Exploring the provision of sport psychology services within elite youth football in the United Kingdom.

Name, position and contact details of researcher:
Francesca Dean, PhD student (fran.sylvia@btinternet.com or s5124845@bournemouth.ac.uk)

Name, position and contact details of supervisor:
Professor Tim Rees: trees@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Amanda Wilding: awilding@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Emma Kavanagh: ekavanagh@bournemouth.ac.uk

To be completed prior to data collection activity

Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information (https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/governance/access-information/data-protection-privacy).
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop participating in research activities at any time without giving a reason and I am free to decline to answer any particular question(s).
I understand that taking part in the research will include the following activity/activities as part of the research [*delete the following bullet points as applicable]*:
• Being interviewed
• Being audio recorded during the project
• My words will be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs without using my real name.
I understand that, if I withdraw from the study, I will also be able to withdraw my data from further use in the study **except** where my data has been anonymised (as I cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my data removed.

I understand that my data may be included in an anonymised form within a dataset to be archived at BU's Online Research Data Repository.
I understand that my data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.

	Initial box to agree
I consent to take part in the project on the basis set out above	

I confirm my agreement to take part in the project on the basis set out above.

Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Signature
Name of researcher (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Signature

Once a Participant has signed, **please sign 1 copy** and take 2 photocopies:

- Original kept in the local investigator's file
- 1 copy to be kept by the participant (including a copy of PI Sheet)

Appendix 5

Participant Agreement Form: Phase Two

Bournemouth University

Participant Agreement Form

Full title of project: Exploring the provision of sport psychology services within elite youth football in the United Kingdom.

Name, position and contact details of researcher:

Francesca Dean, PhD student (fdean@bournemouth.ac.uk or s5124845@bournemouth.ac.uk)

Name, position and contact details of supervisor:

Professor Tim Rees: trees@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Amanda Wilding: awilding@bournemouth.ac.uk
Dr Emma Kavanagh: ekavanagh@bournemouth.ac.uk

To be completed prior to data collection activity

Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information (https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/governance/access-information/data-protection-privacy).
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop participating in research activities at any time without giving a reason and I am free to decline to answer any particular question(s).
I understand that taking part in the research will include the following activity/activities as part of the research [*delete the following bullet points as applicable]*:
• Being interviewed
• Being audio recorded during the project
• My words will be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs without using my real name.
I understand that, if I withdraw from the study, I will also be able to withdraw my data from further use in the study **except** where my data has been anonymised (as I cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my data removed.

I understand that my data may be included in an anonymised form within a dataset to be archived at BU's Online Research Data Repository.
I understand that my data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.

	Initial box to agree
I consent to take part in the project on the basis set out above	

I confirm my agreement to take part in the project on the basis set out above.

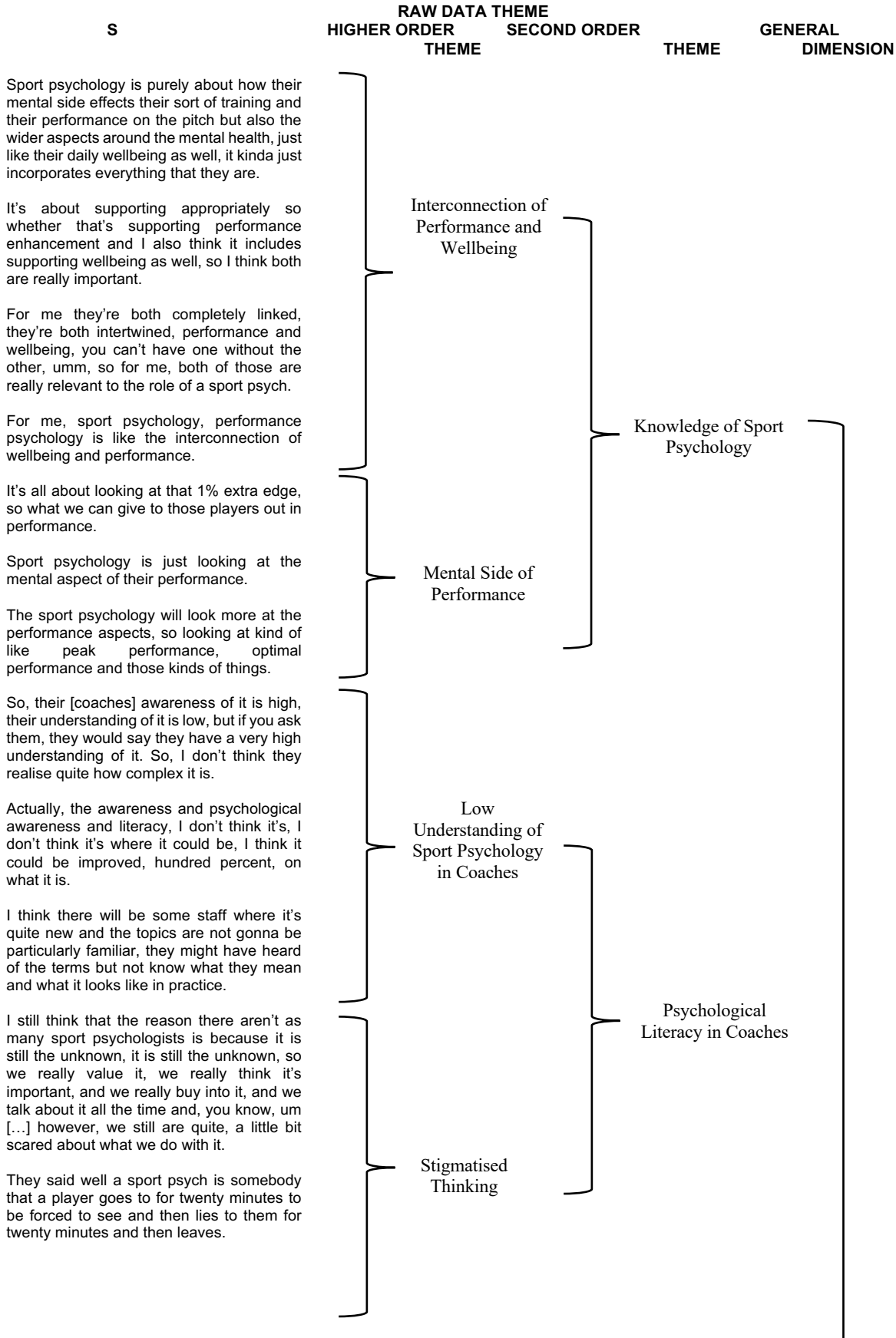
Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Signature
Name of researcher (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Signature

Once a Participant has signed, **please sign 1 copy** and take 2 photocopies:

- Original kept in the local investigator's file
- 1 copy to be kept by the participant (including a copy of PI Sheet)

Appendix 6

Data Analysis Tree: Phase One



Probably a little bit left of the kind of ah there's a problem, send them to the sport psych.

Clubs are then using it as a tick box exercise, so they never fully integrate it themselves.

The first thing that always springs to my mind, rightly or wrongly, is tick box.

I see it like Ofsted, you know, coming from a teaching background, you know, it's a little bit like Ofsted but it does give accountability.

I guess, um, its [Psych section of the EPPP] vastly inadequate, um, in terms of when we get audited and I look at the one-page premier league document whereby it says, have you seen it, you've seen it right? 'phychology'… do I need to say anymore?

It was written by a sport scientist, um, so the language and everything like that, in terms of testing is very physically driven and all they've done is they've picked up the sport science kind of language if you like and they've dumped it onto a page that's 'phychology' and they can't even spell psychology right, um, so let's not go there.

The premier league haven't said well lets employ a, an advisor, a premier league sport psychologist that is within the premier league that can then implement this and advice it, let's get our sport scientists to write one page on 'phychology' and we will put that out as a formal document, I mean, that's not embarrassing. I went nuts.

Within the audit process, they spelt psychology wrong, so I mean they obviously don't have a great understanding, they want to include it but I don't think they have a full understanding of it.

I don't think it [EPPP] was put together by someone who worked in, or it didn't look like it was put together by someone who worked in the environment.

I think that the psychology section of it is one of the most vague um, and I think that might frustrate people but I think it might also be a good thing […] I think the pure performance psychology section is sort of one page so um, so it gives us a little bit of a framework and the minimal thing we've got to do but how we do it is entirely up to us.

So, I think it's quite good that its fairly open to give you guidelines, this is what you need to be doing to improve to achieve cat one or cat two or cat three. But actually, your interpretation of how you see that and how you apply that is entirely up to you.

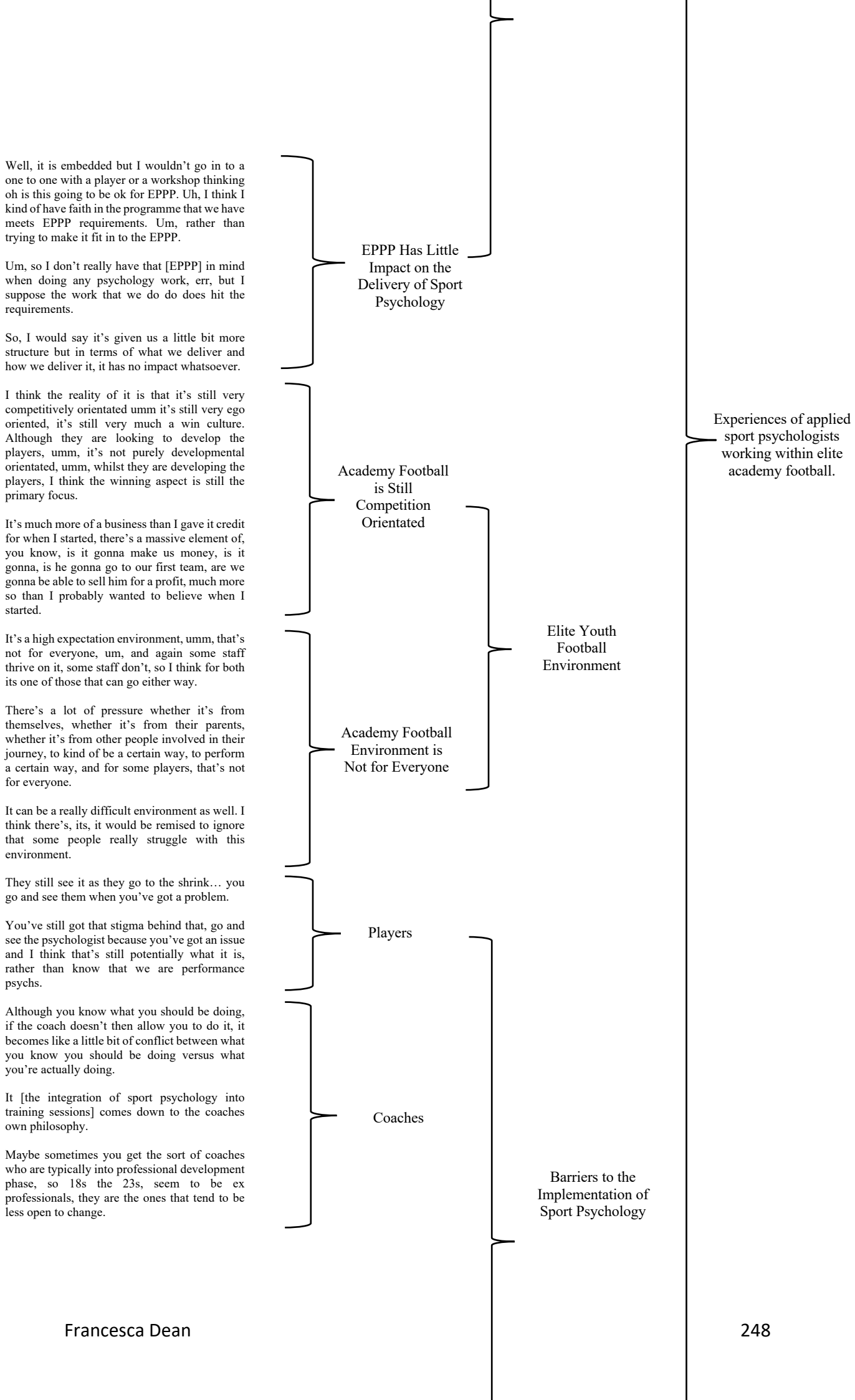
I think if um it [EPPP] had a lot more detail and was a lot more prescript I think you'd lose that autonomy as a practitioner and I think the role would be a lot less enjoyable because you'd feel like you were ticking boxes all the time.

EPPP is a Tick Box Exercise

Psych Section of the EPPP is Inadequate

Vagueness Allows for Freedom in Delivery

EPPP and Delivery of Sport Psychology


Well, it is embedded but I wouldn't go in to a one to one with a player or a workshop thinking oh is this going to be ok for EPPP. Uh, I think I kind of have faith in the programme that we have meets EPPP requirements. Um, rather than trying to make it fit in to the EPPP.
Um, so I don't really have that [EPPP] in mind when doing any psychology work, err, but I suppose the work that we do do does hit the requirements.
So, I would say it's given us a little bit more structure but in terms of what we deliver and how we deliver it, it has no impact whatsoever.
EPPP Has Little Impact on the Delivery of Sport Psychology
I think the reality of it is that it's still very competitively orientated umm it's still very ego oriented, it's still very much a win culture. Although they are looking to develop the players, umm, it's not purely developmental orientated, umm, whilst they are developing the players, I think the winning aspect is still the primary focus.
It's much more of a business than I gave it credit for when I started, there's a massive element of, you know, is it gonna make us money, is it gonna, is he gonna go to our first team, are we gonna be able to sell him for a profit, much more so than I probably wanted to believe when I started.
Academy Football is Still Competition Orientated
It's a high expectation environment, umm, that's not for everyone, um, and again some staff thrive on it, some staff don't, so I think for both its one of those that can go either way.
There's a lot of pressure whether it's from themselves, whether it's from their parents, whether it's from other people involved in their journey, to kind of be a certain way, to perform a certain way, and for some players, that's not for everyone.
It can be a really difficult environment as well. I think there's, its, it would be remised to ignore that some people really struggle with this environment.
Academy Football Environment is Not for Everyone
Elite Youth Football Environment
They still see it as they go to the shrink… you go and see them when you've got a problem.
You've still got that stigma behind that, go and see the psychologist because you've got an issue and I think that's still potentially what it is, rather than know that we are performance psychs.
Players
Although you know what you should be doing, if the coach doesn't then allow you to do it, it becomes like a little bit of conflict between what you know you should be doing versus what you're actually doing.
It [the integration of sport psychology into training sessions] comes down to the coaches own philosophy.
Maybe sometimes you get the sort of coaches who are typically into professional development phase, so 18s the 23s, seem to be ex professionals, they are the ones that tend to be less open to change.
Coaches
Barriers to the Implementation of Sport Psychology
Experiences of applied sport psychologists working within elite academy football.

So, I think probably limited resource would be the one area.

I think a lot of it, in my probably being controversial here, it's down to funding a little bit because if you do have the money you can buy better facilities, you can go abroad and potentially invite players, some clubs don't have that luxury.

It's becoming more apparent to seek your own psychologist, rather than sports supporting it and endorsing psychology and bringing people in.

From my experience, it varies from sport to sport, so umm, in a lot of sports I will get approached by individual athletes as opposed to like national governing bodies or specific sport clubs.

You could argue that potentially, individual sports are maybe more well versed because individuals tend to have their own personal psychologist. So, you're getting a lot more bang for your buck.

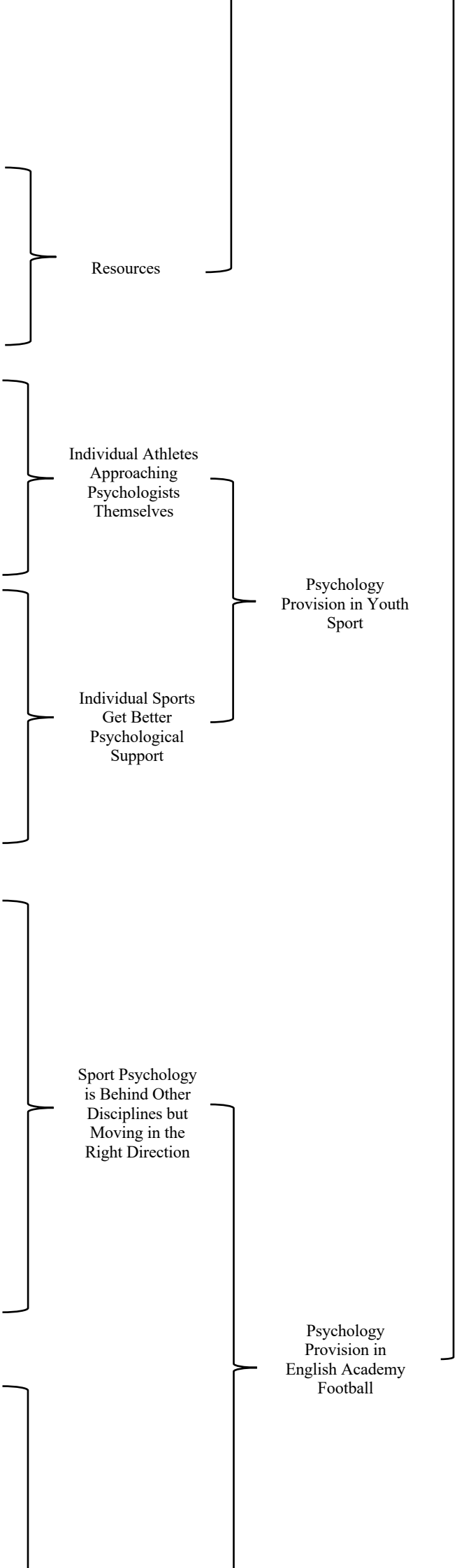
I think with team sports, I think it's really difficult because you've got the coach […] your assistant coach then you've got your physio, your sport scientist, maybe a psychologist, err, analyst as well; and actually I think everyone might have different philosophies in the way they work.

Sport psychology is still late to the table, and we are still not there yet.

I think things are moving forwards, just like I said, they are slightly further behind other organisations and its gonna take a bit of time to catch up, but we are going in the right direction at least.

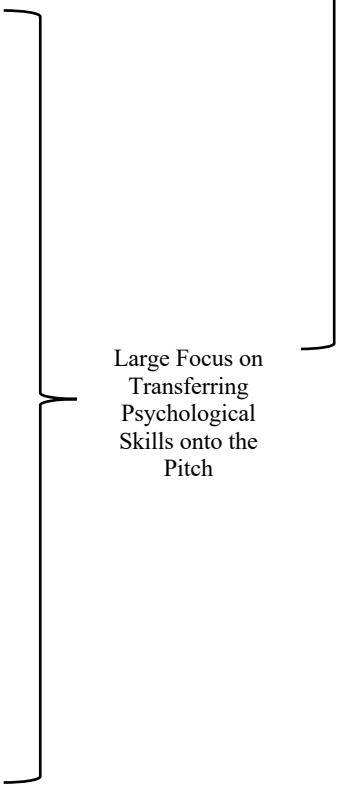
Probably over the last 18 months or so, maybe a little bit longer, um, psychology has been very much more integrated, so we are in the audit meetings, we are in the MDT meetings, um, we have our say, we are now working with the analysis team looking at the psychological behaviour analysis and linking that up with the analysis team and clipping that footage so it can go into the prebrief and debrief, umm, a lot of the things that coaches and the MDT are saying is psychological language, a lot of their CPD's incorporate psychology.

When we are out there, and we are talking, and we are doing things and



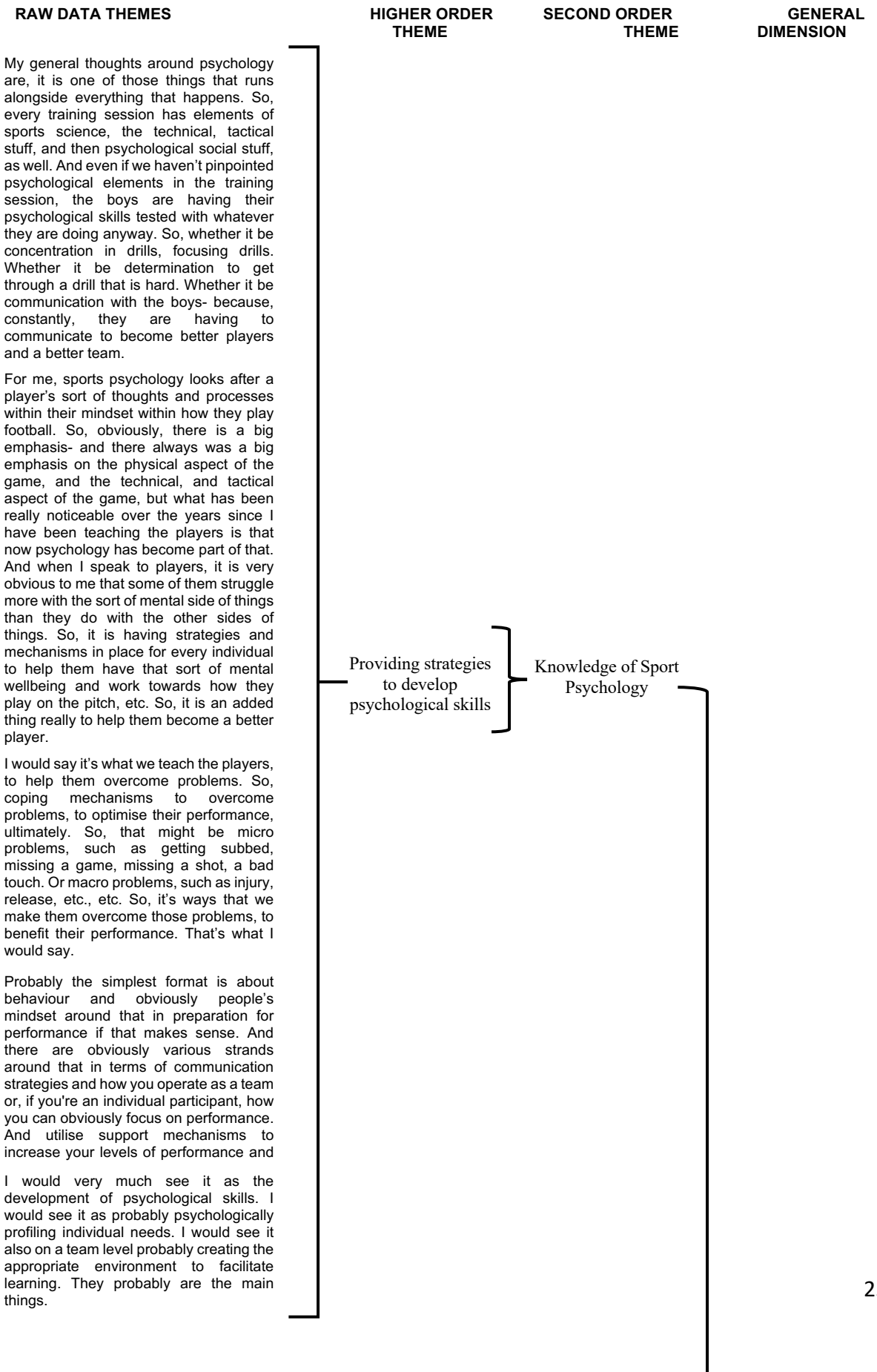
then we might reflect afterwards and just try to attach anything to the actual game and making it as engaging and as real as physically possible.

What we try to do is practice the techniques in the classroom. We might do different games, might do, err, just a drive through of the technique, then we'll actually say ok when are these situations or what situations will arise where we might be able to use this technique. And then we go practice it for two or three weeks in training, um, and they can start to manipulate and practice it in games as well.
We work quite a lot on transferring psychology onto the pitch, so it's not just something that's done in the classroom and then they leave the classroom and that's the end of that kind of thing.



Appendix 7

Data Analysis Tree: Phase Two



I would say it is way more ruthless than it needs to be. I think there is a misperception of what we are actually working with. I think as a result people treat it as elite sport, which it isn't. It is obviously youth development. So, I think it is way more ruthless than it should be, in terms of the processes that we have in place, like retain/release and those meetings, in terms of the way players are discussed as assets, when again they are children and young adults. I think, for me, the environment is very debilitative compared to where it probably should be for not only performance but also wellbeing outcomes.

Yes. So, I think it is quite an elitist environment, but I think it is quite a high-pressure environment, as well. And I think parents, especially, have great expectations of their child, and how they want them to do, and where they see their future going, and players themselves.

It's tough, because we ask a lot of the players and the parents, for what can be seen as a very difficult task. So, we would ask them to give up a lot of hours, drive a long way, drive to away games, all this sort of stuff, for the percentage rate, they know it's a low success rate.

Academy environment is ruthless

Then in terms of staff members and coaches and the environment, I guess the aim is to produce elite-level footballers, but often people will say, "Oh, we're just trying to produce good people." I think that's a load of bollocks because you wouldn't pay and fund an academy to produce good people. If you want to do that, you'd just donate your money to charity, wouldn't you, and say, "We can help young, disadvantaged children around Bournemouth"? You're not trying to help some 13-year-old be a good person. You're trying to get him to play in the first team. That's bollocks really.

I think that what has got better is stuff like the player care provision and the after-care provision. So, for example- Basically, if you're in an academy, you're on an extended trial. Let's be honest. You're on an extended trial. Whether you've got a two-year contract, or a one-year contract, at some stage we're going to make a decision on you over whether you stay longer. So that's the fact of the matter. The brutal fact of academy life is you're in an extended trial. I think the clubs have got better at understanding the pressures.

The main focus ends up being performance, and no, for me it is not the right focus, because it is very focused on the players performing all the time or, even worse, winning games. And I think we should be focused on development. But I think the issue you have is the culture of judgement, and I think that culture of judgement then drives these issues.

Academy focus is on performance

Elite Youth Football Environment

So, if you think, like, a school environment, they have OFSTED so they have to meet certain criteria. It seems like that's what it is. You've got to meet certain criteria in order to pass. And you have to, yes, make sure that you're following the guidelines really. And you can't just make up your own programme or make up your own staff and stuff, you've got to fall in with the EPPP.

So, it is the framework by which the academy system needs to be put into place. The rules have governed what we do, how we do it, what we should have in place for our category level, their sort of minimum standards for your category level. So, for us as a Category 3 Academy, there are certain rules we need to follow, certain things we need to do, and boxes we need to tick in terms of what we provide for the players, in terms of coaching hours, in terms of coaching support, performance support in terms of sports science and medicine, analysis in psychology, education provision. So, we are governed by them in terms of what we should be providing as a Cat 3 Academy.

I think originally it was there to ensure that a minimum set of standards were adhered to. I think the problem they then had was they were judging clubs in a kind of Ofsted way, in terms of more softer processes that are probably more subjective. As an example, it is fine, probably, to judge a club on whether or not they have a building that they need. But I think to judge coaching styles there is not a cut and dried right and wrong. So, they have now moved to a twofold process, where you have compliance and then you have standards. The compliance part is, "Have you got this? Yes or no?" And the standards are, basically, "Tell us what you do." I think it is very much a standard enforcing process, and overall that has probably been useful, I think.

The EPPP is a set of standards that must be met

The EPPP is a set of standards that must be met

EPPP

I personally think it was created for what should have been the top. I think they wanted only nine Category 1 academies; I think that was the intention. And that morphed into- I think we've got 25 or something now. So, I think they wanted to give those top-performing academies, who were invested, more investment, to become better. And then the rest of us got a portion of that.

I think probably the biggest problem is though that the top clubs end up just hogging the best players. And they can go and get the best young players and pay a small fee to get them into their academy, so they have the best players within their area. So, it has definitely helped to get better players through but probably more the top clubs bringing them through rather than some of the other clubs that their best players end up getting taken from them.

If you look at the demographics of Bournemouth and the types of young people that live here, it's not the same as an inner-city London, so the types of players you're going to get are different. And consequently, there are probably more players that would make the grade at a good level of football in London than maybe there would be in Bournemouth. So, we're disadvantaged in some way, in terms of some elements of the EPPP, with regards to travel. We've got an hour and a half travel distance, when Bournemouth has got the sea behind them and forest either side, and not a lot of people in between. So, it disadvantages some clubs automatically, I think.

Top clubs benefit the most

The Implementation of Content

There is a clear technical/tactical bias

There's such a big emphasis on technical tactical from the coaches that you're almost under pressure to focus massively on tech tac. Well technical more than tactical. What essentially happens is the first team say the reserves aren't good technically. The reserves say the youth team players that come up aren't good enough technically and the youth teams say well the 16s that come up aren't good enough technically. So it just filters down like that, so their focus becomes let's zoom in on the red corner. Whereas actually for their needs as people, and this is the thing, we're not just developing football as we should be developing people, and that's why the social and the psych is so important.

They then will have physical targets for sessions, but those are based upon the sports science programme that we provide and saying, "You should do this on a Tuesday," or, "This on a Thursday," and then how we provide that support to them. Then in terms of psychological and social sides, it's similar to how I said it before, of they know that they should be considering it and they're probably saying that they do, but whether they fully understand the effects that they're having and/or how they should be training or setting up practices, I'm not so sure. Also, they often use a lot of psychological wording and just describe the same session that they're doing anyway. I don't know, a key example would be bravery to play, which is one of our parts, but that's all part of Bournemouth's philosophy. Every drill that you do and there's a football at your feet, you could be brave. You could basically be, "Okay, I'm going to try my best. I'm going to just continue, keep going," but you're always brave to play, whatever that means. It just basically means don't just kick it away. Try and keep the ball and look after it, even when you're scared and other people are there watching near you, trying to tackle you. You just continue doing the Bournemouth way, as such. It's not, therefore, a psychological session just because you say, "Oh, we're doing the same session as we did last week, but this week we're brave to play," because the kids probably were brave before.

I think we have quite a technical bias. There are obviously the tactical elements to the training sessions and obviously how we play in the game on the Sunday. I think the physical programme has developed a lot more of late, purely because of having manpower. It's not ideal, we still have little gaps here and there.

Obviously, as I said earlier, I think with any club, not just AFC Bournemouth, the technical and tactical side- Technical first, it will always be the one that gets the most hours. If you look at our programme now, apart from the 16s, it's pretty much purely technical stuff. And the 18s. I'm looking at the younger ones, but even the 18s are doing pretty much purely technical stuff.

No. When I plan a session, the main focus a lot of the time is on, like, technical stuff. And the sport science will have a focus on the physical stuff and maybe give some recommendations on pitch size and adding in, like, a sprint or that kind of stuff. But a lot of it is around the technical and tactical stuff with an idea of the psych and the social but isn't necessarily something that you would really do a massive amount of planning for. Sometimes you would because certain players might need some sort of psych challenge.

I think there is a lack of understanding. It is easy for you. It is easy for me. It is easy for people who have a basic to good to really high level of understanding. But I think as a coach, if I have just done my badges, there is no reason why I would have a really good understanding of psychological concepts.

Like I said, there are certain people that have a really good understanding, I think. And others that, maybe not, but they would still be receptive to it. I think from a sports science and medicine perspective, I think people have a good handle on it because a lot of us have learnt about it during our degree programmes. And that doesn't make us psychologist. It just means that we have got an understanding of certain aspects of psychology, which is a good thing.

I don't think the coaches understand what psychological skills are. If you were to go, "Right, goal-setting, imagery, composure, cue words," all that jazz, I don't think the coaches would be able to understand that. For example, an issue is if we have got a lad who we want to work on, let's say, confidence, they wouldn't understand how you might implement an imagery programme to help that player develop confidence through increasing their feeling of performance accomplishments, as an example.

Yes, so I think everyone knows that there is a mental side to the game and there are psychological attributes that contribute to it. Whether everyone understands how psychology can affect players and also how their own influences can affect the psychological aspects that they see, I would disagree with. I think that everyone goes, "Oh yes, we're considering the psychology in this," but they don't. First off, so specifically talking about coaches, they don't understand the majority of the time. They're given some education through the FA. I think that's excellent because at least they're not just disregarding it completely, but in terms of actually can they acknowledge what they are doing personally but also their effect on the players, probably not to the extent that they should with the majority of them.

Staff and players have a basic understand of sport psychology

I think some players don't understand the reasons why they feel maybe like they feel. And when they've had a bad game, they might not understand how to control their emotions and they may lose a bit of confidence because they feel like they've had bad games. So, it's them understanding what psychology is but then also how they can use it to benefit them. I don't think all the players necessarily understand how that works. They know what psychology is but I don't think they would necessarily know how to use it to benefit them.

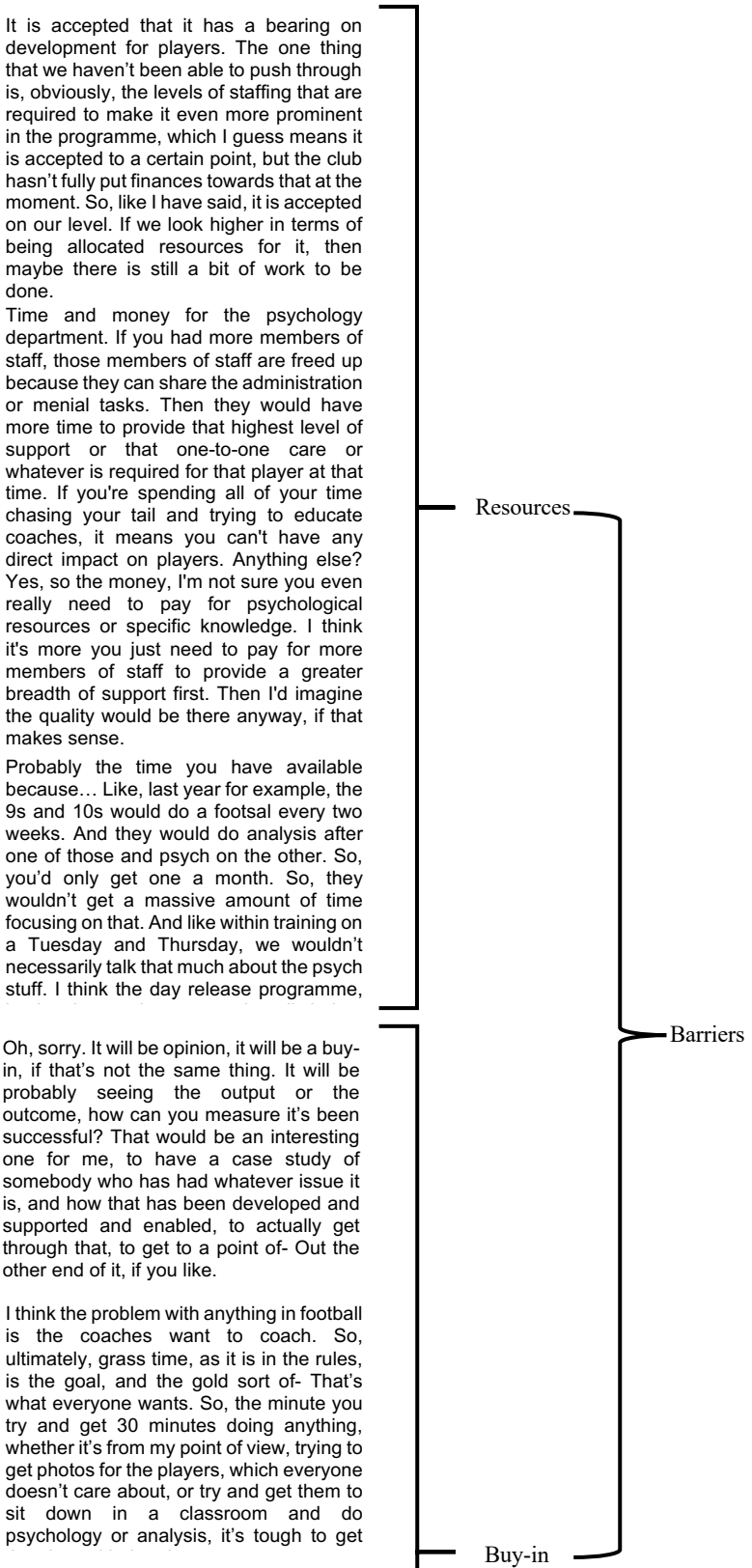
Psychological Literacy

I don't feel that is carried out particularly well to grass, if I am honest. I don't feel that I then observe that as a coach as a real running theme. We have some areas that we deem…If we are working on overlaps, what is the mentality needed? An obvious one is the intent to run. So, I think there is a disparity between, "Right, okay. We have got lads doing overlaps. I want to see intent on this run." Which is a psychological concept. What does intent mean? Intent means running as if I am going to get the ball. So, I think there is a disparity there which could be better.

No, I haven't seen much evidence of that [coaches integrating sport psych into training]. If you hadn't told me that I wouldn't know from seeing session plans. That is not a slant on the coaches. That is just honesty. I will watch training tomorrow night, and I won't see courage and commitment come out at any point. The players might subconsciously pick something up tonight and do it tomorrow night, and that would be brilliant, but I won't see the coaches, "Guys, remember last night we did courage? So what does courage look like in football? It means getting the ball off the keeper. Courage means giving it away and going and getting it again. That is what courage looks like in football.

I am aware of it being used outside classrooms. The amount that it's used outside classrooms is very limited. For example - I'll use myself an example - I have, before, understood where we are in terms of the Six Cs, which C that the players are currently working on, and then related that to their physical sessions and providing them another opportunity to demonstrate or develop those qualities. Then after doing that for a few weeks you forget. You've got your own job to worry about and you think, "Okay, I don't need to-" well, you don't think, "I don't need to do it anymore," you just forget to do it. You just don't do it until somebody reminds you again and then you think, "Oh, what we could do is we could do this." Then you continue doing it again. My perspective would be that the coaches are exactly the same, of when they're reminded, they'll do it for a short period of time and then they're not reminded. Then they just won't do it until they're reminded again.

Sport psychology is not well integrated into training by coaches


It is accepted that it has a bearing on development for players. The one thing that we haven't been able to push through is, obviously, the levels of staffing that are required to make it even more prominent in the programme, which I guess means it is accepted to a certain point, but the club hasn't fully put finances towards that at the moment. So, like I have said, it is accepted on our level. If we look higher in terms of being allocated resources for it, then maybe there is still a bit of work to be done.
Time and money for the psychology department. If you had more members of staff, those members of staff are freed up because they can share the administration or menial tasks. Then they would have more time to provide that highest level of support or that one-to-one care or whatever is required for that player at that time. If you're spending all of your time chasing your tail and trying to educate coaches, it means you can't have any direct impact on players. Anything else? Yes, so the money, I'm not sure you even really need to pay for psychological resources or specific knowledge. I think it's more you just need to pay for more members of staff to provide a greater breadth of support first. Then I'd imagine the quality would be there anyway, if that makes sense.
Probably the time you have available because… Like, last year for example, the 9s and 10s would do a footsal every two weeks. And they would do analysis after one of those and psych on the other. So, you'd only get one a month. So, they wouldn't get a massive amount of time focusing on that. And like within training on a Tuesday and Thursday, we wouldn't necessarily talk that much about the psych stuff. I think the day release programme,
Resources
Oh, sorry. It will be opinion, it will be a buy-in, if that's not the same thing. It will be probably seeing the output or the outcome, how can you measure it's been successful? That would be an interesting one for me, to have a case study of somebody who has had whatever issue it is, and how that has been developed and supported and enabled, to actually get through that, to get to a point of- Out the other end of it, if you like.
I think the problem with anything in football is the coaches want to coach. So, ultimately, grass time, as it is in the rules, is the goal, and the gold sort of- That's what everyone wants. So, the minute you try and get 30 minutes doing anything, whether it's from my point of view, trying to get photos for the players, which everyone doesn't care about, or try and get them to sit down in a classroom and do psychology or analysis, it's tough to get
Buy-in
Barriers

I think that ex-players view it with a bit of suspicion because I think that they were still, albeit a bit younger than me, almost my era, where it was, if you're struggling for a bit of confidence, you go and see a sports psychologist. So, my interpretation is, certainly within my coaching department, I think there's an openness to learn more about it, but I think there's still a fraction, maybe suspicions is the wrong word. But, just where they're aware that they're not experts in that area, they're not as comfortable doing it, so there's more of a hesitancy to openly kind of go, "This session is on confidence." That would be my take on it.

Eventually down the line somewhere, we need to… the club needs to put its hand in its pocket and decide to really back psychology and go down that route because, I think, if you speak to anyone in the Academy and they will tell you that psychology has value, but the club hasn't resourced it.

Like I have said, for us to have you, for example, in full-time would allow them to have a resource to support them in that aspect and I think that would make them more confident about it.

So, for example, if you were full-time with us, my strategy would look like you spending probably minimal time with players really in terms of workshops and stuff like that. And maybe- like we are doing now, it would be probably similar or exactly the same, in terms of workshops.

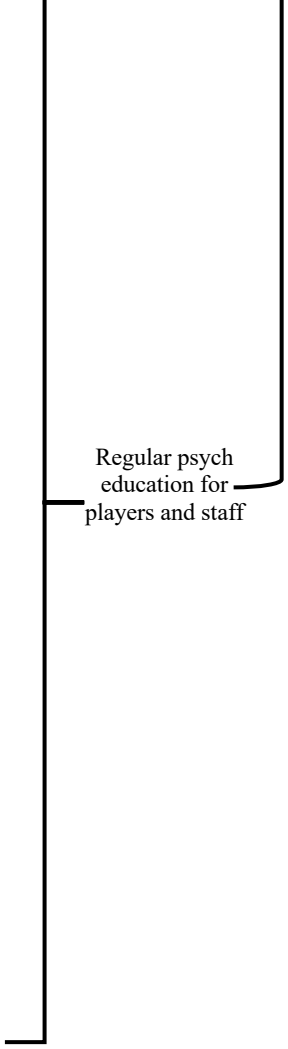
If I'm honest, I think there should be one fulltime for 18s, and that should be accessible. And probably two for the younger, well I say one for YFP and one for FP. If you're really going to utilise it. Um, I think that would be manageable but again it depends how much you want to get through and how much the club is willing to promote the support staff in terms of doing their job rather than relying on the coaches to get them through.

I think the first port of call is bringing in a full-time head of psychology. That would be massive. And that person would obviously have to work closely with me, because we would need to work out a way of doing it. Then, obviously, the idea would be at very least you have phase leads. At very, very least. If not, even better, one per age group or one per two age groups. So, you would need someone full time on that, no doubt.

Full time psychology staff

I would then also say, like I said before, I think that the education, the coaches have a larger impact, particularly matches and training, on a player's psychology or their mental attributes or whatever you want to call it. Observations of them and how they act towards players and reflecting on that would be the first thing. Instead of going to a training session and watching how do the players to certain things? How does the coach react, when? How do the coaches react differently to different players, but also differently to positives and negatives? Also, how do they react in terms of the themes?

Recommendations



So I think that what we need to do is sit down with you and come up with almost like a targeted session where you'll regularly be available in that session on the grass in order to either reinforce what we're doing in the classroom or, better for me, because we're individualised and we've already talked about the different types of psychological needs that some players have got. You'll always be in this session but you might target two players a week or three players a week and you and I, or you and the coach, need to liaise over like what does that player need and I hope that it will make the other coaches if they don't already realise that they need to know their players by now.

I would say, keep it basic and continual messages, so similar to our tech literacy really is little and often, I'd say, for the players and the staff. And I think if, in every – as part of every session there was one overriding psychological trait that we were to look at in every session, but it was very basic, right, that's what we're looking at, keep mentioning that, make sure you mention that alongside some tech tac stuff, keep mentioning this. I think then it gets the coach actively focusing on something psychologically, and then the players, and then that will filter across the board, I think.