# Practitioners' use of motivational interviewing in sport: A qualitative enquiry

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10                                    **Abstract**

11    The purpose of this study was to explore the use of motivational interviewing (MI) in

12    sport contexts by experts in that approach. Specifically, to understand which aspects

13    of the MI approach are deemed valuable for working in sport, and begin to

14    understand how these aspects are best applied. Nine practitioners participated in

15    semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis identified themes related to core

16    and sub-components of MI (e.g., relational spirit, technical microskills, applied tools

17    and the MI communication styles continuum). Additional themes relate to integrating

18    MI with other interventions, challenges of working with athletes (e.g., mandated

19    attendance, ambivalence about change) and unique aspects of working in sport

20    contexts (e.g., frequency, duration and location of contact points).  Participants also

21    outlined essential ingredients for an MI training curriculum for practitioners in sport.

22    This counseling approach appears to have valuable relational and technical

23    components to facilitate the building of the therapeutic alliance, enhance athlete

24    readiness for change, and support delivery of action-orientated interventions in

25    applied sport psychology.

26         Key words: *motivational interviewing; applied sport psychology; therapeutic*

27         *alliance; ambivalence; integration*

**Introduction**

28

29          The relationship between sport psychology practitioners and their athlete

30   clients is consistently recognised as very important for the outcomes of sport

31   psychology consultancy, (e.g., Andersen & Speed, 2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish,

32   1999; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). Nevertheless, what is required in the

33   discipline is greater clarity on how to cultivate and maintain these working alliances,

34   beyond broad descriptions of rapport building and verbal and non-verbal

35   communication. In this regard, repeated recommendations have been made for sport

36   psychology to learn from wider disciplines within psychology (Andersen & Speed,

37   2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999), with limited sources delineating specific

38   relational and technical communication skills for sport psychologists (e.g., Katz &

39   Hemmings, 2009; Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Watson,

40   Hilliard, & Way, 2017).

41          One approach which seeks to maximise the working alliance, and is starting

42   to receive attention in applied sport psychology (Mack, Breckon, Butt, & Maynard,

43   2017; Mack, Breckon, O'Halloran, & Butt, 2019; Turner et al., 2019, Wood, Mack, &

44   Turner, 2020), is motivational interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). MI is a

45   counseling therapy which was founded on the principles of client-centred

46   psychotherapy of Carl Rogers (1959), yet is different to traditional Rogerian

47   counseling, in that it is intentionally directional (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick,

48   2005). Guided by its underlying 'spirit', MI primarily facilitates the building of an

49   interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client, and aims to resolve

50   ambivalence towards behavioral change. Initially applied as a pre-treatment to

51   action-orientated intervention work on substance addictions (Miller, 1983), MI was

52   conceived not from testing empirically-driven hypotheses, but phenomenologically

53    from intuitive clinical practice, as an alternative to the more confrontational styles of

54    therapy which were prominent at the time (Miller & Rose, 2009).

55        Breckon (2015) offers an extensive description of the core elements of MI: the

56    relational component (spirit) which consists of partnership, acceptance, compassion

57    and evocation; the technical component (microskills) which mobilises the spirit,

58    known by the acronym OARS - open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections,

59    summaries; the four+ processes (engaging, focussing, evoking, planning,

60    maintaining) within which the relational and technical components are actualized;

61    and the language of behavior change (change talk, sustain talk).

62        Psychotherapy research has repeatedly concluded that therapists who form

63    stronger alliances with their patients show better treatment outcomes than therapists

64    who form weaker alliances (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2007; Horvath & Symonds, 1991;

65    Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Wilmots, Midgley, Thackeray, Reynolds, & Loades,

66    2019). MI acknowledges conceptual differences between relational and technical

67    components, and offers a philosophy of professional relationship development and

68    maintenance, and techniques to achieve those aims, in keeping with working alliance

69    theory (see Hatcher & Barends, 2006). Many of the therapist attributes and

70    techniques associated with strong alliances reported by Ackerman and Hilsenroth

71    (e.g., exploring, reflecting, providing accurate interpretations, and affirming; 2003)

72    can be found within the MI approach (e.g., Miller & Moyers, 2015, Table 1, p. 408;

73    Miller & Rollnick, 2013), not least the value of empathy and engagement with clients

74    (Miller & Rose, 2009). Similar attributes and techniques have been repeatedly

75    outlined as ideal for sport psychology practitioners (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish,

76    2015). What appears to be sparse in applied sport psychology literature is not the

77    importance of demonstrating engagement, forming working alliances and

78    communicating effectively with athletes (e.g., Sharp & Hodge, 2015), but explanation

79    of the fundamental processes or mechanics of achieving these things, i.e., the *how*

80    of alliance building and intervention delivery. This is a gap that MI can fill potentially,

81    particularly for students and neophyte practitioners in sport and exercise psychology.

82    One further contribution that MI may make to applied sport psychology could be a

83    framework to underpin the action-orientated approaches, such as cognitive-

84    behavioral therapies and strategies, which are dominant in the discipline. This

85    integration was, in fact, the purpose of MI upon its conception, with the MI spirit

86    (ways of *being*) supporting the techniques (ways of *doing*) of other approaches

87    (Miller & Rose, 2009). An MI-CBT integration is becoming understood in other areas

88    of psychology (e.g., Naar & Safren, 2017), and this is perhaps where sport

89    psychology could seek guidance on how to effectively integrate these complimentary

90    approaches on a common factors, assimilative or theoretical level, as opposed to

91    eclectically combining tools and techniques from multiple approaches with little

92    regard for their underpinning theories (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005).

93          Mack and colleagues (2017) identified a limited use and understanding of

94    core elements of MI by applied sport psychologists, but a significant role for MI in

95    sport psychologists' work - including the use of MI as a stand-alone or an integration

96    with other approaches. Subsequently, Mack et al. (2019) shared a single session

97    case study outlining the use of MI with one professional athlete. Therefore, the aims

98    of the current study were to provide an in-depth exploration of which components of

99    the MI approach underpin expert practitioners' work in sport, and to begin the

100    process of understanding the application of these components, for example to

101    enhance verbal communication, facilitate alliance formation and maintenance,

102    increase athlete readiness for intervention, or in conjunction with other

103    psychotherapeutic approaches.

104                                    **Method**

105    **Participants and sampling**

106            Nine practitioners took part in data collection. To qualify for inclusion,

107    participants were required to have extensive knowledge of, and experience in

108    applying MI, and be doing so in a sporting context. The Motivational Interviewing

109    Network of Trainers (MINT; www.motivationalinterviewing.org) provides training

110    internationally for practitioners wishing to become trainers in MI, and determines the

111    content and curriculum for MI training globally. MINT has a rigorous application

112    process for new members, and membership of MINT was therefore used as an

113    indication of knowledge and experience in MI, and was deemed essential for

114    inclusion in this study.

115            A purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of 16 MI practitioners known within the

116    research team's network, and thought to be using MI in a sporting context, were

117    contacted via email to participate voluntarily in this study. Further, four practitioners

118    responded to a public message broadcast on the MINT eForum (self-recruited

119    sampling; Gomm, 2008) and six practitioners were recommended to the primary

120    researcher by practitioners from the initial round of sampling (snowball sampling;

121    Patton, 2002). This represents an exhaustive initial sample, on a global scale, of

122    practitioners thought to be applying MI in a sporting context. Of these 26

123    practitioners, 17 were eliminated due to failing to satisfy inclusion criteria, or being

124    unresponsive to repeated requests to participate. This gave a final sample size of

125    nine participants, based around the world (two in Australia; five in the U.S.A.; two in

126    mainland Europe). Participants came from a range of educational and training

127    backgrounds, including clinical psychology (n=1), health psychology (n=1), sport

128    psychology (n=3), counseling (n=2) and sport coaching (n=2). All participants were

129    members of chartered societies and governing bodies of their relevant fields (e.g.,

130    Australian Psychological Society; Southern Association for Counselor Education and

131    Supervision; National Association of Social Workers). Finally, all participants were

132    applying MI in a sporting context, in roles such as head coach, sport psychologist,

133    addictions counselor, and MI trainer. The sample comprised of seven males and two

134    females, aged between 32 and 53 years (41.2 ± 6 years). Participants had between

135    4 and 23 years of experience (13.2 ± 6.9 years) in their respective fields. Finally,

136    participants were working with a range of athletes, including amateur (e.g., club, high

137    school), college (e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)), professional

138    (e.g., National Football League (NFL); Major League Baseball (MLB); Australian

139    Football League (AFL)), and Olympic level.

140    **Procedure**

141        Those recruited were sent participant information, participant consent forms

142    and a demographics questionnaire prior to their interviews. Voluntary, written,

143    informed consent was received from all participants. Ethical approval was provided

144    by the governing institution of the research team (HWB-2016-17-S&E-13, Sheffield

145    Hallam University). Data were collected in the form of semi-structured qualitative

146    interviews, which were conducted by the principal researcher. The semi-structured

147    nature of the interviews permitted the interviewer to deviate from the interview guide,

148    to explore novel concepts as and when they arose (Patton, 2002). Interviews were

149    conducted using internet-based conferencing software (Zoom; https://zoom.us/), as

150    this was a sample of international participants. All interviews were audio recorded on

151    a manual Dictaphone. Audio recordings were then transcribed (converted to written

152   form) verbatim, which initiates immersion in, familiarity with and reflection on the

153   collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and can mark the beginning of the data

154   analysis process (Emerson & Frosch, 2004).

**Interview guide**

156         The interview guide was designed deductively, in that it was informed by

157   existing MI theory, but with flexibility to ask spontaneous, probing questions. Each

158   member of the research team contributed to the development of the final interview

159   guide. Questions in the interview guide focused on key aspects of the application of

160   MI, including the application and relevance (to sport contexts) of MI spirit, MI

161   technical skills, MI processes, eliciting change talk, managing ambivalence and

162   discord, and integrating MI with other approaches.

**Data analysis**

164         As latter participant interviews were being conducted, and former interviews

165   were being transcribed verbatim from audio recordings, the primary researcher

166   began to suspect that data saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018) had been reached.

167   This was due to a repetition of responses given by participants in earlier interviews.

168   Therefore, additional participants were not initially sought prior to commencement of

169   data analysis. This impression of data saturation was strengthened as interview

170   transcription was completed, and after performing several initial sweeps of the

171   transcriptions to become familiar with the data, though without being pre-emptive

172   regarding what would eventually constitute themes (Saunders et al., 2018). Data

173   saturation was subsequently discussed and agreed upon within the research team

174   as data analysis progressed.

175         In order to gain a clear understanding of how MI is being applied in sport, a

176   deductive to inductive thematic analysis of the data was conducted in two phases

177    (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019) by the primary researcher. In line with

178    the deductively-designed, a priori interview questions determined by broad MI core

179    components and language (e.g., Miller & Rollnick, 2013) an initial deductive sweep

180    of the data was performed. The purpose of this was to identify responses related to

181    the MI core components of spirit (e.g., partnership, empathy), microskills (e.g.,

182    reflections, affirmations), four+ processes (e.g., engaging, focussing) and language

183    of change (e.g., change talk, sustain talk). In the second phase, transcripts were

184    analysed inductively to identify, analyse and report novel themes from the data

185    (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013) which did not fall immediately within the MI

186    core components, such as communication styles and traps to avoid, and applied

187    tools of MI.

188        The primary researcher extracted codes consisting of discrete, original

189    participant responses from interview transcripts, and grouped codes of similar

190    meaning to create sub-themes, using spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel). A

191    similar process was executed on a sample of interview transcripts by other members

192    of the research team. Sub-themes were discussed, discrepancies were addressed

193    and codes were re-grouped within the research team, until consensus was reached

194    that the shared meaning of codes within each sub-theme was consistent, and had

195    been labelled appropriately (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A similar process took place to

196    group sub-themes in order to construct themes, and to label themes in ways which

197    both accurately captured theme content and would be most meaningful for the

198    reader. The research team included two practitioners who are trained in MI, and two

199    who are not, whose analysis of interview transcripts was therefore not lead by prior

200    MI knowledge. This assisted with reducing researcher bias in the data analysis.

201    Throughout the analysis, MI-specific language has been used where possible

202    to label themes and subthemes, to maintain clarity and consistency with existing MI

203    literature, and the MI practitioner training process. Novel themes which were

204    constructed were labelled accordingly with new terminology. In keeping with previous

205    articles (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2019) themes and sub-themes are presented

206    briefly in Tables 1-4, in conjunction with thick descriptive quotes from participants to

207    provide detail and context for the reader. Quotes were chosen based on how

208    accurately they captured the shared meaning of the theme or sub-theme they

209    represent, and those which would provide the most meaning, context and clarity for

210    the reader. Consideration was given to the eight criteria for excellence in qualitative

211    research (worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant

212    contribution, ethics, meaningful coherence) in the design, implementation, analysis

213    and reporting of this research (Tracy, 2010). To give one example of this, to

214    represent the perspectives and contributions of the entire sample, quotations from all

215    nine participants, rather than a select few individuals, were chosen to add detail and

216    context to the themes for the reader (multivocality, contained within credibility; Tracy,

217    2010). Participants have been identified with a label in accordance with their

218    professional role (e.g., Psychologist 1).

**Results**

220    Participants highlighted numerous aspects of the MI approach which feature

221    prominently in their applied work in sport, including the four core components of MI,

222    the applied tools of MI, sharing information and expertise with athletes in an MI-

223    consistent manner, relational and technical traps to avoid, and the MI verbal

224    communication styles continuum. Participants also described their consideration of

225    structure and processes of integrating MI with other approaches or interventions, and

226    several aspects of the MI approach which are relevant to working with athletes in

227    brief contact, or as a team. A number of challenges associated with working in sport

228    settings, and unique aspects of the sport environment, which give rise to

229    opportunities for implementing the MI approach, were also described. Finally,

230    participants shared insights on what are considered to be essential ingredients and

231    structure of MI training for sport psychologists.

232    **Core components of MI (Table 1)**

233          All nine participants commented on the four core components of MI (spirit;

234    technical skills; four processes; language of change; see Table 1), indicating that

235    these are paramount in their work with athletes, and felt these would be relevant

236    regardless of the context of their work. A summary of these can be seen in Table 1.

237    All participants indicated that the spirit of MI was essential to their work with athletes,

238    was something which drew them to the MI approach and something upon which they

239    placed great value. For example, Psychologist 2 said, "I use a lot of MI with athletes,

240    but one thing I always, always use is the spirit. To me, that's the most critical

241    component."

242    Participants spoke of the importance of each of the technical skills, primarily complex

243    reflections and affirmations:

244          *I think what the MI training did for me was really help me sharpen my use of*

245          *reflections, in particular complex reflections. I've really noticed a difference*

246          *when I've been working with clients in terms of how much quicker it is to*

247          *engage with the client now, and how we're getting better results than I was*

248          *previously.* [Psychologist 2]

249    Psychologist 1 described affirmations as "something that is specific and that you're

250    observing that's positive about an internal quality that they have." All participants

251    reported their use of the original four processes model (engage, focus, evoke, plan)

252    and several spoke of a phase of maintenance or troubleshooting, which has been

253    proposed elsewhere for addition to the original model as a fifth process (maintain),

254    known as the four+ processes (Breckon, 2015). Participants were asked to elaborate

255    on how they specifically apply these processes with athletes. Two points in particular

256    were clear and recurring; firstly, that engaging is something which is ever-present,

257    regardless of the stage in the relationship or the intervention. And secondly, that the

258    processes do not take place in a linear, stepwise manner, but rather in a fluid,

259    flexible, non-linear manner:

260        *Let's say suddenly the athlete comes up with some kind of sustain talk that*

261        *gives us a hint that maybe we are too far now in the process, do we really*

262        *have the right focus here, since here comes a lot of sustain talk? Should we*

263        *proceed to help this person resolve ambivalence, or should we maybe take it*

264        *a bit slower and just do a big mapping of the athlete's whole situation and see*

265        *what's the most important focus right now? Maybe we were a bit too quick*

266        *when we tried to move further on… it's not a step by step process.*

267        [Psychologist 4]

268    Regarding the language of change, participants referred specifically to change talk

269    (athlete language in favour of behavior change), sustain talk (athlete language

270    against behavior change), ambivalence (athlete language which indicates mixed

271    feelings about behavior change) and resistance (athlete language which indicates a

272    lack of readiness for behavior change). All participants stated that they are

273    constantly listening to the language being used by their athletes regarding behavior

274    change, and become more attuned to this the more they practise MI. Participants are

275    consciously trying to evoke change talk from their athletes, as well as trying to

276    reinforce it upon hearing it. Several participants indicated that they are deliberate

277    and selective in their responses to athlete sustain talk, opting to stay strengths-

278    orientated and frame their responses in a way that will evoke change talk rather than

279    reinforce sustain talk. It was acknowledged that change talk in particular tends to

280    come primarily in the form of 'preparatory' language:

281        *The form that I hear the most in terms of change talk is usually more of that*

282        *preparatory change talk, that desire to change, or 'I need to change' or 'I*

283        *should change', 'I should study more at night', 'I know I shouldn't be partying',*

284        *'I know I should go talk to the trainer about this injury', it's a lot of that.*

285        [Counselor 1]

286    Participants generally stated that their work with athletes is primarily about applying

287    MI in sport as they would in other settings, as opposed to a sport-specific version of

288    MI being required. For example, Coach 2 would ask themselves, "'how effective is

289    this, how can I use MI, the techniques or the spirit, how can MI help this conversation,

290    this coaching session be better?'" Nevertheless, participants indicated that an

291    intimate understanding of elite sport environments and challenges is essential, as

292    well as athlete cultures, norms, pressures, risks and rewards. It was felt that

293    adaptations to the MI approach may have to be made in order to fit with these, and

294    opportunities to apply MI in sport settings may have to be actively sought. Another

295    participant described MI as "home base", and stated, "…if I'm confused at where we

296    are, or where we're going, I always just go back to MI" [Counselor 2]. To that end,

297    participants commented further on how MI enhances their work in sport settings,

298    including applied tools, sharing information and expertise, traps to avoid, challenges

299    of working with athletes, unique aspects of the sport context, brief MI interactions,

300    the communication styles continuum, using MI with teams, integrating MI with sport

301    interventions, and MI training.

302    **MI Applied tools (Table 2)**

303          Participants referred to several tools from the MI approach, the most common

304    of which were scaling rulers, agenda setting, and elicit-provide (with permission) -

305    elicit (E-P-E; see discussion for description).

306          *I think that* [collaborative agenda setting] *does a couple of really useful*

307          *things… you're getting a sense of what is most important for the athlete, and*

308          *often we make assumptions about 'ah yes they'd like to work on this first', or*

309          *'this is most important', but by agenda setting, we're essentially asking them*

310          *'ok what's most important for you right now?', and they're then giving us that*

311          *feedback which is really valuable.* [Psychologist 2]

312    **MI-consistent sharing information and expertise (Table 2)**

313          Participants reflected that the E-P-E format is a valuable and efficient tool for

314    sharing key information with athletes in a respectful and collaborative manner, and

315    that it can be used in conjunction with more instructional or educational approaches,

316    to share information in an MI-adherent manner:

317          *I think that it's much more effective if you offer it in that MI-consistent way, that*

318          *E-P-E, asking what they know about imagery, cognitive rehearsal, asking if*

319          *they've used it before and getting some input about that. Then saying 'would*

320          *you like to hear more about it' if they don't have much knowledge about it and*

321          *how it can work, then asking if it would be useful for them and in what way.*

322          *When you do that, you get greater buy-in.* [Psychologist 2]

323    **Relational and technical traps to avoid (Table 2)**

324    Participants spoke of 'traps to avoid' from the MI approach, including the

325    'expert trap' (and associated 'righting reflex') and the 'premature focus trap'.

326    One participant gave a specific example of conflicting feelings and concerns

327    between them and an athlete who was playing through a potentially career-ending

328    injury, and highlights how priorities can be completely different between stakeholders.

329    This example contains the expert trap and righting reflex, sustain talk, acceptance

330    and equipoise (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

331    *I had this gut feeling of 'oh my gosh, I just want this guy to get an MRI, I want*

332    *this guy to get healthy so he can dominate at the next level' but he really felt*

333    *so much like 'if I go through this and tell my coach that I'm hurt, I'm losing*

334    *eligibility, I'm afraid I'm going to miss out on being drafted, if I rehab I may not*

335    *get the velocity on my fastball that I had before', so it's hard for me in those*

336    *instances when I feel like 'I know what's best for you', and I need to leave that*

337    *feeling at the door and be willing to sit with that sustain talk, sit with some of*

338    *that resistance to change, and honour it some, rather than push and go*

339    *'you've really got to get this fixed, you need to figure this out, you need to be*

340    *honest with your coach' because I'm not in his shoes, I'm so removed from*

341    *being there.* [Counselor 1]

342    Participants also described differences between praising (i.e., attaching value or

343    making judgements about behavioral or performance outcomes) and affirming (i.e.,

344    enhancing self-efficacy, self-exploration and autonomy), and spoke generally of

345    always striving to affirm rather than praise. Nevertheless, one participant explained

346    being conscious of using both praise and affirmation in their role as a coach:

347        *I use praise as a coach, and I think most coaches do, 'nice hitting, nice job*

348        *there', but one thing that motivational interviewing has caused me to do is ask*

349        *a question like 'how do you think that went?' and I go into MI from there, so an*

350        *affirmation that I'll give them would be along the lines of 'you're thinking about*

351        *this more deeply' or 'you're taking this more seriously'…* [Coach 2]

352    **MI communication styles continuum (Table 2)**

353        Two participants, both of whom are coaches, commented on the directing-

354    guiding-following continuum of communication, and how they attempt to stay mostly

355    in the guiding style. The first of these participants acknowledged that this is openly

356    discussed between coaches during their coaching sessions:

357        *I think it's important to have a guiding style, like 95% of the time… And I talk to*

358        *my colleagues about this as well, 'we have to be more guiding now', 'now is*

359        *time to be more directive'. Often if we have been directive we have to go*

360        *quickly back to the guiding style.* [Coach 1]

361    The other participant acknowledged that there are times when they have to be

362    directive in their role, but limit this to when necessary, and described a conscious

363    process of "slipping in and out" of the MI approach [Coach 2].

364    **Brief contact MI interactions (Table 2)**

365        The unique settings and circumstances of sport contexts (see Table 3) give

366    rise to conversations which participants stated could last as little as 30 seconds. This

367    has led participants to recognise the need to be able to interact with athletes in a

368    carefully considered way in these very brief moments:

369        *Sometimes these conversations are two minutes long, but starting with that*

370        *open-ended question, 'what were you thinking here, what was the plan?', or if*

371        *I go out to the mound with a pitcher who is struggling, it's really trying to*

372        *understand better, instead of saying 'this is what you need to do, here's what*

373        *you should be doing'.* [Coach 2]

374    **Using MI with teams (Table 2)**

375        Several participants acknowledged that this was perhaps an area to which

376    they should give more consideration. Nevertheless, two participants were able to

377    give specific examples of their use of MI with teams. Psychologist 5 spoke in detail of

378    their use of MI during team sessions, for example a session to resolve conflict

379    between players and a coach:

380        *… this team meeting, I spent 90% of it reflecting back to them. A lot of it was,*

381        *'so you don't feel like the coach is listening to you; it's frustrating that he's not*

382        *asking you all what you think and just telling you what to do; so he's frustrating*

383        *you because he's moving you to new positions and he's not telling you why',*

384        *those kinds of things. And it built engagement like I haven't seen.*

385        [Psychologist 5]

386    **Integrating MI with other interventions in sport (Table 2)**

387        The suitability of MI for integrating with other approaches or interventions in

388    sport was highlighted by all participants, who felt that as a minimum, the spirit, the

389    technical skills and listening for change talk would probably be relevant in any

390    circumstance:

391        *I haven't really come across any mainstream approach that's incompatible*

392        *with motivational interviewing. People can find some way to weave it in there*

393        *in some form or fashion.* [Psychologist 3]

394    When it comes to the process of integrating MI into one's applied work, what appears

395    to be essential is having an in-depth understanding of the different approaches being

396    integrated:

397        *No matter what intervention style I'm doing, I always have motivational*

398        *interviewing running in the background, and I was trained in person-centred*

399        *therapy and existential psychotherapy and then moved into the more CBT-ish*

400        *kind of stuff, and it* [MI] *just fits really well.* [Psychologist 3]

401    This participant also spoke of two options for integrating MI with an approach like

402    CBT or interpersonal therapy, either as preparation for another intervention, or

403    applied extemporarily when faced with, for example, ambivalence:

404        *One is you just kind of do it as a precursor to CBT and then the other one is*

405        *you look at the common elements and you blend them together and I think*

406        *you could take a utilitarian approach.* [Psychologist 3]

407    Three participants shared more details of how they would integrate MI with another

408    approach for the duration of an intervention. Psychologist 2 described a framework

409    for underpinning action-orientated intervention work such as cognitive-behavioral

410    strategies:

411        *I see MI as the kind of framework for working with the athlete, and then*

412        *cognitive behavioral strategies might be some of the tools that you use within*

413        *that framework, so your mindset of working with the athlete is very much*

414        *about the spirit of MI, you're using some of the techniques of MI and so forth,*

415        *and then you're using the CB strategies, and you're delivering them within that*

416        *framework.* [Psychologist 2]

417    Psychologist 4 described how their work was 'topped and tailed' with more MI-

418    specific work, and how MI was used to support a middle phase of intervention

419    delivery:

420        *… I think I always start from MI in my approach, to explore the situation and*

421        *the goal and so on… Then I'm combining my work with strategies from*

422     *cognitive behavioral coaching, for example using mindfulness… MI is always*

423     *helpful to strengthen the readiness and to strengthen the feeling of how*

424     *important this is, and to strengthen confidence also… I always have a follow-*

425     *up session two or three months after the last session, and in that follow-up*

426     *session of course a lot of MI is the focus.* [Psychologist 4]

427 Counselor 2 indicated both an MI-intensive period at commencement of the

428 relationship, and the ever-present nature of MI in their work:

429     *I tend to be heavy on MI in the beginning, because I think the spirit is what*

430     *really creates the most fruitful relationship… after five or six sessions, we're*

431     *moving into mindfulness strategies or CBT, or for some a lot of traumatic*

432     *experiences come up, so we'll move into strategies to work through that.* [MI]

433     *is always interwoven, especially if emotions get high and an athlete needs a*

434     *break, I'll go right back to just basic reflections, that's 'home base'.* [Counselor

435     2]

436 **Challenges of working with athletes (Table 3)**

437     Several participants spoke of the challenges of working with athletes,

438 including mandated attendance, coaches wanting to know the content of sessions,

439 stigma attached to mental health and psychology, athletes not being used to

440 answering questions or having opinions, and athletes being mistrusting of 'outsiders'.

441 The MI core components of spirt and technical skills were repeatedly highlighted as

442 primary strategies in overcoming many of these challenges.

443     *I have found that I have to lay a lot more groundwork in terms of establishing*

444     *rapport and trust with athletes than I do with most of my other clients… they're*

445     *so consumed with their responsibilities to the team that I'm like an outsider… it*

446     *takes time to inspire trust.* [Counselor 2]

447     **Unique aspects of the sport context (Table 3)**

448          Several participants acknowledged that interactions in sport take place in

449     settings which are very different to other contexts (e.g., healthcare), including locker

450     rooms, training grounds, gyms and corridors. Additionally, participants acknowledged

451     that contact with athletes can occur with reduced frequency and significantly reduced

452     duration compared with other settings. Examples of these include half time, time-

453     outs and in-game situations, such as visiting a pitcher's mound during a baseball

454     game. Psychologist 4 labelled these conversations as "MI on the go". Participant 9

455     highlighted how most MI work takes place 'out of the moment', for example treatment

456     for alcohol addiction, but working in sport can involve working 'in the moment', in

457     situations which have literally just taken place, referred to here as 'hot' issues:

458          *… in baseball we're doing it often right in the moment… sometimes it's not*

459          *even after, it's in the midst of it, if it's a pitcher and I've visited the mound to*

460          *talk to him and he's struggling through something, and you're right in the*

461          *middle of it… we use this metaphor it's 'hot', it's a hot issue and they're feeling*

462          *it.* [Coach 2]

463     **MI training for sport psychologists  (Table 4)**

464          Participants cited several aspects of the approach as being essential for

465     training curricula for practitioners. Firstly, there was consensus from all participants

466     that the MI core components and their constituent parts were paramount, and would

467     need to be covered and understood in depth. Auxiliary components of the approach

468     which were mentioned include the righting reflex, elicit-provide-elicit, demonstrating

469     accurate empathy, maintaining practitioner equipoise (consciously deciding not to

470     use professional expertise to influence an athlete's decision in a direction the

471     practitioner views as optimal), and how to integrate MI with other strategies.

472    Practitioners indicated that this should be achieved through a combination of

473    context-specific methods, including experiential exercises, case studies, and video

474    samples. Further, Psychologist 2 commented on the sequence of training in MI and

475    other more action-orientated approaches, which potentially has implications for

476    training pathways:

477        *And then once you have that pure understanding of how this framework* [MI]

478        *might work, then it'd be introducing the cognitive behavioral strategies,*

479        *because I think if you do them first, I think that people would often just jump*

480        *into suggesting those, and not within the framework. So my preference*

481        *would be to build the MI before the* [CB] *strategies.* [Psychologist 2]

482                                    **Discussion**

483        The purpose of the current study was to explore the components of MI which

484    expert practitioners are applying in sport contexts, and begin to describe the

485    application of these with athletes. Findings revealed ways in which MI can enhance

486    the work of practitioners working in different roles in sport (e.g., psychologist,

487    counselor, coach). Participants have confirmed that the four core components of MI

488    (spirit; technical skills; four processes; language of change) are as pertinent to

489    working in sport as they are to working in any other setting, something which has

490    been questioned in previous research (Mack et al., 2017). Significant overlap can be

491    seen between sub-components of the MI spirit (see Table 1) and components of the

492    'real relationship' in sport psychology as outlined by Longstaff and Gervis (2016),

493    indicating that MI is one way for students, neophyte and established practitioners to

494    develop and maintain these relational aspects of their practice.

495        The MI technical skills mobilise this spirit, helping practitioners to build

496    engagement and demonstrate empathy (which are key predictors to success in

497    talking therapies; Miller & Rose, 2009), by showing that the practitioner is listening to

498    what the athlete is saying, doing their best to understand the athlete's perspective,

499    and prompting a raised consciousness of the actual words they are using, their

500    meaning and the potential directions of the conversation. In psychotherapy, empathy

501    is consistently shown to be correlated with client satisfaction and compliance with

502    treatment, and positive outcomes of treatment, and this was recently shown also to

503    be the case for athletic trainers working with NCAA athletes (David & Larson, 2018).

504    Sub-components of the MI technical skills (Table 1) are clearly linked with 'general

505    counseling skills' for developing relationships with athletes identified by Longstaff

506    and Gervis (2016). The MI four processes can provide practitioners with a conscious

507    structure for everything from a single consultancy or coaching session to long-term,

508    ongoing support, as has previously been suggested (Mack et al., 2019). It was also

509    highlighted that practitioners are considering a period of maintenance following the

510    action/intervention phase, which may constitute a fifth process (maintenance and

511    managing relapse) as proposed by Breckon (2015), and it may benefit practitioners

512    in sport to be cognizant of maintenance and lapse response when implementing

513    psychological interventions.

514        Practitioners spoke of constantly listening for opportunities to evoke,

515    acknowledge or strengthen change talk from their athletes, to increase momentum

516    towards change. The finding that athletes' change talk is usually preparatory (client

517    language which expresses perceived desire, ability, reasons or need for behavior

518    change) rather than mobilizing (client speech which indicates intention, obligation or

519    steps taken to change behavior; Miller & Rollnick, 2013) shows support for previous

520    findings on a lack of athlete readiness for change (Massey, Gnacinski, & Meyer,

521    2015) and that athlete resistance is a crucial but neglected aspect of sport

522    psychology consultancy which should be receiving greater attention (Gardner, 2017).

523    Barriers to 'gaining entry' to athletes and teams were identified a number of years

524    ago (Ravizza, 1988), and today there are still factors which can influence an athlete's

525    attitudes and openness to engaging with sport psychology (e.g., gender, previous

526    experience, stigma tolerance - see Martin, Zakrajsek, and Wrisberg (2012) for a

527    summary). Taken together, these findings indicate that sport psychology

528    practitioners need to be prepared to work with athletes who present initially as

529    ambivalent or discordant, and to work with this as it arises, responding to sustain talk

530    and ambivalence in a non-confrontational way (Apodaca et al., 2016). This has

531    previously been identified as something which is perhaps missing in applied sport

532    psychology in the UK (Mack et al., 2017), and may begin with a recognition that

533    sustain talk and ambivalence towards change are naturally-occurring aspects of the

534    change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Miller & Rose, 2009). Athlete reluctance to

535    engage with sport psychology support has been acknowledged for at least 30 years

536    (e.g., Orlick, 1989), and yet strategies for overcoming this are yet to be widely

537    acknowledged and implemented within the discipline. The initial assumption can

538    often be that the 'blame' for a lack of engagement or motivation lies with the athlete

539    (Gardner, 2017), and practitioners are instead encouraged to examine their own

540    approach and behaviors to determine if they might be contributing to athlete

541    resistance (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019). Such self-

542    examination was described in a recent case study regarding an MI-rational emotive

543    behavior therapy (REBT) intervention with an athlete (Wood et al., 2020). Athlete

544    ambivalence and scepticism about sport psychology support arose after several

545    consultancy sessions, when the practitioner introduced the REBT phase of work

546    before client allegiance (Tod et al., 2019) had been achieved. Relational and

547   technical aspects of MI, combined with the practitioner's awareness of their role in

548   inducing athlete resistance, proved effective for addressing these issues, and

549   progressing the athlete to the point of readiness for intervention work. It has recently

550   been suggested that strategies for working with athlete resistance should be factored

551   into intervention guidelines (Latinjak, Hernando-Gimeno, Lorido-Méndez, & Hardy,

552   2019), which presents on way in which MI may support intervention delivery.

553          Participants commented on many other aspects of the MI approach beyond

554   the four core components. The need to share information or advice in an MI-

555   consistent way (viewing the athlete as resourceful and knowledgeable; being mindful

556   of collaborating and supporting athlete autonomy) was highlighted repeatedly, with a

557   need to avoid the 'expert trap' and its inherent 'righting reflex' essential to forming

558   successful relationships.  One tool for doing so which was often mentioned was the

559   elicit-provide-elicit (E-P-E) framework, which facilitates practitioners in gathering

560   information held by the athlete on a certain topic, then gaining permission to fill any

561   gaps in this knowledge, and finally checking with the athlete so see how they

562   understand this new knowledge, and what they might do with it (Miller & Rollnick,

563   2013). The E-P-E framework has previously been approximated in applied sport

564   psychology literature; Petitpas et al. (1999) discuss the need for psychologists to

565   collaboratively solve problems with their athletes, by first taking time to understand

566   the athlete's issues, and then checking to see firstly whether the athlete will accept

567   information from the practitioner, and secondly if the athlete understands this

568   information once it is provided. Sachs (1999) extends this idea by suggesting an

569   additional step which takes into account the athlete's ideas for what might work for

570   them, or even strategies which they have previously (perhaps unsuccessfully)

571    attempted. The EPE framework can add value to sport psychology consultancy,

572    when applied in a skilled, considered manner.

573         The differences between praising and affirming (practitioner statements which

574    value a client positive attribute or behavior, and build self-efficacy; Miller & Rollnick,

575    2013) were discussed. Participants stated that where possible they seek to affirm

576    rather than praise, but occasionally (particularly in the role of a coach), there is a

577    need to step away from this MI-adherent strategy and offer praise which may help to

578    teach or reinforce the performance of a skill, or congratulate an athlete on their

579    performance. This ability to consciously 'slip in and out of' the MI approach also

580    appears relevant to the 'directing-guiding-following' continuum of communication

581    styles (Rollnick, Miller, & Butler, 2008), which was cited here as giving participants a

582    consciousness of which style they were adopting, and their reasons for this, and

583    helped them determine when it was appropriate to switch from the coach or expert-

584    like style of directing back to the MI-consistent style of guiding. Being conscious of

585    affirming rather than praising, and of the flow of communication styles within a

586    conversation, appears beneficial for practitioners and has recently been further

587    supported elsewhere (Wood et al., 2020).

588         Participants' comments on integrating MI with other approaches have

589    significant implications for applied practice in sport psychology. It was stated that at

590    the very least, the MI spirit, technical skills and an awareness of athlete change talk

591    are valuable in any circumstance and regardless of other approaches being used.

592    This indicates that training in MI is a route to developing and maintaining one's

593    professional philosophy, communication strategies and self-reflection in striving to

594    cultivate meaningful professional relationships with athletes, and generate

595    momentum towards athlete behavioral change. It is likely for this reason that MI was

596    described by participants in this study as 'home base'. It is noteworthy that all nine

597    participants spoke of having at least one other approach that they applied regularly

598    in their work with athletes, so MI was by no means regarded as a universal remedy

599    (cf. Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

600        Several ways of integrating MI with other approaches were indicated,

601    including: a precursor to an intervention deemed appropriate for the athlete's issues

602    or concerns; a strategy for working with ambivalence or discord, should these arise;

603    or a framework which can be used to underpin and facilitate the delivery of an

604    intervention or ongoing support from beginning to end. Regarding the latter, this is

605    likely a period of MI-intensive work at commencement of the relationship, followed by

606    delivery of the appropriate action-orientated intervention supported with relevant core

607    components from MI, and concluded with a second period of MI-intensive work for

608    review, maintenance, or possibly to assist reassessment and reformulation

609    processes. This comprehensive knowledge of the MI approach, and conscious

610    consideration of the steps for integrating MI into applied sport psychology with other

611    relevant and compatible approaches, represents a level of integration at least akin to

612    'assimilative integration', potentially even 'theoretical integration'. This is a step up

613    from 'technical eclecticism' (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005), or a 'cherry picking'

614    or "scattergun" (Cecil & Barker, 2016, p. 63) approach, which has been proscribed

615    by the British Psychological Society as an unsuitable approach for trainee

616    practitioners (BPS, 2018). These deeper levels of integration can only be achieved

617    through greater understanding of the theories, common factors and techniques of

618    multiple approaches (Boswell, 2016), and are perhaps what practitioners in applied

619    sport psychology should be striving for. Research has already begun to describe

620    such integrations of MI with different cognitive behavioral therapies in applied sport

621    psychology (e.g., Turner et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020).

622    Practitioners highlighted aspects of the sport context which create challenges

623    when working with athletes (Table 3). Several of these were in keeping with

624    previously identified factors which may prevent athletes from taking up or engaging

625    fully in sport psychology support (e.g., Mack et al., 2019; Martin, Zakrajsek, &

626    Wrisberg, 2012). MI appears to have several valuable tenets to assist practitioners in

627    navigating these challenges. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of consultancy

628    in the sport context also appears to create some unusual opportunities for contact

629    with athletes, often outside pre-set appointment times and in non-clinical locations

630    which would be typical of other contexts where MI has traditionally been applied.

631    These contact points can also be extremely brief, perhaps a passing conversation in

632    a corridor or changing room, and even in-game situations lasting as little as 30-60

633    seconds, when issues are 'hot' and performance may or may not be going according

634    to plan. This is absolutely the briefest of brief contact consultancy, and participants

635    were adamant that MI has a role here, by being conscious of embodying elements of

636    the MI spirit (e.g., evocation) and focusing on the MI communication microskills (e.g.,

637    asking, reflecting, affirming).

638                            **Implications for training in MI**

639    Participants indicated aspects of the MI approach which would be essential

640    for a training curriculum for practitioners working in sport settings (Table 4). The

641    general consensus that practitioners are applying MI in the context of sport, as

642    opposed to a sport-specific version of MI, indicates that a grounding in broad MI

643    theory and training (i.e., Tables 1 and 2) is a suitable initiation for any practitioner

644    wishing to add MI to their applied work in sport. It was proposed by one participant

645    that students of sport psychology should be taught an approach like MI, with

646    relational and technical aspects to form the therapeutic alliance, *before* action-

647    orientated interventions. This could minimise the risk of neophyte practitioners

648    prematurely applying the only intervention strategies they have learned so far,

649    regardless of athlete resources or readiness and without developing a sound alliance,

650    assessment and formulation (e.g., Cecil & Barker, 2016). This is perhaps something

651    for professional bodies, universities and supervisors of trainees to consider.

### Implications for future research

653    The training of practitioners in the MI approach opens avenues of possible

654    further research. It is of course important to investigate the impact of this training on

655    their applied practice, in terms of MI-consistency, professional relationship

656    development (from both practitioner and athlete perspectives), and impact on

657    desired outcomes, such as intervention goals and sport performance. But, only once

658    competence and consistency in applying the MI approach has been achieved,

659    reported and evidenced, can its impact in sport be truly measured. Such an

660    investigation would likely further inform best practice guidelines, help to identify

661    sport-specific adaptations of the approach (e.g., MI with teams; brief-contact MI with

662    athletes), and contribute to the development of a model for integrating MI with other

663    interventions in sport.

### Strengths and limitations

665    Several sampling methods were employed to ensure the search for

666    participants for this study was as exhaustive as possible, producing a global sample

667    of practitioners who are a) working regularly in sport with amateur, international and

668    professional athletes, and b) proficient in the MI approach, as indicated by their

669    membership of MINT. The research team has attempted to show rather than tell

670    (Tracy, 2010) the reader participants' responses, using their own words and the

671    established language of the MI approach.

672            There are limitations to this study, which also need to be acknowledged. It is

673    debatable if this study has identified specific adaptations to the MI approach for use

674    in sport psychology, for example during moments of brief contact with athletes. It is

675    possible that this may only be achieved through action research or case studies, to

676    identify the nuances of adapting this approach to this specific context. Additionally,

677    the participants in this study have not provided evidence of their competence in

678    using MI, nor their fidelity to the approach. Their comments are based on their recall

679    and their self-assessment of their applied work. This opens their testimonies to

680    questions of bias and accuracy, as is the case with any qualitative research of this

681    nature. Recent research on an MI-based intervention in sport (Wood et al., 2020)

682    has begun to address this limitation by audio recording practitioner-athlete

683    consultations, assessing for practitioner MI competence and fidelity, and providing

684    verbatim extracts to support practitioner assertions and reflections.

685                            **Conclusion**

686            This study has offered the most in-depth exploration to date of the

687    components of MI being applied by MI-proficient practitioners in sport settings, and

688    determined that the approach has much to offer psychologists, coaches, and other

689    practitioners working in the sport context, for whom the practitioner-athlete

690    relationship is fundamental to their role and the success of their work. This includes

691    the MI core components and tools, communication styles, traps to avoid and

692    integrating MI with action-orientated interventions. More research is needed on

693    sport-specific adaptations to the approach, including working with teams and brief

694    contact interactions. MI is a viable option for neophyte and established practitioners

695    to develop their professional philosophies, sharpen relational and communication

696    skills for building and maintaining working alliances, and enhancing their self-

697    reflection.

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876          **Table Titles**

877     **Table 1**

878     *Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport*

879     **Table 2**

880     *Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport*

881     **Table 3**

882     *Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI*

883     **Table 4**

884     *Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context*

885 **Table 1**

886 *Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport*

| Core Components of MI | Sub-components |
| --- | --- |
| Spirit | Partnership |
| | Build athlete autonomy |
| | Acceptance |
| | Unconditional regard |
| | Evocation |
| | Compassion |
| | Accurate empathy |
| | Equipoise |
| Microskills | Open Questions |
| | Affirmations |
| | Reflections (simple and complex) |
| | Summarising |
| Language of change | Preparatory change talk |
| | Mobilising change talk |
| | Sustain talk |
| Four+ Processes | Engage |
| | Focus |
| | Evoke |
| | Plan |
| | Maintain |

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889    **Table 2**

890    *Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport*

| Theme | Sub-themes |
| --- | --- |
| MI applied tools | Elicit-Provide-Elicit |
| | Agenda mapping |
| | Values sort |
| | Scaling rulers (importance; confidence; readiness) |
| | Goal setting |
| MI-consistent sharing information and expertise | Consider the therapeutic alliance |
| | Dialogue not monologue |
| | Collaboration |
| | Athlete autonomy |
| | Athlete as expert |
| | MI-adherent |
| | Elicit-Provide-Elicit |
| Relational and technical traps to avoid | Expert trap |
| | Righting reflex |
| | Premature focus trap |
| | Affirming not praising |
| MI communication styles continuum | Directing |
| | Guiding |
| | Following |
| Brief contact MI interactions | MI spirit is essential |
| | MI is adaptable to brief contact |
| | Short, intentional interactions |
| | Moment-to-moment scenarios |
| | Know when to direct/instruct |
| Using MI with teams | MI processes |
| | Reflections |
| | 'Global' affirmations |
| | Accurate empathy |
| Integrating MI with other interventions in sport | Spirit |
| | Microskills |
| | Change talk |
| | 'Home base' |
| | Precursor |
| | Common factors |
| | Underpinning framework |
| | Follow-up |
| | Cognitive behavioral strategies |

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893    **Table 3**

894    *Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI*

| Theme | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Challenges of working with athletes | Mandated attendance |
| | Confidentiality |
| | Stigma towards psychology support |
| | Heteronomy (athletes are unaccustomed to being asked for their opinions/answers) |
| | Athlete mistrust of 'outsiders' |
| | 'Quick fix' mentality within sport |
| | Performance-driven environment |
| | Deficit view of athlete issues |
| | Practitioner equipoise towards athlete change |
| | Managing discord in the relationship |
| | Athlete ambivalence towards change |
| Unique aspects of sport context | Reduced frequency of contact |
| | Limited duration of contact |
| | Non-clinical locations |
| | 'In the moment' contact |
| | 'Hot' issues |

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897    **Table 4**

898    *Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context*

| Theme | Sub-themes |
| --- | --- |
| MI training content | Core components of MI |
| | Traps to avoid |
| | Elicit-Provide-Elicit |
| | Accurate empathy |
| | Equipoise |
| | MI integration with other approaches |
| | Sport culture, norms, pressures |
| MI training design | Multi-method |
| | Experiential |
| | Sport-specific materials |

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