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An investigation of the cultural sensitivities and challenges associated with working in an elite male English football academy's multidisciplinary teams

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ABSTRACT

Elite football academies depend on multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) to facilitate player development, yet the cultural sensitivities and operational challenges faced by these teams remain inadequately explored. This study presents a rigorous ethnographic investigation into the lived experiences of MDT staff within an English Premier League Category One academy, providing novel insights into the complexities of interdisciplinary collaboration in this high-performance environment. Over 13 months, data were gathered through 81 interviews with MDT-facing staff and observations of 147 MDT meetings spanning 160 hours, augmented by the researcher's ethnographic experiences and reflections as an MDT-facing academy sport psychologist. An inductive thematic analysis identified five key themes that define the MDT experience: (1) Rhythm of the Season, which explores how the cyclical nature of elite football influences MDT priorities and decision-making; (2) Staff Diversity, which extends beyond disciplinary boundaries to encompass professional backgrounds, employment structures, and social identities that affect team dynamics; (3) Partnerships and Conflicts, which examines the tensions between disciplinary silos and the pursuit of integrated player support; (4) Instability and Challenge, which underscores the pressures of organizational change, staff turnover, and first-team performance; and (5) MDT Operational Factors, which highlights the logistical and structural constraints that shape MDT effectiveness. This study enhances the understanding of MDT functioning in elite football, bridging gaps between organizational psychology and applied sport science. Through critically examining these themes, the findings offer practical implications for optimizing interdisciplinary collaboration, enhancing team cohesion, and fostering more effective support structures in elite player development environments.

Lay Summary: Working within an elite English football academy presents unique challenges for multidisciplinary teams. This study highlights key challenges and cultural sensitivities within these multi-disciplinary teams. Practical advice is offered to help navigate team dynamics, enable more effective collaboration and better support young players throughout the season.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Forewarned is forearmed: By understanding what preoccupies staff and players at different points in the season, a practitioner is in a stronger position to be effective.
- Work interdependently: Close collaboration with colleagues can, in addition to significantly increasing a practitioner's ability to spot player challenges and opportunities, also help facilitate opportunities for interdisciplinary delivery.
- Secure small/quick wins: Members of academy MDTs are very busy, so supporting the group, even in small ways, is appreciated, helps the newcomer gain acceptance and lays the foundation for more ambitious, longer-term interventions.

The English Premier League (EPL) is the most successful professional sports league outside of the United States of America and, accordingly, aims for its academy development system to be world-leading. To this end, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) was introduced 14 years ago (The Premier League, 2011). A key objective of the EPPP was to create talent development environments that consistently transition young players to first-team football (Champ, 2018). To help enable this, the EPPP prescribed minimum levels of capability provision dependent on the football club's academy status, as defined by a classification system between category one (the highest, and the classification of the Academy being researched) and category four (lowest). The EPPP is considered to have been a step forward, as evidenced by a review of the first ten years of implementation (The Premier League, 2022). An important contributor to this success has been a significant investment in EPL academy sport science, medicine, psychological and other support capabilities, although a lack of accompanying EPPP service delivery guidance has also left open the potential for the resulting teams of staff to be less effective than they perhaps could be. The ten-year review states that "it is essential that disciplines work together" and then that "clubs adopt different support networks around their players, but a common denominator is how these networks communicate and cooperate …" (The Premier League, 2022, p. 29). While championing clubs' independence is laudable, it may also be unintentionally masking an ongoing opportunity to learn how best to maximize the collective impact of increased multidisciplinary resources.

This challenge is not unique to football academies. Elite sport is increasingly commercialized and increasingly invests in sport science, medicine, and psychological capabilities to help consistently deliver success (Wagstaff, 2017). When working together these disciplines are often referred to as Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs). MDTs can work together effectively but they can also sometimes be prone to conflict (Reid et al., 2004). They can also sometimes be stressful environments for many reasons including long working hours, job insecurity and lack of role clarity (Arnold et al., 2019). In understanding elite sporting MDTs, it is instructive to consider the broader domain of which they can be considered a part, namely organizational psychology. For a broad identification, conceptualization and organization of this bigger picture a 4-part framework has been proposed, covering attitudes and emotions, stress and well-being,

behaviors, and environments, including culture (Wagstaff, 2017). With respect to understanding the latter, an emerging trend of understanding performance sport environments and culture via immersive, ethnographic research approaches was noted (e.g., Cavallerio et al., 2016).

While the acronym 'MDT' has been used thus far to refer to teamwork involving multiple disciplines, it must be noted that a range of terms are used in the literature, sometimes interchangeably and ambiguously (Burns & Collins, 2023). 'Multidisciplinary' is most commonly used to refer to collaboration from different disciplines where they each stay within their respective boundaries, 'interdisciplinary' (e.g., IDT) refers to a more harmonized and synthesized collaboration, while 'transdisciplinary' (e.g., TDT) implies the most integrated dynamic of all in which the collaboration of separate disciplines can be said to be so seamless that it transcends their usual boundaries. A closely related concept is the department of methodology (DOM), an example of a proposed enabler if such teams aspire to transition from MDT to TDT (Otte et al., 2022).

In addition to clarifying nomenclature, the extant literature also includes models that conceptualize teamwork. A recent narrative review that considers the performance support team literature through the lens of a conceptual framework of team effectiveness is a good example (Stewart et al., 2024). The featured framework (McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014) outlines inputs (e.g., the individuals that make up the team), outcomes (e.g., the criteria used to assess team effectiveness) and mediators (e.g., team processes and other 'emergent states' that help or hinder team members in their delivery). It serves to illustrate the wide range of variables that can contribute to a performance support team being effective, or not. An interdisciplinary scoping review reinforces this point but from a slightly different angle (Burns & Collins, 2023). Focused on evidence of collaboration, four key themes were identified: Theoretical frameworks leading to shared understanding, facilitative leadership and culture, suitable organizational/logistical structure and processes and, finally, personal and interpersonal qualities of the staff themselves. It has also been suggested that understanding social identities can be helpful in explaining the behavior of individuals and sub-groups within teams in elite sport (Slater et al., 2017).

Psychological researchers engaged with the English elite football academy context have typically approached the field from one of several angles. Perhaps the most common angles are those related to player-focused interventions, such as the introduction of mindfulness protocols (Spencer et al., 2019) or indeed sport psychology overall (Champ, 2018). Also notable are contemporary research efforts designed to better understand the experiences of practitioners delivering sport psychology services (Dean et al., 2022) and to more broadly support the development of the discipline, as exemplified by a recent study offering practical guidance addressing common challenges for applied practitioners in this context (Feddersen et al., 2025). There is also, at a more macro level, literature exploring topics such as organizational stress (Ade, 2021) and organizational change (Gibson & Groom, 2018).

The academic and professional resources briefly outlined here are helpful in starting to build an understanding of contemporary football academy MDTs, albeit somewhat tangentially. Player-focused psychological interventions, efforts to support the sport psychology profession and literature related to organizational structure, stress and change are all in some way relevant to multidisciplinary staff teams. But research

focused specifically on English football academy MDTs is harder to come by. The previously cited scoping review (Burns & Collins, 2023) included only one paper centered specifically on this environment (Reilly et al., 2000): A validation of a multidisciplinary battery of tests to support talent identification, but one that does not aim to discuss the organizational interactions within the environment. The aforementioned narrative review (Stewart et al., 2024) did not include any others. Elsewhere, a case study documents how the 5C's framework assisted interdisciplinary cohesion (Steptoe et al., 2019), while another paper provided a review of the football academy multidisciplinary approach through the lens of performance analysis opportunities (Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015). A general need for future such research to go deeper and uncover lived experiences and practices of staff teams in elite sport has been previously highlighted (Burns & Collins, 2023). This study aims to do this, by offering a novel and in-depth exploration of the cultural sensitivities and challenges inherent in multi-disciplinary team dynamics within an English Category One male football academy.

Method

Philosophical assumptions and methodology

Having considered overarching philosophy to ensure methodological coherence (Willig, 2013), the stance of interpretivism was adopted for this study: specifically, ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple and created) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is subjective and constructed). Consistent with this overarching philosophy, and in response to the study's aim to investigate 'cultural sensitivities and challenges', ethnography was the overall methodology chosen, and constructionist data collection methodologies were employed (e.g., interviews and observations).

The opportunity for this ethnography was secured by the researcher obtaining a dual practitioner-researcher role at the football academy, as part of its 'comprehensive psychology provision' featuring 4 other practitioners covering both performance psychology and mental health (Feddersen et al., 2025). As a neophyte trainee sport psychologist, undertaking the British Psychological Society Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology, performance psychology practitioner responsibilities were assumed for the Academy's Youth Development Phase boys (YDP: Under 12, 13 and 14). The researcher role was a PhD studentship jointly sponsored by the football club and a local university, with the research reported here forming part of that scope. The practitioner aspect of the role conferred 'insider' status, so enhancing understanding of situations, behaviors and motivations (Champ, 2018). By becoming a member of the sport psychology department and of the YDP's MDTs, the lead author became a colleague to the staff being researched, genuinely participating in the academy's service delivery over a 3-year period. Ethnographically, this enabled an extensive range of experiences across the 'Complete Observer/Observer as Participant/Participant as Observer/Complete Participant' continuum, recorded via handwritten field notes guided by consistent use of the 'Who/What/Where/When/Why' questions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 102–105). The associated risk of becoming 'over familiar' with the academy was managed by keeping a reflective journal throughout (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), so enabling self-awareness

of thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and how these shifted over time, with both aspects of the practitioner-research role subject to this reflection.

The research reported in this study was conducted over a 13-month period (April 2022 to April 2023). Structurally, a first phase of research enabled familiarization of the researcher with the football academy staff, and vice versa, while also informing the design of the second phase. Data collected during both phases, via interviews, observations and personal researcher-practitioner experiences and associated reflections, was combined into a single dataset, which was then subjected to an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The inductive approach taken informed the presentation format adopted in this article, with quotations or other data presented first and then discussed together with supporting literature. Throughout this process, the researcher also employed two supervisors to act as critical friends (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Presentation of results and associated discussion enabled iterative evolution and fine-tuning, as well as providing stimulus for further reflection.

Sampling and participants

The researcher developed an understanding of the academy organizational structure via iterative conversations with the academy secretary and a psychology department colleague and, from this, identified approximately 80 individuals whose role was in some way MDT-facing. 68 of these were purposefully sampled (Patton, 1990) and approached via email to secure their informed consent, of whom 60 agreed to be interviewed. The remainder, all of whom were approached twice, did not respond. The 60 semi-structured interviews conducted were with the following participants: football coaches ($n = 17$), physiotherapists (6), medical doctors (2), strength and conditioning coaches (9), data analysts (5), teachers (5), player care (2), operations (3), nutritionist (1), safeguarding (1), recruitment (1) and academy management of varying levels and scope (8). The resulting sample was also reviewed to assess representativity versus the total MDT-facing population in terms of gender, employment status (full time, part time, casual, fixed term) and academy tenure, with no substantial differences noted. This was complemented by observing 87 meetings as a participant-observer: Under 12 meetings ($n = 25$; total duration 25 hours), Under 13 meetings ($n = 30$; total duration 29 hours), Under 14 meetings ($n = 30$; total duration 31 hours) and other multidisciplinary non age group specific meetings ($n = 2$; total duration 10 hours).

During the second phase, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with football coaches ($n = 4$), physiotherapists (2), medical doctors (1), strength and conditioning coaches 2), data analysts (2), psychologists (2), teachers (1), player care (1), operations (1), recruitment (1) and academy management of varying levels and scope (4). This was complemented by observing 41 meetings as a participant-observer: Under 12 meetings ($n = 13$; total duration 17 hours), Under 13 meetings ($n = 13$; total duration 16 hours) and Under 14 meetings ($n = 15$; total duration 19 hours). The researcher also passively observed another 19 meetings in which they were not a participant: Under 9–11 meetings ($n = 5$; total duration 4 hours), Under 15/16 meetings ($n = 6$; total duration 4 hours), Under 18 meetings ($n = 5$; total duration 4 hours), Under 21 meetings ($n = 3$; total duration 1.5 hours).

Procedure and data collection

University ethics committee approval was first secured, with a commitment to exclude players and parents from direct data collection as a key underpinning principle. The 60 semi-structured interviews in the first phase were each approximately 20–30 minutes in length and were conducted in an 'introductory conversation' style in which the researcher would first introduce himself (via a summary of educational/career/sporting history and an explanation of current role at the club) before asking the interviewee to do the same. These interviews were recorded by field notes only. In this first phase, MDT meeting observation was purely as a participant-observer, enabled by the researcher's dual role as a sport psychologist for the Under 12s, 13s and 14s. Observations were recorded via field notes and a reflexive diary, and enabled the researcher to develop an initial understanding of each team member's roles, provided numerous examples of their interaction with the rest of the team and started to inform the researcher as to how such interactions evolve through the course of the season. They also provided important foundational understanding from which to be able to compare and contrast other Academy MDTs observed in Phase 2.

The 21 semi-structured interviews in the second phase were between 53 and 70 minutes in length (mean = 59 minutes) and were conducted in a perhaps more traditional academic interviewing style, with the discussion typically proceeding as follows: a) asking the interviewee to describe their role and how it evolves through the season, b) clarifying which academy MDTs they have experience of, c) their perceptions of academy MDTs and what typically works well, less well and why, d) similarities and differences across the academy MDTs they've had exposure to, e) academy MDT best practices and opportunities that they perceive and f) anything else they'd like to mention about academy MDTs. The 21 second phase interviews were conducted, recorded and automatically transcribed via Teams software (Microsoft, 2023). MDT meetings in this second phase were of two types, participant observation and passive observation. Participant observation of the Under 12s, 13s and 14s MDTs continued as before, while passive observation was also conducted of the MDTs covering the Under 8–11s, 15–16s, 17–18s and 19–21s. Care was taken with the latter to be as unobtrusive as possible, an objective assisted by the researcher by this stage being reasonably well known throughout the academy. Once again observations were recorded via field notes and a reflective diary, with a particular focus on comparisons with understanding already formed from experiences both as an MDT participant and long term colleague.

Data analysis and rigor

Combined, the two phases of research yielded a large qualitative dataset. Field notes were typed up, and interview transcripts (second phase only) were checked and corrected. A master spreadsheet was then prepared with a unique, anonymized identifier for each participant (e.g., P1, P2 etc.), and this was kept separately and password-protected from the rest of the data. The dataset was then subjected to an inductive reflexive thematic analysis, following a six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, a process of familiarization. All sections of the dataset were read and re-read, and the initial resulting ideas were noted down. Second, the entire dataset was systematically

coded. Third, individual codes were collated into potential themes, together with the associated data. Fourth, the resulting thematic map was reviewed, and alternatives were considered. Key questions included whether the themes seemed to make sense versus the individual codes and the broader dataset. Fifth, the themes were then iteratively reviewed, looking for opportunities to deduplicate and refine the themes and sub-themes, considering whether they 'made sense' versus the lead author's ethnographic experiences, and generally clarifying the overall story. Finally, the report was produced, with the inductive nature of the analysis clearly signified by each theme being introduced with vivid, compelling extracts from the dataset, followed by discussion and supporting literature.

Hand-written maps were used periodically to help the researcher visualize the thematic map at various points in the analysis. Two critical friends (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) were also employed to further help the process of iteration. The researcher presented the evolving thematic map and supporting details on three occasions, with feedback used to inform the next iteration. A "15-point checklist for good reflexive thematic analysis" was used to guide the analysis and critique the outputs (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 269). The whole process was recorded in a reflexive journal, with methodological reflections informed by the following qualitative research trustworthiness criteria: Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This approach is advocated as "gold standard in qualitative work in Sport, Exercise and Health" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 179).

Results and discussion

The analysis resulted in five themes: Rhythm of the Season, Staff Diversity, Partnerships and Conflicts, Instability and Challenge, and MDT Operational Factors. Each is comprised of supporting sub-themes (see Table 1) and these are used to characterize the themes as they are introduced and discussed below.

Rhythm of the season

The English football season tends to start sometime in August/September and end sometime in April/May, and the same is true of elite English football academies. But throughout the calendar year, there are recurring events and patterns that are crucial if the ebbs and flows in demand experienced by the academy MDT are to be fully understood.

Table 1. Summary of themes and supporting sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
Rhythm of the season	Player education, Retain/Release, Competition, Bio-banding, Tours
Staff diversity	Educational background, Individual differences, Full-time/Part-time/Casual
Partnerships and conflicts	Inner versus outer circle, Play versus injury rate, Internal versus external focus, Player versus person
Instability and challenge	Organizational context, Staff turnover, Proximity to 1st team, Psychological safety
MDT operational factors	Complexity, Time, Planning, Reflection, Leadership

[Under 16s] after Christmas, with their GCSE's, our contact time will become shorter. So, they'll go up to Easter, then they'll only be in for the evenings. So really it becomes less and less. And then all of a sudden, they're going into full time football. (P2)

This quote introduces the first of five supporting sub-themes, *Player education*. Overall, the academy includes players from ages 9–21, so for most of them education is a statutory requirement. The Athletic Talent Development Environment model (ATDE) takes this a step further, recognizing the role that school/education plays in supporting the holistic development of academy footballers (Larsen et al., 2020). However, the academy role in their education does vary depending on the age group; for the Under 13s and below it primarily involves just keeping in touch with their school, whereas for the Under 14s, 15s and 16s, who will typically do one full 'day release' per week, academy teachers will deliver content provided by their schools. The Under 17s and 18s are required to continue their education alongside their football scholarship, with academy teachers typically taking the lead.

In that September period, we tend to get quite a lot of injuries due to perhaps the increase in load from going back to school, participating in other sports around school as well as then starting a full program of day release and things like that for some of the older age groups. So, we always have to keep an eye on that. (P1)

As this quote illustrates, the *Player education* sub-theme deals not only with the direct impact of education but also more indirect effects. Higher rates of injury are associated with the Under 12s starting secondary school and the Under 14's starting regular day release from school, and consequently higher training loads. But both events can also be associated with less obvious psychological stressors, ranging from issues with friendship groups to worries about keeping up with their homework.

So, the 11s, 12s, 14s, 16s panic in October, November, pressure ramps up and we're seeing it now. We've had two phone calls this week. [Also] March into April time decision making that [also] affects quite a lot of things and people's thinking. And so obviously, parents start getting more anxious, boys start getting more anxious … (P7)

This quote introduces the second sub-theme, *Retain/Release*. Elite football academies are pressurized environments in which player registration must be continually earned through performance, and the points at which registration decisions are taken can be very difficult for players and parents (McGlinchey et al., 2022). But what about staff? The above quote implies that the jobs they do may also become more difficult as a result:

I think May is tricky for staff. Particularly myself, it's a bit of a watch out. Not necessarily how many hours you're working, but the emotional drain. So, what we're talking about is retain/release … You can spend a morning doing your 'retain/release' and it could be [only] 2 hours of phone calls. But the impact of that is pretty heavy. You're wiped out … and then it's the next follow up bit as well, which is also quite draining in terms of the conversations with parents. (P13)

In a wide-ranging prior study of the staff stressors experienced, communication with players and parents didn't feature (Arnold et al., 2019), a difference perhaps explained by this study's specific focus on a football talent pathway environment in which perhaps many more such decisions are taken each year. The importance of each decision to the player and parents involved, plus the sheer number of them,

means the impact on MDT staff is not to be underestimated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the lead author had several experiences of acting as a 'confidante' to staff colleagues during this period.

> So, I think if we were in that position where we were still looking at getting a league win, we might not be in that kind of wind down period. We'd be more of, like, powering through to the end of the season, rather than winding down at the end of the season. So, I think it does depend on, yeah, where you are … (P15)

The third sub-theme is *Competition*. It is well known that context is crucial when intentionally subjecting players to pressure to develop their ability to cope (Kent et al., 2022). The same principle applies to the overall academy programme, with context here provided by each age group team still being in contention to win something, or not. Those contexts where teams get knocked out of all competitions early (e.g., January/ February), can result in a decidedly odd feeling of the season being nearly over, which can have consequences for service delivery of different members of the MDT. Indeed, on more than one occasion, when reflecting on sub-optimal psychology group workshop player engagement, the lead author noted the lack of competitive focus as a potential contributory factor.

> We've been doing bio-banding in January, which has been a nice way of feeding back in from a break over Christmas. But also giving that opportunity for players to play in their respective maturation bands … we really value bio-banding, it's a really important tool we use for player development, but also player assessment. (P1)

This quote introduces the fourth sub-theme, *Bio-banding*, which refers to a temporary intervention whereby the players are grouped by their maturational status instead of the usual chronological age (Hill et al., 2020). It is generally embraced by academy MDT staff, seen as a useful means of exposing early and late maturing players to different challenges, as providing a different lens through which talent identification can be viewed. It also brings different demands for MDT staff. For Strength and Conditioning (S&C), it means a lot of work to define and organize, while for other staff the lead author directly observed the extra layer it can bring to already complex logistics, in terms of arranging who to play against, fielding additional questions from parents, etc.

> the lead up to Easter is very busy because that's when we like to try and get as many of our groups away on tour as we can and that covers literally Under 9s through to Under 18s. So, it will be one, maybe two, away trips for each age group. And that might be either a tournament in the UK where they'll travel up to the Midlands and stay over. Or very likely it will be over in Europe somewhere, taking part in tournament and that will range from anything from two days up to 10 days (P11)

The fifth and final sub-theme of Rhythm of the Season is *Tours*, which can be pre-season, post-season or during the season and of varying lengths depending on the age group. The previously cited study of staff stressors included 'too much travelling' (Arnold et al., 2019). Academy staff attendance on *Tours* will vary, with larger numbers involved in the older age groups and fewer in the younger age groups, although with the latter there might be a need for the same staff to cover multiple tours. Whether they are viewed as 'too much' will also vary, with attendance on some tours highly sought after and others, particularly if they clash with personal commitments away from football, sometimes less so.

Staff diversity

The second theme relates to staff heterogeneity in the football academy MDT environment. To some this theme may seem surprising, as it has been recognized that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups are under-represented in off-pitch football roles despite being over-represented on-pitch versus the general population (Professional Footballers Association, 2024), and this academy is no exception. Nonetheless, the diversity in staff that are present is significant, and an in-depth understanding of this can yield real insight into the workings of each MDT.

> … performance disciplines, so that's Psych, S&C, Medical, Analysis, all of those disciplines have a disadvantage in that we don't talk football language. I think we all come from an educational background, I'm being very general now, but we've all come from university. [Many] of the coaches have not. (P16)

Introducing *Educational background*, the first sub-theme, this quote yields both explicit and implicit insight to the sensitivities of academy MDT working. Explicitly, it refers to the challenge faced by university-educated staff in tailoring their communication to the football environment, particularly noticeable each summer with the annual influx of placement students in Performance Support roles. Implicitly, it hints at the wide range of professional and social identities present in the contemporary football academy MDT, which can influence team dynamics in subtle and less subtle ways (Slater et al., 2017). It is tempting to view these identities stereotypically, equating the people with the educational and professional development pathway 'typical' of their academy role. Indeed, there is some truth to this, since medical doctors and physios tend to have a National Health Service (NHS) background, teachers tend to have trained and worked in state schools, S&C and Analysts often have a Sport Science undergraduate degree, while many of the coaches have a professional or semiprofessional playing background and might describe their education as 'the school of hard knocks'. But stereotypes are often also oversimplifications, as the illustrated by the second sub-theme, *Individual differences*.

To illustrate this sub-theme, examples are given from the first phase of research, recorded via field notes. Consider the example of an academy teacher, with a prior career as an NHS nurse. Or a psychologist who had previously worked as a teacher in a state school. Or a football coach with an MSc in Sport Psychology. Or a S&C coach with high level training as a classical musician. For every member of staff who may seem stereotypical, it is easy to find another that confounds the stereotype. And even those who do seem stereotypical have their own unique personalities which, when combined the personalities of their MDT colleagues, will contribute to the dynamics of each specific team (Beauchamp et al., 2007). An understanding of *Individual differences* is crucial if the cultural context of a specific MDT is to be fully understood.

The final sub-theme relates to the employment realities of a modern football academy:

> In the younger age groups where you've got part time or casual staff, and also, you've got members of the MDT working across multiple age groups, that can make it more difficult. Whereas in the older age groups … they've got a regular full-time member of staff pretty much in each area. That generally gives them a better chance of being effective … we've

got a really good intention to work as [an] interdisciplinary team … it's still just difficult with a programme of this scale, with lots of moving parts … in different spaces at different times, for optimal interdisciplinary working (P18)

This sub-theme has been named *Full-time/Part-time/Casual* in recognition of 3 employment classes that are all heavily represented in the academy. As this experienced academy manager noted, their likelihood of collaborating in an interdisciplinary way is heavily influenced by their employment status. As the lead author personally experienced, part time and casual staff are far more likely, by necessity, to default to siloed working, which can limit the effectiveness of the staff team (Burns & Collins, 2023). To further reinforce this point, the same manager shared a prior career experience:

when I was part of an MDT on a national development program, I think we had a good interdisciplinary working environment. But we were in one relatively small training centre, with one squad, who were not moving around that much. And you were all on the same schedule, so that allowed, you know, sports psychologists and S&C coaches to come down into the technical training environment and be involved … the coaching team to be alongside warm-ups, fitness training and so on (P18).

Partnerships and conflicts

The third theme explores alliances and flashpoints that repeatedly occur in the football academy's MDTs, albeit with sometimes differing intensity due to the seasonal rhythm.

… the 'inner circle', it's like your day-to-day support on the grass team so that [would] be your technical coaches, maybe physios, maybe S&C, maybe goalie coach, maybe analysis … and then you've got, and this wouldn't be regularly used vernacular, but … like a wider team of people who support the program but who don't necessarily have day-to-day contact. [The inner circle] definitely … you would say they're probably more in synch and [have a more] aligned understanding of each other … just because of the time they spend together (P10)

Termed *Inner versus outer circle*, this sub-theme describes a common dynamic in academy MDTs. The so-called 'inner circle' can often have the strongest likelihood of working in an interdisciplinary fashion (Burns & Collins, 2023), and even if not, their shared understanding will likely be higher. In contrast, the 'outer circle' is more likely to miss opportunities to collaborate, more prone to misunderstandings, more likely to work in silos. Any individuals positioning vis-à-vis the *Inner versus outer circle* is not however based purely on discipline, since tenure, relationships and personality can also all contribute.

Another sub-theme helping to explain MDT dynamics is linked to player injuries:

So [the Physios] job is to try help players get healthy. But I think the coaches realise that, in elite sport, injuries are going to occur and are actually a major part of pushing players … pushing development and creating opportunities for learning. So, there's certainly been friction between physios and coaches around physical workloads. And that can be a really positive thing, but what you don't want is them retreating back to their own camps and almost being annoyed with each other … you want them to have a productive conversation … and then go for it. (P18)

Deemed *Play versus injury rate*, this sub-theme is articulated clearly by the quote and explored further by extant literature (Ekstrand et al., 2019). Effective communications

and interdependent working between coaches, medical staff and MDT colleagues can be highly beneficial in this respect but are sometimes easier said than done. Such tensions tend to peak if team competitive intensity is high, e.g., when trophies are on the line.

> You've got one group of people who, it's their job to essentially nurture those who are within the system already and [then] you've got another group whose job is to … almost to perturb the system with other players. This gets the conversation started with both coaches and recruitment and you have to just be at peace that you've got different objectives for your roles and that's fine (P18).

The third sub-theme, *Internal versus external focus*, is centered on MDT dynamics related to talent identification and retention through the academy pathway, a complex process with many factors at play (Sarmento et al., 2018). The researcher has repeatedly observed, in meetings when retain/release decisions are being made, a dynamic whereby the internally focused MDT, that has been working with a lad often over several years, will advocate for him to be retained and the externally focused talent scouts will bring a seemingly 'harsh' dose of external reality. In such discussions it is then often the senior coach with many years of experience, who has seen players in this environment go through the whole academy journey, that will then also weigh in with the 'hard right' (e.g., release them as they're not going to make it) over the 'easy wrong' (e.g., give them the benefit of the doubt for now).

> The good MDT is when you talk about the players and then you allow an open forum for people to be able to share their conversations and their experience with the player. Paint the whole picture of it. It is easy to fall into the habit 'what does the team need? What does your schedule look like?' [So, for example] … the coach opens up and says this is what we saw in the game at the weekend. Then it's down to the wider MDT to feed into that. So, the coach says, 'he didn't press very well' and then [the Analyst will say] 'GPS says that in the week he actually had really high metric, so he might not have been a good physical state … he looked fatigued'. Then Psych come in and say 'oh and he's actually had something going on at home' … (P5)

The final sub-theme in this section is *Player versus person*. The sport psychology literature is full of examples emphasizing the importance of considering the whole person, not just the footballer (e.g., Ong et al., 2018), and as the quote illustrates, this viewpoint is strongly supported by others, but not always. Given a conducive context, it is likely that most MDT staff would be supportive of such discussions, but when the pressure is on things can be very different. And while this seemed to be hypothetical example given by the interviewee, it is nonetheless also illustrative of the care that the sport psychologist must take in MDT discussions, representing the player's interests without betraying confidentiality (Feddersen et al., 2023). The impact of the broader context is explored in detail in the next theme.

Instability and challenge

English football is pressurized (Wagstaff & Thelwell, 2020), and English football academies are not immune from this pressure, even though their overall scope is developmental. For academy MDTs, this can mean an unstable, challenging reality, with the following four sub-themes illustrative.

> We [men's 1st team] have an extremely strong threat of relegation, which is kind of impacting on our planning [for the whole club] for next year. If that wasn't a threat, we'd be more set in 'this is broadly what we're going after' … it's that old chestnut that the one constant is change and that … couldn't be more true this year. (P18)

Introducing *Organizational context*, the first sub-theme, this quote nicely captures the jeopardy that every single member of staff in an English Premier League football club can feel, toward the end of the season, when the men's 1st team are at risk of relegation. The key reason for this is relatively easy to understand, the financial consequences of being relegated are massive (Speer, 2023), and this means that almost everyone is likely to feel a degree of job insecurity, a known stressor among elite sport support staff (Arnold et al., 2019).

> There is something bubbling under the surface [at the moment] … And I'm not actually convinced it's the first team stuff … I think it's uncertainty. I think it's maybe, well, to be honest, its core staff going. That's probably the biggest thing. (P17)

This quote introduces *Staff turnover*, the second sub-theme and one that can be related to, but is nonetheless distinct from, the first. The football club had experienced a change of ownership in the preceding 12 months and as is sometimes the case with such changes, it had resulted in the departure of a number of key personnel with long tenure in the academy. Such changes have been observed elsewhere, at least temporarily, to lead to reductions in staff engagement and commitment (Gilmore, 2017). In this case, it certainly led to increased uncertainty for more experienced and less experienced staff alike.

> I don't know if this is usual, within like a normal year within the Academy. There's been a lot of change this year like in terms of management, obviously, and so knock-on effects with some coaches have changed, moved up, moved down or left. (P19)

Another factor that can be associated with Instability and Challenge is *Proximity to 1st team*, the third sub-theme in this section, introduced as follows:

> The 18s [program] logistically, is pretty stable. So, it's Monday to Friday [and also] you have a set day off for Education that lets the staff get on with, you know, do what needs to be done. They've got the games on Saturdays every week. A few midweek games here and there, but it's pretty stable. Whereas the B Team? [also known as the Under 21s] … it's not stable. There may be a 3-day break and maybe a 7-day break, maybe a 2-week break. … [you have] some of the 1st team players dropping down, you got first of some of the B team players moving up to the 1st team … after the Christmas break you've got players leaving because they're out of contract at the end of the year, so you've got in and out players on loan. (P10)

Other researchers have written about the propensity for 1st team football to be extremely unstable, with the very high frequency of changes in the 1st team Manager/Head Coach a common theme (e.g., Wagstaff & Thelwell, 2020). This sub-theme develops this point by noting that just being one step away from the 1st team increases program instability, irrespective of whether the 1st team is doing well or not. The B Team's utilization of multiple devices to aid MDT flexibility (e.g., daily meetings supported by multiple white broads providing daily detail of player whereabouts, training plans etc) is illustrative of this.

The final sub-theme, *Psychological safety*, is introduced by a member of staff who was finding working in a specific MDT to be particularly challenging:

… part of me thinks, maybe you know, I shouldn't take it personally when somebody kinda comes down on you like a ton of bricks … whereas you know, in contrast with [another MDT], there is … high challenge as well but much safer high challenge … you're allowed mistakes in that environment. (P19)

Researchers have previously written about football being a tough, challenging environment with multiple perceived 'threats' for academy players (Gervis & Goldman, 2020). As this quote illustrates, the potential for this isn't just among the players. Current interest in this topic seems warranted (Walton et al., 2024).

MDT operational factors

The final theme explores a variety of operational considerations that quickly become apparent to those that work in the football academy's MDTs.

… we put on the games program. We do the training, we look at the operations and logistics side of things, we work the transport, we make sure the players are aware where they need to be etc. We communicate with the parents … It's a big task to make sure everything is covered, especially from a physio point of view, because obviously it's an FA requirement that we need to have a physio attend these fixtures … if not, we can be turned away at the gates. (P11)

The first sub-theme is *Complexity*, a reality this quote neatly illustrates. A study of elite sport staff stressors (Arnold et al., 2019) featured multiple logistics issues and, with upwards of 150 players across 10 teams to provide for at any one time, it is little surprise that the football academy context has them too. Certainly, the lead author observed that any time the 'standard' games programme was augmented (e.g., Tours, Bio-banding, 'recruitment' fixtures etc.) there was a risk of *Complexity*-related stress within the MDT.

The physio will run through the names. And then as soon as they've heard the coach's opinion on them, and then as soon as they heard a physical opinion on them, that was it. You'd have to go 'whoa, whoa, whoa. Can we just go back?' But that's only if you've got the ******** to actually say [that]. Because sometimes it's quite daunting if your MDT's massive, like if you've got 20 people sat in a ring and you're like, 'I've got something quite important to say, but I don't wanna stop the person from speaking, cause the time's going on too much and I know we said that we'd finish in an hour and it's an hour and 5 minutes' [already]. You know what I mean? (P5)

Time is the second sub-theme, with staff MDT meetings being one example where it was lacking. Another is the challenge of securing time in the player's schedule. Large MDTs also tend to mean multiple demands on the player's time. The author's own practitioner experience has sometimes mirrored that of other sport psychology practitioners who have reported lack of time as a limiting factor in service delivery (Gervis & Goldman, 2020).

The third sub-theme deals with the seemingly thorny topic of planning:

In Education, you're planning a year ahead … GCSEs are always at certain points of the year. So, we have to plan way ahead. Whereas Coaches and Operations are really reactive and flexible and reacting to things on an hourly basis, which is quite stressful for us as teachers. I think because we like to know exactly who we've got in front of us and who

we're delivering to. So, when you work in elite sport setting, that can't happen like it does in a school. So yeah, for us it's frustrating sometimes. (P6)

So, for some members of the MDT, in some situations, a lack of *Planning* is an issue. Of course, a lot of planning does go into the running of the football academy, with the periodization approach to planning and designing training programs, structured around so-called macro-, meso-, and micro-cycles a great example (Pass et al., 2022). The quote shows that, despite this, the demands of a particular day/week often get in the way. Additionally, it seems that even the planning that is happening isn't always visible – especially to those in the 'outer circle'. And it probably could happen more. In justifying the status quo, the phrase "it's football!", together with a shrug of the shoulders, is a not infrequent occurrence.

> The MDT's themselves are structured differently. So, in the 18s we have reds and greens for the week. So, 'what went well last week? What didn't go well?' So, I think they tend to be a little bit more reflective maybe than the 15s. The 15s are very much like what's happening next and what are we doing? Whereas the 18s, there is that element of 'what are we doing well?' what are we not doing well?' and 'how are we gonna move that forward?' I think that's probably due to the nature of the program. I think because in the 18s, we've got the players full time, we can do a bit more of that. Whereas maybe that wouldn't be as appropriate for the 15s every week. (P15)

The fourth sub-theme is *Reflection*, which is recognized as a critically important component of many professions and disciplines, both inside and outside the world of sport (Cropley et al., 2023). And group reflective activities have been acknowledged to contribute to effective interdisciplinary working practices in other domains (Burns & Collins, 2023). Given the context described by the preceding *Time* and *Planning* subthemes, among others, it is perhaps unsurprising that the potential for reflection to help is also not always realized.

The fifth and final sub-theme is *Leadership*. The following quote illustrates how strong and less strong leaders can alternatively manifest in the academy MDT context:

> I get the impression that it's very different based on who leads them [for example with a particular former coach] you got a sense for the direction of the [overall academy] program as well. You got things that were connected to the program vision and how they want to operate as a bigger purpose thing. So, what was brought forward was almost sense checked. Maybe not explicitly, but … there was a reference to a bigger plan or bigger thing that everyone's attached to. Whereas [in another MDT the interviewee had recently started attending] I wonder how connected that one is to anything bigger than just what's happening next week? (P10)

The potential for a strong leader to make a difference to the success of any team has been extensively researched and has been written about specifically in many domains, including football psychology (e.g., Konter et al., 2019). The myriad sensitivities and challenges of the football academy MDT environment suggest there is plenty of opportunity for strong leadership to make a tangible difference in this context too.

General discussion

Modern, elite English football academies are complex organizations with lots of resources, so it is perhaps unsurprising that an ethnographic exploration of the cultural

sensitivities and challenges associated with working in the multi-disciplinary teams of one such organization reveals a similarly complex and nuanced reality. The previous section discussed explicitly how each of the 5 themes and supporting sub-themes, when considered independently, can help bring the experience of working in these teams to life. It also hinted more implicitly how an interdependent consideration of the themes and sub-themes can bring further insight, with perhaps the most significant involving the theme *Rhythm of the Season*. As an example, consider the *Rhythm of the Season* in conjunction with *MDT Operational Factors*. Staff experience a lack of *Time* most acutely at particular points of the season, with *Tours* a great example, particularly during pre-season. Pressure on the staff can be most intense when a *Competition* is on the line, and at such times a lack of *Reflection* or *Planning* may be most evident. *Bio-banding* is highly valued by the academy staff due to the development opportunities it offers the players and the evaluation insight it offers the staff, but it also comes with additional *Complexity* of logistics that the MDT has to collectively manage. Multiple examples were also presented of the *Rhythm of the Season* influencing *Partnerships and Conflicts* (e.g., around end of season Retain/Release decisions), *Instability and Challenge* (e.g., after Christmas when B Team players go out on loan) and *Staff Diversity* (e.g., the influx of placement students in Performance Support roles each summer). As a complementary construct to aid understanding of football academies and their MDTs, the *Rhythm of the Season* would therefore seem to have strong potential, particularly given the understandably cross-sectional or retrospective nature of much of the contemporary football academy research (e.g., Dean et al., 2022; Fedderson et al., 2023, 2025; Gibson & Groom, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020).

More broadly, previous researchers (Burns & Collins, 2023) highlighted a general need for further research uncovering the lived experiences and practices of staff teams in elite sport and this ethnographic research has done just that. As a result, two particular opportunities for future research are apparent, either of which may practically help those working in football academy MDTs to do so more effectively, and perhaps also some working in other elite sport contexts.

The first relates to 'facilitative leadership' (Burns & Collins, 2023, p. 8). This research has identified several factors which can impede effective collaboration. The sub-themes *Full Time/Part Time/Casual* and *Inner versus Outer Circle* provide examples of how members of staff can end up working in silos. The sub-themes *Time* and *Psychological Safety* both provide examples of how MDTs can further miss opportunities to maximize the collective sum of their parts. And the sub-theme *Leadership* described how some MDT leaders are much more effective than others. So there seems to be an opportunity to explore how football academy MDTs can be facilitated/led more effectively. This could take the form of training, since those charged with facilitating and leading MDTs in this research seem to have done so largely based on prior relevant experiences that they may, or may not, have.

The second relates to 'team reflection' (Burns & Collins, 2023, p. 13). Evidence from the medical industry that such activities can lead to more effective MDTs has been invoked to suggest that they warrant further investigation in elite sport. The sub-theme *Reflection* resulted from the observation that use of this process is variable across this football academy's MDTs. Whether it be daily, weekly or on a longer frequency, when

the lead author observed such collective activities, they seemed to be extremely benefi-cial for team collaboration. But such occasions were sporadic, and some MDTs seemed to go considerable periods of time without any kind of collective reflection activity at all. MDT reflection could be self-led or independently facilitated. Both seem worthy of exploration.

The present study has both strengths and limitations. In relation to trustworthiness criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), it has particularly strong 'credibility', supported by the length and depth of the lead author's ethnographic engagement in the academy. Gaining such access to English football academies can be challenging and in this respect the study clearly contributes to the extant literature. It can also be argued to have strong 'transferability', since the descriptions provided are sufficiently thick to ensure that the reader is well-informed enough to judge whether potentially relevant to different con-texts, although this assertion must be qualified by the fact that the research considered only one English football academy. Other clubs may have different cultures and the 'academy MDT experience' could be different, so similar research in other academies could therefore be beneficial.

Conclusion

This study presents a rigorous ethnographic investigation into the lived experiences of MDT staff within an English Premier League Category One academy, providing novel insights into the complexities of interdisciplinary collaboration in this high-performance environment, summarized in five themes: Rhythm of the Season, Staff Diversity, Partnerships and Conflicts, Instability and Challenge and MDT Operational Factors. Each of the themes illuminates aspects of the MDT staff experience. There is a Rhythm to the Season that fundamentally affects the Academy MDTs, in ways that would not always be apparent to the casual football observer. The Staff Diversity, which is consid-erably more nuanced than just the constituent disciplines, makes each MDT unique. Commonly observed team dynamics are articulated in the Partnerships and Conflicts theme, illustrating tensions that occur as each team member executes their individual responsibilities. Instability and Challenge are common to most elite football environ-ments, but just how acutely they are felt in any specific MDT will depend on the sub-themes explored such as *Proximity to 1st Team* or *Organizational context*. While MDT Operational Factors captures key factors that underpin the successful delivery of an elite football academy program. The interdependent influence of Rhythm of the Season over the other themes was also noted and its potential usefulness as a complementary con-struct to help inform future football academy research was proposed.

We conclude by offering three applied implications. They may be of interest to trainee practitioners and/or those who are unfamiliar with elite English football academies:

'Forewarned is forearmed': the *Rhythm of the Season* theme offered in this analysis provided an insight into what preoccupies MDT colleagues, and the young footballers they support, at different stages of the season. Armed with a detailed understanding of this, the practitioner is in a far stronger position to a) anticipate demand and b) do their job effectively. Some opportunities are more obvious than others, such as the

opportunity that pre-season offers for supporting the head coach with team building. Less obvious is the timing of scholarship decisions for Under 16's, typically December, and the associated workload for the sport psychologist in the few months that precedes it as the pressure ramps up. Or the stress that change can bring as the Under 15 and Under 16 squads are then potentially merged post-Christmas. It is generally acknowledged that the second year in any job is easier than the first, as the chances of being surprised are much less. Familiarity with the Rhythm of the Season can make the first year easier too.

'Secure quick/small wins': A lack of *Planning*, *Reflection* and more generally a lack of *Time* have all been noted as fairly typical of the academy MDT context, so it is important for the sport psychologist to make a tangible impact quickly, however tempting plans for effecting longer term, more systemic change might be. This could be making a difference to a single player who has been disruptive to the broader group. Or offering player workshops during a busy spell for the head coach due to MDT colleague absences. Or even just attending training that a single coach is running and assisting with retrieving balls and shifting goalposts. Members of academy MDTs are busy, so supporting the group, even in small ways, is appreciated, helps the newcomer gain acceptance and lays the foundation for more ambitious, longer-term interventions.

Work interdependently: Arriving with a goal to work in an interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary manner, all of the time, is admirable but unrealistic, especially in the short term. But the underlying approach, of seeking to work interdependently when and where feasible, can still be of huge benefit. The trainee sport psychologist who is part-time and spread across several age group teams will have limited opportunity to observe the many players under their care each week. But there are many other eyes and ears in the MDT and some of them are around the playing groups a lot more, especially the so-called 'inner circle'. Developing a close collaboration with one or more of these colleagues can, in addition to significantly increasing the psychologist's ability to spot player challenges and opportunities, also help facilitate selected opportunities for interdisciplinary delivery, such as introducing goal setting in a session run jointly with a Strength and Conditioning coach. Partnering with members of the so-called 'outer circle' can also be hugely valuable. Academy teachers have deep expertise in child development, and well as lots of background knowledge on any individual in their care, so intentional collaboration can be of significant value to both parties.

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