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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Applied Sport Psychology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uasp20

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To cite this article: James A. Newman, Adam Lickess & Andrew J. Higham (09 Nov 2023): Fighting the system: Psychology consultants' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in sport, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2023.2274455

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2274455

Published online: 09 Nov 2023.

JOURNAL OF APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2274455

Fighting the system: Psychology consultants' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in sport

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to obtain a nuanced, in-depth insight into sport psychology consultants' (SPCs') experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in sport, and their practice recommendations to address this behavior. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five HCPC-registered SPCs in the UK. Data were analyzed in line with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Four group experiential themes emerged, centered around the participants searching for meaning, fighting the system, ingrained acceptance, and tackling the problem of maltreatment in sport. Specifically, the participants referred to how the sporting context influenced their understanding of maltreatment. They also discussed the inherent difficulties with reporting this behavior, and a lack of support in this process, whilst also alluding to how sporting institutions normalized abusive practices in pursuit of performance outcomes. To address the issue of maltreatment in sports, the participants discussed a variety of recommendations including organizations being accountable, the need for organizations to be more representative, and for SPCs to work with contextual intelligence. The findings from the present study provide important implications for sporting organizations, SPCs, and the professional bodies who support practitioners around the need to further understand maltreatment in sport, and to tackle this issue.

Lay summary: In this study, SPCs shared their experiences of how they understand maltreatment in the sporting context. They also discussed their battles with the sporting system, and how maltreatment can be inherent to sports culture. These findings provide valuable insight into how maltreatment can be tackled in sport.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Accountability for the cycle of maltreatment across sporting domains needs to be taken at both the micro, meso, and macrosystem levels.
- Greater efforts need to be made for the continued education of SPCs concerning maltreatment in sport.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 April 2023
Revised 2 August 2023
Accepted 16 August 2023

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- Organizations need to provide greater support, and autonomy to individuals who are tasked with safeguarding individuals' welfare in sport.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing publicity around stories of organizational tolerance of athlete maltreatment in sport (Seanor et al., 2023). Given this media interest, it is unsurprising that research has explored bullying, abuse, and wider maltreatment from the perspectives of key stakeholders such as athletes and coaches (McMahon et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2022a; Salim & Winter, 2022). However, while such studies have focused on the perspectives of these key stakeholders, the existing literature scarcely focuses on those who are potential gatekeepers of an athlete's safety and well-being such as sport psychology consultants (SPCs) (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). This is a notable problem within the elite sport setting as SPCs are "uniquely positioned" to focus on athletes' well-being (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). To address the issue of a lack of representation of SPCs' perspectives, the present study sought to explore SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in elite sport.

Conceptualizing maltreatment

While researchers have set out various typologies for maltreatment in sport (see David, 2005; Kavanagh, 2014; Raakman et al., 2010), Stirling's (2009) conceptual framework currently provides the predominant model for conceptualizing maltreatment in sport. This is due to this model's focus on defining the constructs and categories of maltreatment, whereas previously terms such as abuse and bullying had been used interchangeably (Stirling, 2009). Within the framework, maltreatment is categorized into relational and non-relational forms. Relational maltreatment occurs within the presence of a "critical relationship," whereby, the relationship holds significant influence over an athlete's sense of trust and attainment of needs (e.g., parental and coach relationships). Contrastingly, non-relational maltreatment is defined as maltreatment that exists independent of a "critical relationship" whereby, the perpetrator is not within a critical relationship with the victim (e.g., player-to-player). In addition, non-relational maltreatment incorporates institutional maltreatment, addressing how sporting organizations can propagate a culture of acceptance. Although Stirling's (2009) conceptual model provides an important guide in terms of potential standardization of the concept of maltreatment for research practitioners in sport psychology it remains centered on the experiences of athletes rather than other stakeholders in sport. Furthermore, despite the model being established for nearly 15 years, perceptions of some of its key concepts (e.g., bullying) remain varied between figures such as coaches and athletes (Newman et al., 2021; 2022a). This suggests that research still needs to understand this concept with sports' stakeholders, such as SPCs.

Understanding maltreatment in sport

Within elite sport, maltreatment results in problems such as athlete trauma, severe interpersonal relationship issues and depression (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). Despite

these known issues, media reports of serial abuses spanning a plethora of elite sport contexts such as cricket and gymnastics (BBC, 2021, 2022) remain prevalent. These reports outline serious concerns around what sporting institutions regard as "acceptable" behavior in the sporting culture. Specifically, the recent exposure of athlete maltreatment within British Gymnastics documented how coaches played down "exhaustive" and "abusive" practices as "tough love" and "a mark of quality coaching, necessary for success" (BBC, 2022). While media reports appear to relate more to coaches and wider organizational and cultural issues around maltreatment in sport, they also highlight issues with individuals who serve to protect athletes' safety and well-being. One such group is SPCs, who may inadvertently normalize wrongdoing (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Indeed, as Kerr & Stirling (2019) propose, SPCs may indirectly exacerbate the issue of maltreatment through a combination of their socialization in sport, their deference to the power of a coach, and/or a lack of formal education or training in safeguarding. Despite these notable points, it is important to state that work focusing on whether these are the experiences of SPCs concerning maltreatment and their wider safeguarding practice, remains limited.

Currently attempts to safeguard against maltreatment has often been driven by international sport organizations such as the International Olympic Committee who provide a "toolkit to safeguard athletes from harassment and abuse" (Mountjoy et al., 2020). This has replicated at a national level in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, where UK Sport and Sport England have committed to five areas designed to support welfare and safeguarding for all people across performance and participation sport (UK Sport, 2023). For key sporting stakeholders such as SPCs though, these attempts at safeguarding are set against a backdrop where they are socialized to an often harmful, "win at all costs" culture (Feddersen et al., 2020), which results in anti-social behaviors (Higham et al., 2022). This culture is underpinned by a hierarchical, systemic acceptance, and normalization of maltreatment across sports (Vveinhardt et al., 2019). SPCs may be vulnerable to this form of acceptance if they have been socialized in contexts where questionable practices are accepted in the pursuit of winning (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Furthermore, SPCs face insecure working conditions which may exacerbate this problem and serve as a barrier to reporting (Kerr & Stirling, 2019).

Given the nature of the potential challenges faced by SPCs, it may be useful to understand them from a systemic perspective. One theory which may usefully address this is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory which highlights how experiences of maltreatment can be influenced by the five environmental systems in which athletes interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Bronfenbrenner's (1999) model allows for a focus on the organizational and cultural (macrosystem), as well as the environmental and temporal (chronosystem), influences on maltreatment in sport. Moreover, it describes how the different environmental systems interact to further exacerbate the issue of maltreatment. For example, the interaction at the macrosystem and exosystem levels in sport has resulted in a culture which is underpinned by self-regulation and organization (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022), and a reluctance to engage with external administrators and stakeholders (Champ et al., 2021). The result of this lack of external regulation is an enclosed social system (Goffman, 1961), where terms such as mental toughness normalize maltreatment and key stakeholders such as SPCs feel inhibited in their ability to report and

disclose wrongdoing (Champ et al., 2021; Seanor et al., 2023). Furthermore, interactions at other levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological systems (e.g., the mesosystem and microsystem) may also demonstrate how maltreatment in the presence of SPCs can occur. Trainee SPCs' identities, are often malleable, and shaped, not only by the organizational culture in which they ae embedded (Champ et al., 2021) but also by the key stakeholders (e.g., parents, and coaches) of sporting organizations they interact with. Consequently, if key stakeholders propagate the acceptance of athlete maltreatment, and bullying (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) it is then possible to see how this behavior becomes normalized and then occurs.

A lack of formal education and training

A final cultural issue for SPCs concerning maltreatment and wider safeguarding pertains to the persistence of insufficient education and training in this area (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). In an earlier study, Stirling & Kerr (2010) found that most SPCs only reported a moderate comprehension of sport-specific safeguarding policies. Despite this noteworthy finding, in the intervening years, progress has been limited in terms of developing formal education around maltreatment and safeguarding in training programs for SPCs. For example, the latest "Certified Mental Performance Consultant® (CMPC®) Certification Program" with the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) in the USA does not specify safeguarding education as part of its core knowledge areas (AASP, 2023). Likewise, the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC, 2023) makes no explicit mention of safeguarding as part of its certification for becoming a Specialist in Applied Sport Psychology (SASP-FEPSAC). In the United Kingdom (UK), the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES, 2022) and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) offer approved training routes to becoming registered as a sport and/or exercise psychologist with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)[1]. Despite the existence of both pathways, training around maltreatment and safeguarding is limited to a workshop-oriented format for trainee SPCs (with no further training required for qualified SPCs) through BASES, and no mandatory training being required by the BPS. Given the unique role of the SPCs in enhancing holistic athlete well-being and social functioning (Kerr & Stirling, 2019), it is a surprise that greater importance has not been placed on the commitment of accreditation routes to advance the realism and diversity of safeguarding training. Moreover, the absence of a baseline requirement for training with AASP and the BPS, as well as follow-up training and evaluation with BASES raises concerns for SPCs. These concerns link to SPCs' practice concerning safeguarding and their wider understanding and experiences of maltreatment sport.

Present study

Taken in unison, the research literature, and recommendations for professional practice in sport psychology (Kerr & Stirling, 2019), highlight how the practice of SPCs in relation to maltreatment in sport is potentially inhibited by a systemic web of challenges and issues in terms of education and training. Nonetheless, recent publications in this

area have been confined to recommendations for professional practice and research (e.g., Fisher & Dzikus, 2017; Kerr & Stirling, 2019), rather than studies of the experiences of SPCs. Therefore, due to the issues highlighted from both a research and practice stance, the present study's primary aim was to explore SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in the sporting context. The present study also had a secondary aim to conduct an open-ended exploration of SPCs' recommendations for practice regarding working with cases of maltreatment. Due to the important focus on SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment, the present study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). IPA was the ideal approach to explore experiences of maltreatment given the priority it places on the person (e.g., the SPC), and their world (e.g., the sporting context) (Smith et al., 2022). Exploring this interdependence was seen as particularly important given the potentially systemic nature of maltreatment in sport.

Method

Research design and philosophical underpinnings

In this qualitative study, a semi-structured interview design was utilized. Given the study's aims, IPA was employed to explore the lived experiences of SPCs in relation to working with cases of maltreatment in sport (Smith, 2011). In situating SPCs' experiences within sport, the present study was able to maintain both the contextualist position whilst maintaining the social constructionist stance of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). The researchers ensured the social constructionist viewpoint by situating interest around how meaning was constructed by SPCs from both a subjective (e.g., as a SPC) and social worldview (e.g., life outside of practice). Through using IPA, the researchers were also able to undertake an intricate analysis of the perceptions of SPCs' perspectives and experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in sport. This unearthed both the convergences (e.g., in fighting the sporting system) and divergences (e.g., tackling maltreatment) within participants' accounts, subsequently, assuring the idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

Participants

Following IPA guidelines, the researcher utilized a purposive sampling technique to ensure that the selected participants could offer a unique perspective on the explored phenomenon (Smith, 2019). In accordance with recently published research using IPA in sport (Newman et al., 2022a), five participants (see Table 1) were recruited to explore SPCs' nuanced experiences of maltreatment in sport. The sample consisted of British

Table 1. Participant demographics and years of HCPC accreditation.

Participant	Age	Gender	Years accredited
Liz	35	Female	7
Helen	29	Female	3.5
Steve	36	Male	3.5
Rebecca	32	Female	3.5
Fred	33	Male	2.5

($n = 4$) and American ($n = 1$) HCPC-registered SPCs who are currently practicing in the UK ($Mage = 33$, $SD = 2.74$). The participants had completed United Kingdom (UK) based formal training/accreditation with BASES or the BPS. In terms of working with cases of maltreatment, the participants highlighted examples of their experiences. This included dealing with the "grey areas" of behavior (particularly in relation to bullying and banter), how they identify maltreatment, their work as part of safeguarding meetings, and how they work on preventative methods against wrongdoing. Participants were recruited directly through online forums (e.g., LinkedIn) whereby the study procedure was explored, and initial study briefings were held. Given one of the participants was known to the research team, the sensitive nature of the study, and the importance of protecting the participants' identities, we operated a relational care approach (Ellis, 2007). An example of how this approach was employed was using the double hermeneutic, which is particular to IPA (Smith, 2019). This facilitated prolonged conversations with the participants to explore how the findings should be presented, whilst also safeguarding anonymity for the participants (Ellis, 2007). Due to the study being conducted in the UK, participants were required to be accredited by the (HCPC) for a minimum of two years and needed to be practicing for the same duration.

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, the researcher facilitated introductory chats whereby both the information sheet and consent form were shared with the participants. Before each online interview, the participants were reminded of the data handling procedures, their right to confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any point throughout the data collection. In accordance with recommendations from Smith (2019) around how data is obtained in IPA studies, semi-structured interviews (see Table 2 for a guide) were then conducted with each participant. This enhanced the promotion of a symbiotic allegiance to meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022). To enhance the idiographic and hermeneutic commitment of IPA, the researcher adapted both the wording and styling of questions between participants to evoke further depth

Table 2. Sample interview questions and probes.

Sample questions	Sample probes
Could you tell me in your own words what the terms maltreatment in sport mean?	Can you tell me more about that?
Could you tell me about your experiences of maltreatment in sport?	How did you feel about that?
How do you know when you see maltreatment in sport?	What was that like for you?
What do you feel when you see maltreatment in sport?	Do you have anything else to share?
What do you do when you see maltreatment in sport?	
What sort of effects do maltreatment in sport have?	
How have you/do you/would you manage reports of maltreatment in sport?	
What does the process look like for a sport psychologist?	
What would be the ideal way to manage reports of maltreatment in sport?	
If you have seen maltreatment in sport, what have you done? If you have not what would you do?	
What would be the ideal way to manage situations where you see maltreatment in sport?	

within the subjective phenomenological narratives portrayed by each participant (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, given an interview schedule should be a stimulus for talking within IPA, the content of the schedule was used flexibly throughout the interview (Smith, 2019). To explore meaning beyond the participants' experiences, the researcher embedded probing techniques (i.e., "could you expand upon that?"), which fortified a double hermeneutic stance to elicit the participants' nuanced lived experiences of maltreatment (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Following completion of the interviews, participants were reminded of data confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Interviews lasted between 53 and 71 min ($MDuration = 62.13$, $SD = 7.05$). Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed, with names being replaced with pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed in line with IPA guidelines set out by Smith et al. (2017). Firstly, the second author played back the interviews whilst referring to and re-reading the transcripts, enabling full immersion in the data, and subsequent sharing of the participant's frame of reference (Smith et al., 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2006). Secondly, within each transcription, notes were made within the left margin when significant content in relation to the explored phenomenon was present (Smith, 2019). Formulated notes documented the experiential nature of SPCs' lived experiences of working with maltreatment cases in sport as well as the linguistic devices utilized by the participants (Smith et al., 2022). This facilitated the contextualization of the data, expanding beyond what was voiced verbatim, and enabled a deeper exploration of participant responses (Smith et al., 2022). Following note-taking, the researcher revisited each transcript to create personal experiential themes using psychological concepts to envelop the inherent meanings of the accounts (Smith et al., 2022). For example, from a quote where a participant described "maybe people would be less terrified of what is disclosed to them and they wouldn't gaslight people," this developed into a personal experiential theme of "gaslighting causing self-doubt." The next stage within the analysis involved the researcher reanalyzing the transcripts to cluster emergent themes, which subsequently unearthed a set of group experiential themes (e.g., thus "gaslighting causing self-doubt" was subsumed into the theme of "fighting the system"). Consistent with best practice guidelines for IPA (Conroy & de Visser, 2015; Nizza et al., 2021), these are presented to illustrate experiences and recommendations regarding working with cases of maltreatment in sport.

Research quality

Although there are no predefined criteria for quality in IPA research (Smith, 2011), the present study drew on recently published guidelines regarding achieving excellence using this approach (Nizza et al., 2021). Firstly, the researcher ensured the construction of a "compelling, unfolding narrative" by creating a coherent story, detailing the progressive journey through a narrative. In this study, data were carefully extracted from the transcript to compose a story of SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in sport. Throughout this process, the researcher ordered quotations within each

group experiential theme (e.g., the theme "tackling the problem") in a way so that they would flow to convey a compelling insight that had momentum (Nizza et al., 2021). Following this, the delivery of a vigorous experiential account was ensured through the exploration of participants' experiences of maltreatment. Additionally, the researcher committed to close analytic reading through the further exploration and analysis of linguistic devices evidenced (e.g., the sporting example of red flags illustrating clearly distinguished maltreatment) by the participants. At this stage, there was a particular focus on the meaning-making employed by the participants (Newman et al., 2022c). Thirdly, convergence and divergence in responses were attended to by highlighting both similarities and differences within and across participant responses (Nizza et al., 2021). Specifically, the balance was facilitated between individuality and commonality whilst promoting the idiosyncratic characteristics of participants' responses (Nizza et al., 2021).

Due to the delicate phenomenon explored within this study, the researcher displayed sensitivity to context (Yardley, 2017) by allowing participants to expand upon their responses through the utilization of prompts (e.g., "could you explain what this meant from your position within sport?"). Importantly, to ensure reflexive practice, the researchers discussed proceedings post-interview to evaluate the impact of personal assumptions (e.g., personal involvement in sporting organizations) or biases (e.g., sporting affiliations). In doing so, this allowed the researcher to facilitate a network of critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) whereby personal/professional presuppositions could be analyzed to challenge and enhance the researcher's interpretations as well as the delivery of future practice.

Results

The present study sought to explore SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in the sporting context as well as their recommendations for practice. Following examples of best practice guidelines in IPA research (Conroy & de Visser, 2015; Nizza et al., 2021), four group experiential themes were presented: (a) "searching for meaning;" (b) "fighting the system;" (c) "ingrained acceptance," and (d) "tackling the problem." The themes included convergent and divergent experiences of how SPCs experienced working with cases of maltreatment as well as their recommendations for how sporting organizations, and practitioners can address this concept.

Searching for meaning

At the heart of SPCs' experiences was a wrestle for conceptual clarity around maltreatment. For some, this ambiguity appeared to relate to their experiences working across different sports. SPCs discussed how this contextual variance led to an inconsistency of practice in different settings which impacted their attempts to address wrongdoing. In other cases, SPCs described challenges of grappling with various terms connected to maltreatment such as abuse and bullying. Steve illustrated this difficulty,

> I think it's prevalent [maltreatment] and has been a very hard area to define. If I was to lump them all together [maltreatment, abuse, and bullying], I'd describe them as behavior that is deemed inappropriate within a professional or interpersonal environment. When you tend to break them down… When I hear abuse, I'm not sure on a word-perfect definition but it involves an individual exerting unauthorized power over another. There are many factors to this such as social and environmental, however, I think this term is hard to generalize and define. In terms of bullying, I feel as if this again is about exerting power over another, just repetitively. Interestingly, I see how this can also be unintended by like banter, which is a debatable term at the minute. But then, maltreatment… Yeah well, a behavior that may be deemed unacceptable by an individual.

Steve's account clearly outlined a sense of the relevance of understanding maltreatment, and its associated terms, yet his repeated reference to terms being hard to conceptualize or not being able to find a "word-perfect" definition suggested a sense of perplexity. Later though, despite the acknowledgement of "blurred lines" around these concepts, he started to provide more clarity.

> I lean towards the effect that this also can have on an individual, whether it be immediate, which makes it easier to engage or axe in the moment, or whether it be later as it may not be observable now. What I look for is if it affects the way the individual acts around the perpetrator or perpetrators in future sessions.

In this extract, Steve became clearer about the emotional criterion for identifying maltreatment which he grounded in his "own personal emotional state and feelings following this." As such his focus became less about delineating terms and more about how to identify the problematic effects of maltreatment on a victim's wellbeing as well as their future interactions with perpetrators. Despite this, Steve retracted slightly to explain how through working in a "multitude of different sports and different organizations" there are different "factors that impact an individual's tolerance to certain behaviors such as banter," for example, whether it was a team or individual sport setting and the degree to which the team traveled and "bonded." Given the ambiguity promoted by different sporting contexts, it was unsurprising that Steve's experience was not unique and was echoed by others such as Helen. As Helen explained "the words aren't coming to my head" exhibiting bewilderment around conceptualization from those who some people may expect to promote safeguarding in sport. While both Helen and Steve pointed out that sport could identify the "red flags" and "extreme areas" of maltreatment, they did also highlight how the cultures of sport create problems at the "other end of the continuum" where "small experiences are repeated." The result is a culture where the appropriateness of behavior (e.g., bullying versus banter) is determined by the degree to which victims perceive and cope with micro-inequities and microaggressions (Booth et al., 2023). This more widely reflects issues at the macrosystem level of sport (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) about these potential micro-inequities and microaggressions. For example, the participants described how the ingrained sociocultural norm of banter filtered down into their working contexts, narrowing their horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 1989) in a way which might impact their practice. Helen for example described banter as a form of "continual put-downs" which is reminiscent of maltreatment, yet she described how sport's culture "influenced her own thinking" around this concept to potentially shift her view about what is appropriate.

For others such as Rebecca however, understanding forms of maltreatment seemed more clear-cut:

> It comes down to does the individual see it as bullying or banter and that is the line, we kind of agreed on as the defining factor. If they see it as bullying, then it is bullying, and if they see it as banter then it is fine. But it is a tricky line, and it is raising awareness then with athletes about the boundaries between the two, setting the cultural environment where the individuals feel free to talk about things and raise any issues they may have about being bullied.

Rebecca's assertive language of "it comes down to" portrayed a stance of certainty which diverged from the majority of the other accounts. Employing the term "we" suggests that such a confident stance has emerged from a group discourse around such a topic. This was supported by her experiences of being "embedded in an environment, … working with individuals on a one-to-one basis … [where] it's kind of easy to spot maltreatment." As such maltreatment may be more clearly defined and experienced when understanding is driven at the microsystem (e.g., club or specific organization) and mesosystem (e.g., the interaction between the club or organization's thinking and the athlete's) levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Fighting the system

Whilst the participants expressed grappling with understanding maltreatment in the sporting context, they also discussed the challenges of fighting the system in this environment. Specifically, they discussed experiences of isolation at times when it came to addressing maltreatment, as well as more concerning occurrences of "gaslighting." Often these experiences were grounded within the SPC's type of practice. Helen outlined a worrying perspective of how this "gaslighting" can occur for SPCs working within a sporting organization,

> People reassure you to the high end that I will bring it up with someone, I will deal with it, you leave it with me, … These people are smart, they've run these operations for 30 years, say. It's not that these people are shady and in the way of saying don't mention it. What it is, is people going oh my gosh, let me deal with it, let me talk to someone. Each ring is gaslighted, yeah leave it with me and you go, great! I've reported it, I've done what I need to do. It doesn't mean something happens and I also think the pace at which these things move is really slowly.

This account highlighted issues with both leadership and the reporting systems in sport which can leave a SPC with a false sense that action is being taken around inappropriate behavior. In describing sporting organizational leaders as "smart" who appear to be willing to act by asking for things to be "left with them," Helen described a level of subterfuge operating within elite sporting organizations. The lack and/or speed of response which ensues may create a sense of futility for the SPC around reporting.

For other SPCs such as Liz, their fights with the system occurred in slightly different ways. She highlighted how individuals come to realize her stance on certain forms of maltreatment by saying, "I am not a huge fan of banter so. I am not saying that doesn't happen around me, however, people tend to be quite filtered around me." As the most experienced SPC in the group, Liz exuded a sense of certainty around banter crossing the line into a form of maltreatment, but this prompted a "filtering" from those she was

working with. From a theoretical perspective it would appear a SPC's experience of maltreatment could be affected at both the micro and mesosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Individuals may be selective in what they say and do around a SPC if they feel that wrongdoing may be exposed and potentially may join forces to keep these more harmful interactions away from the SPC. For Liz specifically, this problem extended itself into a position of potentially being isolated and practicing at a level which is not appropriate for the SPC role,

> If you don't go in with this network behind you, then you are going to feel like the sole person and that you have to make this decision and what have I got to do with all of this? But if you have people around you who make these types of decisions daily, and understand the legality and understand the processes, I am not saying it makes it any easier because it still is not very nice to be in that position, but you're not working beyond the scope of your practice.

Liz' account spotlighted the impact that dealing with such a sensitive topic area alone can have. The use of the word "sole" illustrates this, denoting how a scenario like such can propagate a state of isolation, whilst her reference to not having to work beyond her "scope of practice" insinuated that this is a situation that SPCs can be put in when addressing maltreatment. For SPCs to take this responsibility is concerning, given their previously expressed concerns about searching for meaning in terms of maltreatment.

However other SPCs such as Fred expressed hope, suggesting how working within a private environment offered opportunities to "dig deeper" suggesting maltreatment can be addressed at the microsystem level, given the correct conditions. Contrarily, Rebecca's account portrayed how this was possible in embedded practice through a "whole team of support" suggesting that maltreatment can be tackled at the mesosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) in a supportive environment. Thus, the nature of the environment seems to be particularly important in shaping views and experiences of working with cases of maltreatment.

Ingrained acceptance

Underpinning all SPCs' accounts was how the culture of sport propagated an ingrained acceptance of maltreatment. Notably, all accounts suggested how contextual inconsistencies manifested as a product of the deep-rooted acceptance of abusive practices. Aligned with this, SPCs frequently referred to the topic of culture as a determinant of such issues. Specifically, they described how cultural norms within organizations propagated the acceptance of otherwise inadequate practices toward athletes. For example, Helen's account highlighted how organizational norms and expectations can create blurred lines between expectations and the reality of maltreatment,

> A bit clichéd but love what you do, and you'll never work a day again in your life. Athletes are entitled to that same thing. Instead, it's like they're supposed to be miserable. People feel like you have to have that to achieve results.

Helen's use of the term "clichéd" at the beginning of the extract emphasized the dichotomy between expectation and reality in practice. Moreover, it was suggestive of a sense that though this may be an idea which is promoted to athletes, their experience is much darker. The way in which Helen described how organizations normalize

maltreatment in the pursuit of success, by having to have it to "achieve results" revealed a significant conflict around this level of acceptance for SPCs working in the sport. This is pertinent given her comment when considering performance that "there's no way that you can go to basic Maslow's hierarchy of needs, no-one is going to self-actualize if they're not safe." In support, Rebecca illustrated how it is difficult to make a meaningful change to this culture, especially when she compared working as a private practitioner to being embedded in an organization:

> You feel you have limited influence on the individual in ways you only have one perspective, so you can only change the one perspective of the individual and you really want to get in there, really influence the culture, and really create a nice bit of change. So you can feel frustrated in that there could be more work done but you are doing the best you can be in that situation but you do want to change things so it can be frustrating. You're limited in the influence you have; you can't change the culture or the environment.

Rebecca's fixation on the limitations of solely having influence over an individual's perspective, as opposed to accessing and overhauling organizational culture, was indicative of a feeling that addressing maltreatment would be more successful at both the micro and macrosystem level in sport (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Moreover, Rebecca displayed divergence from other accounts by describing a lack of support from the key bodies (e.g., BPS) supporting SPCs:

> Within private practice, it would be lovely to have someone within the BPS who would support us as practitioners. Someone that we could go to and share or upload our experiences. You know, I kept my PhD mentor for a long time because often I felt as though I did need that help around things like mental health particularly. It would be lovely to have someone within our organization, to have someone to confer with as you do feel quite isolated – it can feel quite isolating as an individual practitioner.

Seemingly the ingrained acceptance of maltreatment may be indirectly supported by such key professional organizations via a lack of resources, support, or awareness. It may also illustrate that the lack of training given within approved SPC accreditation routes (e.g., BPS, 2018), is a reflection of broader issues within regulatory bodies, in that they do not prioritize safeguarding in sport. Instead, SPCs such as Rebecca are dependent on their mentors, who may also be vulnerable to the institutional norms around maltreatment in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) from their own socialization to experiences in practice. This is pertinent as it illuminates how SPCs are accessing informalized support within their wider ecological system, which could suggest varied support is being offered, creating inconsistent applied practices. To conclude, as Liz suggested, "you should never be naïve as a sport psychologist," and if so, "the organization has failed you". Such an account highlights the importance Liz places on remaining vigilant as an SPC and a state where individualized proactivity is a prioritized.

Tackling the problem

Despite a challenging set of circumstances for SPCs where they wrestle for understanding maltreatment, whilst fighting a system which has ingrained acceptance of wrongdoing, they offered a sanguine outlook when it came to recommendations. Specifically, these recommendations needed to retain a strong focus on prevention rather than reaction.

From Liz's perspective of having worked in a large sporting organization, as well as one-to-one practice, preventative methods enable reform across multiple system levels:

> I think preventative methods are far better, like let's look at why this is happening and what we can do to prevent it rather than just saying we're finding it … Let's look at the reasons why this is happening and let's look at the systems that we can put things in place so that it can't happen or that will stamp it out quicker. So there's more accountability in the system so we don't create bottlenecks and organizations that have this in.

Liz' stress on the need to focus on the system suggested that any interventions need to be focused at interactive levels ranging from the microsystem of the organization, to potentially the macrosystem of the sporting culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Furthermore, Liz' reference to the phrase "stamp it out" portrayed a desire to achieve such a feat in practice. Through "accountability in the system" Liz suggested that there is direct responsibility on the heads of organizations to achieve this task, particularly in light of "bottlenecks" which are seemingly obstructive to this process.

Helen largely agreed but extended Liz' account by highlighting how "I think you need more representative people in power, you need more women, more people of color, [so that] people [who] are abused feel more comfortable going to [them]." Here Helen described the issues of a "14-year-old girl going to a middle-aged man about sexual assault." This was indicative of significant issues where maltreatment is not reported because individuals do not feel there is a psychologically safe person for them to speak to. It also reinforced beliefs that safe sport does not cover equity deserving athletes (Gurgis et al., 2022), as these stakeholders do not have an appropriate person with whom they identify with to report maltreatment to in an organization. Beyond this, Helen offered a more instructive set of guidelines for future preventative efforts,

> I think there are certain initial actions that aren't taken quickly that could be. You could suspend a coach, they could still be paid etc, but you can suspend them quickly. There could be outside safety officers standing at every door for every single session for a gym club that's having trouble. Things can be put in place, but I think what people are almost waiting for is the massive shifts. I don't think we always have to go in "massive". There are 2 defined key things that will keep an athlete safe. And there is always getting caught in stupid red tape. You can't suspend a coach until this, this and this but you can suspend. Some of this red tape doesn't always make sense. My assumption is that the writers of the red tape individuals may not have done a day of sport in their lives.

This multifaceted account provided practical guidelines at the microsystem level in terms of suspending coaches and employing safety staff but also outlined challenges regarding the "massive shifts" which are expected to address maltreatment, providing a possible reference to the chronosystem where such shifts take time. Helen's reference to not needing to go in "massive" alluded to a less systemic focus than Liz' earlier account. Instead, she linked back to more of a focus on getting the right people, with contextual intelligence in sport, to write policies and procedures, which over time, would establish stronger cultural (macrosystem) and organizational (microsystem) practices.

While Fred's account continued the theme of contextual intelligence (Mellalieu, 2017), he offered a divergent perspective when outlining his approach for the way

forward. Fred discussed how reform is desirable but must occur through cultural immersion to appreciate the underlying good within organizations. According to Fred,

> [SPCs] need to tailor our practices to suit the needs of a client, when you deliver something, it has to become embedded, it has to become part of the culture, so probably storytelling needs to be specific so you can evoke things, so they buy into it. When someone external talks about things yes it is perfect and could have an impact, but in order to have an impact, you have to tailor these practices to the environment you are in. Honor the club values, honor the academy values, correct these values. How do you exceed and live by these values? … To have an impact, you must honor the club values and live by these values.

Fred's stress of the need to tailor practices to the client and club was potentially reflective of his experiences working in a professional football academy. His reference to the impact of externals being questionable and the need to "honor" the club and their values instead reemphasized the need to not only be immersed in the organization to be effective, but to also have a contextual awareness of how they operate. This point was also suggestive of a risk that SPCs could become subservient to the demands of certain contexts, such as professional football, where harsh practices can be commonplace (Parker & Manley, 2016). Through the process of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) some SPCs appear to learn and adopt the values of the sports they are working in rather than being facilitators of change. Consequently, SPCs need to be mindful of the micro-politics within organizations (Gibson & Groom, 2019) if they are looking to be successful in tackling wrongdoing due to its influence throughout multiple ecological levels.

Discussion

The present study's primary aim was to explore SPCs' experiences of working with cases of maltreatment in the sporting context, whilst having a secondary aim to conduct an open-ended exploration of SPCs' recommendations for practice regarding working with cases of maltreatment. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis, SPCs evidenced a variety of convergent and divergent experiences of maltreatment which spanned their attempts to understand this concept, their fights with the ingrained nature of wrongdoing in sport, and their perspectives on tackling this issue. The following discussion provides essential insight for those who are interested in further understanding lived experiences of those working with cases of maltreatment in sport.

One of the primary experiences outlined by SPCs was their grapple with the meaning of the term maltreatment. While on the surface SPCs could provide a definition, more nuanced accounts evidenced a collective sense of ambiguity when defining maltreatment, which is reminiscent of the interchangeable use of terms in this field of study (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). As such it explains why confusion arises within SPCs, and the sport community more generally, when attempting to categorize acts that constitute maltreatment (Fortier et al., 2020). The SPCs in the present study echoed findings from previous research around the grey area of maltreatment (Marsollier & Hauw, 2022) and the difficulty in distinguishing between bullying and banter (Newman et al., 2021; 2022b). Conceptually, this appeared to represent a narrowing of SPCs horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 1989), such that the nature of the sporting culture appeared to thwart their comprehension of wrongdoing and potentially impact their practice as a

consequence. Given the significant role SPCs play in ensuring athlete welfare (Keegan, 2015), such equivocation regarding definitions of maltreatment raises serious concerns around key individuals tasked with managing welfare in sport. Moreover, the references made by the SPCs to tolerance and understanding of maltreatment being shifted by the culture of different sports suggest issues at the macrosystem level need to be addressed (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This finding implied that SPCs may come to inadvertently view some behaviors (e.g., micro-inequities and micro-aggressions) as acceptable in some sports and not others via the process of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Worryingly, this may mean that harmful practices may be reproduced at both the micro, meso, and macrosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), as SPCs and other professionals may come to normalize these behaviors rather than cultural dislocating themselves from them (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

Given the contextual challenges perpetuated by sport organizations' cultures, it was unsurprising that SPCs discussed experiences of having to fight the system regarding maltreatment. Such results were reflective of concurrent research, which has detailed how organizations often frame maltreatment-based discourses in a way that appears publicly principled yet which hides misappropriating reporting procedures (Seanor et al., 2023). In accordance with recent literature, the SPCs spotlighted how tight-knit sporting organizations often deliver obscured and uncompliant reporting processes (Nite & Nauright, 2020). They also extended upon these findings by outlining the levels of subterfuge engaged in by the leaders of these organizations. These reports highlighted how organizations can perpetuate a cycle of power imbalances (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022) which raises serious concerns around how individuals at varying levels within institutions can inhibit the role of SPCs in preventing maltreatment.

Contrastingly, SPCs in the present study suggested how private, independent settings may enable them to "dig deeper" to explore disclosures of maltreatment. This freedom to communicate acts of maltreatment in private rather than within organizational settings aligned with Hartill's (2009) barriers to disclosure. Such barriers outline how institutions embed a belief system in athletes where they perceive themselves as the source of the problem (Hartill, 2009). Thus, the present study provides greater insight into the emerging area of reporting wrongdoing in sport (e.g., Newman et al., 2022c), by exposing the situations where individuals are more likely to discuss maltreatment compared to cases where they feel isolated. Importantly, in the main, the findings also reinforce the dichotomy in autonomy for SPCs between their practice environments where it may be easier in private, rather than embedded practice, to explore these issues. Indeed though SPCs can be tasked with creating psychologically safe climates for athletes (Newman et al., 2022c), they may also perceive an unsafe and unstable climate when working within an organization. Thus, SPCs may perceive that the insecure working conditions they face act as a barrier to addressing harmful practice and wrongdoing (Kerr & Stirling, 2019).

Concurrent with the challenges SPCs typically experienced at the organizational level, they also outlined a culture driven at the macrosystem level of the sport (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Specifically, SPCs referred to how sporting organizations used embedded norms and values to justify harsh practices. Such findings align with research which highlights how sporting institutions legitimize practices which perpetuate a cycle

of abuse in return for performance outcomes (Nite & Nauright, 2020). As such issues at the macrosystem level filter down to the microsystem level where athletes may learn, through social interaction, that anti-social behaviors (Higham et al., 2022) such as bullying earn credibility from their peer group (Newman et al., 2022b), and enhance performance outcomes (Seanor et al., 2023). While SPCs in the present study discussed how it is possible to effect change at the microsystem level, they also highlighted that this can be problematic. The reliance some SPCs placed on having to speak to their mentors instead may be a point of concern, given the inconsistent conceptualizations of maltreatment found in both sport psychology practice and research (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). This raises questions around whether those mentors can give appropriate advice, resulting in varied and inconsistent applied practice.

When concluding participant interviews, SPCs all discussed a means of tackling maltreatment with a focus on prevention rather than reaction. To do so, SPCs highlighted the need for accountability across the sporting system as an initial step in creating preventative measures. SPCs accounts reinforced the need for organizations to both hold responsibility for, and have the power to, create zero-tolerance policies (Schinke et al., 2022). To do this successfully, organizations may need to pay close attention to who is enacting these policies. SPCs extended on emerging findings which highlight the importance of giving voice to equity deserving athletes in the context of safe sport (Gurgis et al., 2022), by outlining how sporting institutions need to be more representative at the board level to address maltreatment. This approach was seen to be particularly important in promoting a psychologically safe climate (Edmondson, 2004), within which individuals could disclose maltreatment.

While SPCs typically focused on these recommendations for organizations, they also highlighted the important ways in which they could work as individuals to address maltreatment. Specifically, they referred to the need for SPCs to tackle this issue using contextual intelligence (Mellalieu, 2017) which will have been amassed by practitioners immersing themselves within the values of different sporting institutions. Although this may serve as a useful approach to navigate the micro-politics of sporting organizations (Gibson & Groom, 2019), it should be noted that this recommendation needs to be cautiously considered given SPCs may have been socialized to accept questionable behavioral practices (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Indeed, SPCs, and those who mentor them, need to be aware how situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) can take place, whereby SPCs may adopt some of the misguided norms of the sporting culture through their immersion within it. This could be problematic to SPCs effecting changes to harmful practices, as through this process of learning they may replace and replenish (Parker, 2006) existing norms in sport. Therefore, SPCs may not be in the best position to address this problem.

Implications for practice

The present study revealed several key practical implications that are shaped by the themes expressed by the participants. First, the continued search for the meaning of the term maltreatment from registered SPCs in the UK reinforced a sense that education and training from regulatory bodies such as AASP, FEPSAC, BASES, and the BPS around this concept remains limited (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). As a result, the present

study highlights that education and training remain as important for more experienced practitioners as it is for trainee SPCs. Thus, education programs need to pay greater attention to providing ongoing training in this area. This is relevant to the ongoing 'blurring of the lines' between bullying and banter, as SPCs in the present study reflected similar challenges as other stakeholders (e.g., coaches and athletes) to disentangle these terms (Newman et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Second, the present study highlights a multitude of challenges SPCs face, such as battling ingrained sporting cultures whereby maltreatment is accepted, ineffective reporting systems, and feelings of isolation when issues of maltreatment need to be raised. To address these problems, reporting systems need improving, with clear evidence regarding how complaints are resolved (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020; Newman et al., 2022c). Additionally, a more psychologically safe culture (Edmondson, 2004) needs to be developed to support whistleblowing by providing support and reassurance to those who are reporting their concerns. Once trained appropriately (Kerr & Stirling, 2019), SPCs also need greater empowerment to help foster psychologically safe climates (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017), as well as greater levels of support from various systemic levels (e.g., respective regulatory bodies and sporting organizations).

Lastly, informed by the recommendations for practice provided by the SPCs, work is needed to address cultural norms at the macrosystem level of sports (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Greater accountability for both understanding and addressing maltreatment needs to be taken by sporting organizations and regulatory bodies for sport psychology practice. To foster accountability, sporting organizations need to be more diverse in terms of their people in positions of power to encourage greater reporting of wrongdoing. Moreover, SPCs need greater training on how to address maltreatment within different sporting environments. As part of this process, SPCs need to reflect on their potential socialization to the norms of some sport as this may impact on their abilities to tackle harmful practices. Further training could be achieved through exposure to a variety of sports, as well as collaborating with other stakeholders who are working in this space such as safeguarding and welfare staff. These experiences would enrich SPCs sense-making abilities, thereby widening their horizons (Gadamer, 1989), and lead to more effective identification and reporting procedures.

Limitations and future directions

Although the present study provided an important exploration of SPCs' experiences of maltreatment, some limitations and future research directions were noted. First, the study's findings were contextualized to SPCs who had followed a regulatory pathway and practice in the UK. Therefore the findings were potentially grounded in a Euro-American-centered theory of practice in sport psychology (Quartiroli et al., 2020) that may not be reflective of SPCs' experiences of maltreatment across the world. Future research may seek to explore the experiences of a more diverse range of SPCs to gain a fully international perspective on maltreatment and the associated recommendations for practice to address wrongdoing. Second, although SPCs have been identified as an important stakeholder in addressing inappropriate behavior in sport (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017), the present study reveals that their understanding of this concept can be impacted by the

sporting context. Thus, their recommendations for practice need to be treated with caution. To provide clearer recommendations to address maltreatment, the perspective of specially educated and trained safeguarding staff in sport may be required, to better inform attempts to tackle wrongdoing, to inform practice in areas such as sport psychology.

Conclusion

The present study makes a significant contribution to research and practice in sport psychology in several ways. It provides valuable information about how SPCs strive for an understanding of maltreatment in sporting contexts and the inherent challenges with identifying this behavior. At the same time, it illustrates the challenges SPCs face with addressing wrongdoing within a challenging culture that accepts such behavior in sport. The present study outlines several ways in which SPCs, and organizations can address maltreatment and navigate their way through addressing this behavior. As a result, the current findings offer SPCS, organizations, and regulatory bodies critical insight into how maltreatment in sport is made sense of across multiple levels and the significant influence culture can have on its tolerance.

Note

1. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is the government regulatory body for Sport and Exercise Psychologists practicing in the UK.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the participants for their contributions on a potentially sensitive topic matter.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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