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**Professional challenges in elite sports medicine and science: Composite vignettes of
practitioner emotional labor**

Abstract

Objectives: Our aim was to provide an insight into professional challenges encountered by sports medics and scientists (SMSs) in elite sport organizations and illuminate the emotional labor required to navigate such challenges.

Design: A semi-structured interview research design was used, and data informed the development of composite vignettes, a form of creative non-fiction.

Method: Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with sport and exercise psychologists ($n = 6$), physiotherapists ($n = 5$), strength and conditioning coaches ($n = 5$), one sports doctor and one generic sports scientist to facilitate data collection via guided reflection. An interpretive thematic analysis was performed, and key codes and themes were used to develop three composite vignettes.

Results: The composites were based on participant accounts comprising three professional roles: (a) sport and exercise psychologist, (b) physiotherapist, and (c) strength and conditioning coach. The interplay between the factors affecting emotional labor in the SMS field (e.g., ethics, power, culture), the enactment of emotional labor (e.g., emotion regulation and observable expressions), and the outcomes (e.g., personal and professional) are illuminated in the vignettes.

Conclusions: These data extend research on professional practice in SMS and emotional labor in three ways: (a) providing a novel theoretical contribution to explain emotional labor in professionally-challenging situations (b) examining the requirements for SMSs to enact emotional labor as part of their professional role and (c) building upon other innovative and rigorous forms of data representation that might be used as a pedagogical tool for reflection with students, trainees, and neophytes.

Keywords: emotions, emotional displays, emotion regulation, ethics, professional development

Professional challenges in elite sports medicine and science: Composite vignettes of practitioner emotional labor

Professional societies and regulatory bodies promote ethical codes of conduct that govern how sport medics and scientists (SMSs¹) engage with others when enacting the routines and practices that constitute their professional practice. For example, professional values and behaviors (e.g., maintaining professional boundaries; Theberge, 2009), evidence-based competencies (e.g., psychological skills training; Fletcher & Mahar, 2013), and consideration of complex ethical matters (e.g., decision making; Praestegaard & Gard, 2013) are endorsed to guide practitioners on how to act when working with clients. SMSs deliver specialized services that aim to enhance athlete performance, often as part of multi-disciplinary teams (Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2016). High performance teams might comprise the expertise of sport psychologists, doctors, physiotherapists, strength and conditioning coaches, and other sport and exercise scientists. Nevertheless, scholars have noted substantial discrepancies between professional codes of conduct, training, and actual practice (see Harwood, 2016). Indeed, a range of nuanced professional challenges for SMSs have been reported, including developing inter-professional relationships (e.g., Malcolm & Scott, 2011), and the potential for conflict escalation (e.g., Reid, Stewart & Thorne, 2004). Moreover, working in elite sport has been portrayed by SMSs as an emotional endeavor where the need to adhere to professional expectations is of the utmost importance, often leading to personal costs (see Lerner, Wagstaff, Thelwell, & Corbett, 2017). Emerging evidence has shown practitioners often need to engage in emotional labor to navigate a range of challenging situations to facilitate desired emotions and behaviors at work (Hings, Wagstaff, Thelwell, Gilmore, & Anderson, 2017). Despite such challenges, regulatory bodies have yet to acknowledge the tensions between codes of conduct and the nature of applied work, or address specific educational or professional training requirements, especially with reference to emotional labor demands. Therefore, in this study we

examined the professional challenges and emotional labor experienced by SMSs through the development of creative non-fiction (e.g., Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, & Yang, 2016).

Emotional labor

According to Grandey, Diefendorff, and Rupp (2013), emotional labor is defined as, “emotion regulation performed in response to job-based emotional requirements in order to produce emotion toward – and to evoke emotion from – another person to achieve organizational goals” (p. 18). Grandey and Gabriel (2015) integrated sociological, psychological, and organizational research perspectives to characterize emotional labor as an integrated three-part conceptualization comprising (a) emotion requirements, (b) emotion regulation, and (c) emotion performance. First, emotion requirements refer to the job-based norms that implicitly govern how one expresses emotion in the workplace. Such requirements shape the employee emotional displays in ways that facilitate the attainment of organizational or work-related objectives (Diefendorff, Erickson, Grandey, & Dahling, 2011). Second, emotion regulation refers to the effort afforded by the employee to meet the socioemotional demands of the job, specifically through the modification of feelings or expressions. Researchers have observed three types of emotional expression: authentic expression, whereby genuine feelings are felt and displayed at work; surface acting, where employees feign the desired emotional expressions (i.e., suppressing, faking and amplifying emotions), and; deep acting, where employees try to create the desired feelings to be expressed (Gabriel, Acosta, & Grandey, 2013). Third, emotion performance refers to the display of desirable observable expressions in the workplace. For example, external characteristics including body language and facial expressions are altered and have been reported to influence work-related interactions (e.g., Sanders, Wadey, Day, & Winter, 2017). Against this background, this study aims to illuminate emotional labor in the context of sport, exercise, and health professions.

Emotional labor in sport

In the sport and physical activity domain, scholars (e.g., Tamminen & Bennett, 2017) have increasingly conceptualized emotional phenomena, such as emotional labor, as complex, social, performative, and intersubjective. For instance, SMSs regulate and perform their emotions in order to navigate the complex sociocultural environments in which they operate (Hings et al., 2017). Lee and Chelladurai (2016) recently observed that coaches who reported higher positive affectivity were likely to deep act or display genuine emotional expressions when dealing with athletes, leading to reduced emotional exhaustion and emotional dissonance. Findings from physiotherapists (Foster & Sayers, 2012), and strength and conditioning coaches (Tod, Bond, & Lavalley, 2012) also indicate experienced practitioners are more likely to express positive emotions through deep acting and authentic emotional expressions, despite previous challenges with clients. Hence, it would appear that the enactment of emotional labor might have professional benefits by helping individuals to navigate complex sport environments. Despite SMSs confronting diverse cognitive and physical demands as part of their role, the social nature of emotional transactions demands emotional labor to be enacted. Thus, the complexity of emotional labor creates unique professional challenges for those working in sport. Larner et al. (2017) recently found surface acting to moderate the relationship between organizational stressor frequency, burnout, and turnover intentions in coaches, performance directors, and SMSs. Other researchers have linked surface acting to undesirable psychological (e.g., emotional exhaustion, burnout; Lee & Chelladurai, 2016) and physical (e.g., somatic anxiety; Jones, 2006) outcomes, indicating that surface acting might have a negative impact on SMSs welfare and well-being. Such research findings imply the necessity of emotional labor and brings to question the competency requirements of SMSs (Arvinen-Barrow, Penny, Hemmings, & Corr, 2010).

The present research

A dearth of research exists exploring how SMSs navigate professional challenges, which is somewhat surprising given the potential negative implications of emotional labor, and the

benefits of professional training, competency development, and reflective practice (see Cropley et al., 2016). Further, Nelson et al (2013) highlighted the need to understand the role emotions play in the day-to-day realities of sports coaching practice, thus increasing preparedness for complex personal and professional demands. Hence, this manuscript aims to provide an insight into professional challenges encountered by SMSs in elite sport organizations and illuminate the emotional labor required to navigate such challenges through the voices of professionals in sport. By providing a platform for sensitive emotional issues (Smith, 2013), and promoting multi-disciplinary learning across SMS professions, it is hoped practitioners, trainees, and students will better understand the emotional demands of both their own and colleagues' work. A narrative approach was adopted to achieve our aims in line with calls for such designs (see Smith, 2016; Tamminen & Bennett, 2017), and to allow for the interpretation of complex, social, emotional lived experiences through retelling participant accounts in the form of stories.

Method

Philosophical assumptions

The present study was underpinned by philosophical assumptions of ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created, and mind dependent) and epistemological interpretivism (i.e., knowledge is subjective and shaped by lived experience; Cavallerio, Wadey & Wagstaff, 2016). In alignment with the philosophical assumptions and research aims, qualitative creative non-fiction methods, namely composite vignettes (e.g., Schinke et al, 2016) were adopted. Specifically, drawing on analysis of qualitative interview data we aimed to elucidate the emotional labor a sport and exercise psychologist, physiotherapist, and strength and conditioning coach might enact when encountering professional challenges.

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling. The sampling criteria specified that participants had to be fully qualified and professionally accredited practitioners in the United Kingdom. Therefore, those

practitioners whose data are included in this study were accredited by one or more of the following professional societies or regulatory bodies; the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), the British Psychological Society (BPS), the Chartered Society for Physiotherapists (CSP), and the United Kingdom Strength and Conditioning Association (UKSCA), or the Health Care and Professions Council (HCPC). The sample comprised 18 SMS practitioners (15 male, 3 female) including six sport and exercise psychologists (experience range 6-23 years), five strength and conditioning coaches (experience range 5-15 years), and five physiotherapists (experience range 2-20 years), one sports doctor and one generic sports scientist. All participants had worked in elite individual (e.g., golf, swimming, triathlon) and team (e.g., football, rugby, cricket) sport in the United Kingdom.

Data collection

Prior to the interviews, all participants provided fully-informed consent, were notified of their participant rights, and issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant on a one to one basis. Interviews were conducted by the first author face-to-face, online using Skype video calls, or over the telephone. Seventeen interviews were audio-recorded with handwritten notes being made concurrently. One interviewee declined to be audio recorded and their data comprises handwritten notes. The average duration of the recorded interviews was 63 minutes ($SD = 11.33$).

Interview guide. A three-part interview guide was used, the first section of which was designed to elucidate a timeline of key career events such as employment turnover, organizational change, experience of working in multi-disciplinary teams, and any other perceived challenges the participants had experienced. The second section covered emotional experiences in the work environment and invited participants to elaborate on their experiences (e.g., “Could you describe how you reacted and responded to the [situation] encountered?”, “Why did you feel the need to suppress your true feelings in that situation?”). The final section explored the effects emotional labor might have had on their professional practice at the time of

the key event described. In this section, the participants were invited to describe the personal and professional outcomes of their emotional labor experiences. A copy of the interview guide is available on request from the corresponding author.

Data analysis and representation

The data were analyzed in two separate stages. During the first stage, interpretive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). This analysis procedure provided insight into SMS's experiences and opinions in relation to the issues they described as well as any factors that influenced the particular phenomena of interest (Braun et al., 2016). For this study, this involved the first author engaging in telling the participants' "story as analyst" (Tamminen & Bennett., 2017, p. 189), whereby the data were organized into codes, first-level and second-level sub-themes, and overarching themes (see Hings et al., 2017), to understand the phenomena and identify relationships and characteristics important to emotional labor enactment. The research team engaged in the six-step process of thematic analysis recommended by Braun et al. (2016). As a result of this process, the first author, with reflexive and discursive help from the research team, discovered the "what's", (i.e., the themes), the "how's" (i.e., the "enacting" of emotional labor) and "why's" (i.e., the effects on professional practice) of the participant accounts (Cavallerio et al., 2016). This involved familiarization with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts and handwritten interview notes, and listening to the interview audio tapes to gauge verbal tone of both the interviewee and the interviewer. The outcome of this stage was the identification of codes and the assemblage of first and second level themes and subthemes, which reflected similar participant experiences and reflections. Throughout this process, the first two authors evaluated the development and refinement of labelled themes, looking for concepts relevant to the research aim. These conversations led to re-iterations of the themes. The second stage of the analysis involved a creative analytical process (CAP) grounded in the themes from the first stage whereby compelling quotations for each theme were selected to enable the development of narratives (e.g., Schinke et al., 2016).

Creative non-fiction

“Creative non-fiction is a type of creative analytic practice that tells a story which is grounded in research data and draws on literary conventions” (Smith, McGannon & Williams, 2015, p. 59). According to O’Malley, Winter and Holder (2017), the fictional storylines created by authors are embedded within the real-life events and lived experiences of research participants. By illuminating meaningful and emotional events through creative writing practices, empirical data previously analyzed through a theoretical lens can be ‘brought to life’ to elucidate the nuances of psychosocial phenomena (Schinke et al., 2016). This provides a basis from which theory and applied practice can be combined through the presentation of large quantities of qualitative data into an accessible form of actionable knowledge useful to practitioners (Denyer & Tranfield, 2003). As such, the aim of the creative non-fiction is to present empirical data in a way that might resonate with the population group investigated (i.e., naturalistic generalizations; Smith, McGannon, & Williams, 2015). To elaborate, naturalistic generalizations occur “when the research resonates with the readers personal engagement in life’s affairs, or vicarious, often tacit, experiences (Smith, 2018, p. 140).

Using CAP to communicate findings is increasingly common in sport, with scholars from sports coaching (e.g., Jones, 2006) and sport, exercise, and health psychology (e.g., Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2015) being particular advocates. Indeed, representing findings in multiple ways provides the opportunity to reveal more complex and multi-layered understandings of a topic through alternative analytical lenses (Schinke et al., 2016). This dendritic crystallization of research data promotes, “the ongoing and dispersed process of making meaning of the same topic through multiple forms of analysis and forms of representations to produce a series of related texts” (Groom, Nelson, Potrac, & Smith, 2014, p. 88). We believe the use of creative non-fiction provides a pedagogical opportunity for practitioners, trainees, and students to become more aware of wide-ranging professional issues and provoke reflective conversations (Smith, 2013; Smith, Tomasone, Latimer-Cheung, & Martin Ginis, 2015).

Composite vignettes

In the second stage of the data analysis process, the first author adopted the position of storyteller (Smith, 2016) with the aim of producing evocative stories that represented population groups. This involved representing data through qualitative creative non-fiction in the form of composite vignettes, whereby the experiences of the six sport and exercise psychologists, five physiotherapists, and five strength and conditioning coaches interviewed were combined into synthesized narratives. These roles were chosen because they reflect core roles within SMS multidisciplinary teams. Throughout the development of the vignettes, the research team engaged in reflexive discussions about the composite content and fit with the themes identified at stage one of the analysis. A combination of these reflexive discussions, re-organizing and fitting together participant accounts, and establishing links between the overarching themes led to the creation of composite characters and vivid storylines.

The first author engaged in a four-step process to assemble the composite vignettes, which was based on examples of qualitative creative non-fiction conducted in the field (Schinke et al., 2016; Smith, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). First, the interview transcripts were separated by the participants' professional role (i.e., sport and exercise psychologist, physiotherapist, or strength and conditioning coach). The overarching themes identified at stage one were used as a framework for possible composite content and the first author then re-read each interview transcript, highlighting key phrases, thoughts and stories that appeared to represent the predominant professional challenges encountered by participants. Highlighted content was transferred to a master document for each professional role. Next, any interrelated quotations were grouped together to form substantive content for the vignettes before the first and second authors reviewed the content of the professional challenges, deleting surplus text and amalgamating multiple shared accounts into concise stories for each of the SMS roles. These accounts formed the basis of early draft vignettes. Finally, the first author linked sentences contained in each of the vignettes (e.g., adding connective words). All authors then iteratively

revised the narratives to ensure relevance to the research question, prose and flow, and adequate representation of the professional roles within the participant groups.

Authenticity

When judging the authenticity of the qualitative creative non-fiction, a non-foundational approach was adopted (Smith & McGannon, 2017). For example, guidance provided by Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, and Herber (2014) regarding: (a) data sources for vignette composition, (b) vignette format, (c) capturing reality, and (d) vignette/participant congruence was utilized. First, data used in the creative non-fiction included the semi-structured interview transcripts, handwritten interview notes detailing the interviewees facial expressions, gestures, and verbal tone, the first author's reflective journal, and the interpretive thematic analysis. Collectively, these sources formed the basis for the narrative framework. Second, the vignettes were formatted to represent each SMS role to illuminate the professional challenges significant to their lines of work and encountered by participants included in the study. Third, despite the creation of composite characters, direct quotations from participant interviews were used where appropriate so the authenticity of the 'voices' within each narrative was preserved, and to enable naturalistic generalizability through providing adequate evidence of participants' lives (Smith, 2018). However, to protect the anonymity of participants, specific details in contextual examples were altered such as gender, locations, and type of sport. Additionally, characteristics such as evocation (i.e., producing stimulating storylines), sincerity (i.e., maintaining participants' voices), coherence (i.e., formulating coherent storylines), and developing a meaningful contribution to a research area were considered when creating the creative non-fiction (cf. Smith et al., 2015).

Results

The creative non-fiction reflects challenges from the perspectives of a sport and exercise psychologist, a physiotherapist, and a strength and conditioning coach. Throughout the stories, the cyclical nature of the emotional labor process is demonstrated by the interconnectedness of

the three overarching themes from the interpretive thematic analysis (i.e., factors affecting emotional labor enactment and professional and personal outcomes). We ask the reader to envisage the composite characters in the vignettes as the culminated experiences of several SMS practitioners, who have bravely shared their firsthand experiences to help others. Such accounts are written as monologues, embellished with dialogue between actors such as athletes, members of multi-disciplinary teams, and other observers.

Introduction to the first vignette: Clinical issues, professional training and remit

Sport and exercise psychologists involved in this study described issues pertaining to the adequate provision of professional training and mental health awareness. Drawing on these data the first vignette tells the story of the emotion-laden transactions faced by a male sport and exercise psychologist. In this vignette, the psychologist is thrust into a situation requiring significant emotion regulation when transacting with an athlete suffering from bipolar disorder.

A sport and exercise psychologist's story. There have been instances in my work where I have been supporting somebody for a period – doing performance enhancement sport psychology support – and then had to refer them for clinical support. There was one instance when the clinical issues were substantial. The client was a young cricketer and I had referred him to a clinical psychologist after four or five weeks. You get to a point as a professional where you realize you can't continue working with an individual. He had complex needs, including the relationship between his parents and the coaching staff, and there were mental health issues in the family. It became apparent that additional help and support were needed.

This person was subsequently diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. I had not seen him for ten years, not since he was 15, when, out of the blue, he called me. I thought it was bit of an odd phone call, but he wanted to have a chat. We agreed to meet at his professional cricket club's training facility at 10 o'clock in the morning, but I got a phone call from people at the venue at about quarter past eight in the morning, informing me that he had arrived. That he was 1'45 hours early made me nervous – I had no idea what was going on or about to happen – but I

310 tried to ignore my concerns and travelled to the venue for the meeting. When I got there, I could
311 immediately see that something was wrong; he was smoking on the side of a practice wicket
312 and he was hitting practice balls around really quite oddly, aggressively. I tried to anticipate
313 what I was about to be presented with and adapted my body language and behavior to negotiate,
314 maybe to console, maybe to protect myself. I went over, the client was talking very quickly, and
315 I could see this was not going to be a normal morning. I needed to prepare myself for a
316 challenging consult. It quickly transpired that one of the cleaners had arrived early, and my
317 former client frightened her by talking in an incomprehensible, agitated state.

318 I took him somewhere that was slightly away from the clubhouse for a little more
319 privacy, and where there were no other people to agitate him. He had a cricket bat in his hand
320 and he previously had talked to me about being attacked and as I later realized he probably
321 feared being attacked as he was acting in quite a threatening manner due to his condition. It was
322 surreal. I was incredibly nervous, but at the same time I had to think on my feet along the lines
323 of: "Right, I have not worked with anybody this way before. I am not trained to deal with this.
324 But I have got to manage this situation, I have got to manage my emotions in this situation
325 because there is a person in front of me who is ill. But, I do not know the exact nature of his
326 illness. I might have some suspicions, *some* relevant training, but I have got to manage myself,
327 and I have got to manage him, and I have got to manage my environment, because this is a
328 place where I have been invited to work, and there are other people around that would not –
329 could not – be so understanding; they would not realize that he is ill."

330 The main emotion I needed to regulate was fear. It was one of the most challenging
331 things I have ever done in my professional career, showing that I was not scared, when I was
332 actually terrified. I felt threatened, but I needed to manage my emotions, needed to show that I
333 was not feeling threatened, that I was myself calm, and also attempt to calm the client. Even
334 though I was scared, it was important that I did not show it - my own emotions would have
335 added another level of intensity and would not have been helpful to resolving the situation. I

336 suppressed that fear response and tried to be empathetic, non-judgmental, non-directive in the
337 language I used. I thought, “What image do I need to portray in this situation? I had become
338 very aware of my behaviors, what am I doing with my arms, my legs, my feet?” You know? I
339 tried to be very neutral. The whole time I was trying to ignore the aggressive swinging of the
340 cricket bat. Let’s put it this way, there was a lot of internal dialogue taking place, which I had to
341 make sure was not reflected externally. He eventually calmed down and left the cricket club. I
342 felt exasperated, I felt frustrated. After he left I remember thinking: “I feel horrible right now
343 but that is just part of it, just keep cracking on with everything else”, I then told myself, “handle
344 it sensitively and make some follow up calls later in terms of duty of care”.

345 Now I reflect on this situation and wonder: “How would I have dealt with that situation
346 emotionally if I had been new to the profession? I would not have had a clue how to act”. It was
347 a very emotionally challenging situation for me because I care for the people that I work with.
348 Unfortunately, you can only do your best and there comes a point when you think, “There is
349 nothing more I can do”. As psychologists, we talk about the separation of emotion and
350 rationality and being a logical sounding board and being able to be non-judgmental, and in
351 reality the context we work in is a highly emotive one. I don’t think it is always possible to
352 separate your emotions and rationality.

353 **Introduction to the second vignette: Ethics, power, and cheating**

354 The physiotherapists in this sample frequently described issues with emotional labor
355 consequences, arising from power relations and pressure from others to disregard professional
356 codes of conduct when operating in elite sport contexts. The second vignette reflects this and
357 tells the story of a composite character who is a female physiotherapist. This vignette focuses
358 on the challenges associated with travelling to international elite sports competitions and the
359 emotional labor issues arising from moral dilemmas and problematic relationships with those in
360 positions of power. In the following vignette, a physiotherapist struggled to regulate her
361 emotions after being asked to deliberately fabricate information regarding an athlete.

A physiotherapist's story. When you are travelling, you are working pretty much constantly. You are usually trying to fit in treatment time around training, around athletes' down time, and around any commitments like team meetings or meals. The work is very fast paced and you're always under pressure. As a physiotherapist in professional sport, it's generally acknowledged that codes of conduct are regularly bent or broken. I mean, I've done things in the past that are to suit the team which haven't been strictly "professional". One incident surpassed all others, including my own diminished expectations. Incidents like the one I'm going to tell you about probably happen quite a lot – colleagues have told me as much – but this was the first time I felt that I had been asked to *cheat*; not just deviate from "the code" a little. There were two competitions scheduled in close succession; one was a qualifier for a national competition and another was a qualifier for a European competition. Entry into the second competition was predicated on a top 8 finish at the first. At the first competition, one of our athletes was guaranteed 8th place after early rounds. As such, she automatically qualified for the second tournament and it did not matter how she performed in the rest of the first competition. As a result, the coach wanted the athlete to rest and take no further part in the competition.

My concerns began when the athlete got a minor injury in an early round. I assessed her injury, and it was a minor muscle strain, and I would expect her to continue into the latter rounds; she had certainly competed with substantially worse injuries in the past. The Performance Director (PD) approached me shortly after my assessment and requested me to tell the tournament Doctor that the athlete was *severely* injured and could not continue in the tournament: "Tell the doctor she's badly injured. Make sure to say it's serious." He wanted me to make up an injury, so the athlete could be excused from the remainder of the competition. The dilemma I faced was that the athlete wasn't really injured, so I refused the PD's instruction. I knew that this guy was quite a prickly, dominant character but up until now we'd had a good relationship. You've got to always give the impression through your behaviors and

communication that the boss (in this case the PD) has not done anything “wrong” as you don't want to damage your relationship with the boss. In essence, jobs are very precarious in our field, so you can't go pissing off the boss. But given the dilemma, which directly contravened my code of conduct, and went way beyond bending the rules, I had to try to manage my response to ‘soften’ my refusal. I tried to reply to the PD in a calm and non-emotional way even though I wanted to scream and shout at him and tell him it wasn't professional or ethical to ask me to do such a thing. Nevertheless, it occurred to me that I would come out of this situation worse off than the PD. I had to juggle my professionalism, my personal moral compass, and some fairly intense emotional reactions to this request. I told the PD that I would tell the tournament doctor exactly what I thought the injury was.

In response, the PD said, "Just say it is a nasty bruise or something." At this point I am starting to feel emotionally and ethically uncomfortable. I could not laugh it off and say it was a hematoma or something like that. There are professional, ethical and legal issues that you need to be aware of in those situations. You *should* always be thinking of the athlete's safety and you *shouldn't* cut corners. However, I was aware that the PD had already “got to” the coaches and athlete and had already influenced them towards his course of action. They now also wanted me to lie about the fake injury. I felt threatened, bullied. I wanted to stay strong and true to my beliefs. I have limits, boundaries, and these were being totally abused. Emotionally, I also wanted to protest to the young athlete. Yet, I tried not to “wear my emotions” – something like bedside manner I guess, one needs to remain a professional.

While these discussions were taking place, the athlete had been practicing and in an ironic twist of fate, had aggravated an unassociated long-standing injury. This required her to see the doctor, and they said, "Yeah she has got to miss the next match." Except the goalposts had shifted! The PD realized that pulling her out of the remainder of the competition would actually automatically *exclude* her from the next (European qualifier) competition. They crapped themselves! The team had a word with the athlete and said, "If you don't compete in

414 this next match, you won't be eligible for the next tournament." So, one minute the PD, coaches
415 and athlete are desperate to avoid the next match based on a fake injury, then she *actually* gets
416 injured. Everyone is seeing her hobbling along barely able to walk, yet everyone is desperate
417 for her to compete. I was so embarrassed. I was horrified and furious, but I couldn't berate the
418 PD, coaches, and athlete for their lack of respect, professionalism and morals. All I wanted to
419 say to the PD was, "Ha! This is what happens when you put everyone's careers on the line." My
420 emotions were bubbling but I had to suppress them; I couldn't say how I felt as it might have a
421 negative impact on the athlete's performance, and it would cast me as the "baddy". Speaking up
422 would have a negative impact on the whole team and I was fairly sure it would be the end of my
423 work with this National Governing Body. Emotionally it was terrible, I felt so alone and
424 isolated. I was on the other side of the world, I couldn't just walk away; we were in the same
425 hotel, had the same travel arrangements. Plus, I had a duty of care to the other athletes. I could
426 tell that the Performance Director and the coaches were unhappy with me because I wouldn't
427 lie. During the rest of the competition they criticized my decisions and it led to a very
428 uncomfortable stand-off. It was such a mess. I thought I was going to lose my job, and it took
429 courage and moral conviction to stand my ground, to remain positive when I didn't want to be. I
430 still wanted to shout at them and explain how unethical their request had been, but I had to hide
431 my real feelings and use the code of conduct as my shield and express my "professional
432 opinion". I stayed calm when I told them I would be risking my professional status; I'd get
433 struck off if anyone found out. Emotions ran high on 'all sides' - From that point on, the PD
434 pigeonholed me as a "no" person. I invested loads of time trying to change his impression of
435 me, but I think it all went back to what he felt that day. It was really tough to deal with
436 personally and professionally. I don't know whether they ever forgave me for that, even now
437 some years on. I was only trying to do the best for the athlete and I felt like I was the only one,
438 it was a constant tension. It was demoralizing. It still demoralizes me. I didn't want to work in
439 that environment, and not long after, by "mutual consent", I was managed out of that sport.

Introduction to the third vignette: Masculinity, banter and death.

The third and final vignette tells a story of a male strength and conditioning coach and focuses on the salience of organizational culture and the influence of organizational values, attitudes and beliefs on emotional labor. The strength and conditioning coaches involved in this study described the pervasive high performance, masculine, and complex culture of their working environment and the effects on their emotional labor, despite potentially negative outcomes on a personal scale. Although many strength and conditioning coaches recalled enjoying the back-and-forth between themselves and the athletes, leading to a sense of personality-job fit, embracing this culture also led to considerable conflict in terms of emotion regulation and disclosure. In the following vignette, the composite strength and conditioning coach had recently suffered a family bereavement.

A strength and conditioning coach's story. I think all good strength and conditioning coaches' work is behind the scenes; it's not about you. Strength and conditioning involves dealing with people from different educational and social backgrounds, and making a difference with them. In this environment, I need to demonstrate intensity and effort, because I require that of the athletes. Going into a session I know when I am going to need to emphasize some things or need to be assertive or passionate to be as effective as possible because that is how I can get a response from athletes. I put on an act almost every time I coach to get my message across, and how I do that depends on the situation. Some days it comes naturally, other days you have to really psyche yourself up to get on the right emotional level. As a coach, you have got to be in-tune with your emotions to get the outcome that you want. Coaches do not know how good they could be if they just did this.

Some of the biggest challenges in my role are in relation to building appropriate relationships with athletes. The sport that I work in is very ego-driven, very alpha male. You have got to be quite assertive and animated. You've got to have a lot of banter with the guys to make them feel at ease and gain acceptance. Most of the time I act like a goof and shout things

like, “Are you gonna tickle that weight or lift it?” That is how I get acceptance, which allows me to get my message across; if I went in totally ‘by the book’ professional, I would get nowhere with “the boys”. Sometimes being a “good bloke” and “having a craic” is more important than what you actually deliver. On the other hand, if you are seen as overly familiar or too mate-like, there are times when you lose the respect of athletes and they take the opportunity to test you. Athletes will deliberately try to “push buttons”, frustrate you, play pranks or jokes at your expense. This is a sign of acceptance, but there is a boundary; if you don’t control yourself and manage their perception of you, you will be walked over, chewed up and spat out. It would be very easy to react when athletes are just trying to wind you up a little bit. If they catch you off guard or on a bad day, it’s hard not to bite or push back, so you have to be more measured than the athletes.

Emotionally speaking, it’s hard to maintain a façade as “one of the lads” when personal things are happening in your life. When I first started my role, I had a family bereavement, my Grandfather, and his illness was drawn out over about two months. It was a stressful time; I found it hard to switch my “work persona” on and off. I was a bit more forgetful, distracted... It can be a bloody nightmare trying to get the day job done when personal stuff is in the back of your mind. But no matter what is going on in your personal world, when the show starts at 10 o'clock you need to be ready to go. I wanted to see my Grandfather; I had a close relationship with him, and so I ended up driving for miles at night, sleeping on mate’s sofa, and then driving back to work first thing in the morning. I did that a few times and my sleep went out the window so that made it a bigger challenge to be the person I needed to be at work with the boys. I didn’t feel like it - I was forcing myself to be the ‘laugh out loud’, everything to everyone, guy. Even though I was giving myself a moment before a gym session or blasting music in the car to psyche myself up, the boys still saw through it:

“Okay boys let’s get on with this!” I strained.

“You okay boss? You don’t look so good.”

492 “Seriously mate, I’m fine, let’s just get to it”

493 Although I was in turmoil on the inside I didn’t tell anyone at work about my Grandfather’s
494 death. I felt that I had to maintain my professional persona. I don’t think it was a case of doing
495 the stereotypical male thing of not asking for help; I just felt that my emotions didn’t fit in with
496 my work, so I hid them. I had to maintain the façade to get the results I needed. Sometimes
497 people picked up that something wasn’t ‘normal’ because my sadness leaked out, it was too
498 powerful, my attempts to bottle it up and keep a mask on became too overwhelming, but when
499 others noticed, I just downplayed it and tried harder to suppress my feelings.

500 The whole situation threw up some unique challenges and emotions but I was desperate
501 for it to not affect my work or relationships. I know that if I take my eye off the ball and let
502 down my guard or suddenly lose my cool, then they will disengage with me, they’ll disengage
503 with their programs even more, and then I’ll be under the pressure from the manager. You have
504 to react to what you are faced with and try to do the best that you can, despite personal
505 situations and the effort. If that happens, and I have seen it in more than one practitioner,
506 including myself, that it can really take you down as it were. Coping with this stuff can really
507 affect you mentally because you... I think that can have real negative consequences. We
508 support staff don’t always have a support staff network. In football, rugby and cricket for
509 example they will provide players with a support network in the event of changes or behavioral
510 problems. The only option for support staff is to go to the doctors, maybe the psych, but they
511 are your peers, teammates. Not that I go to the doctors – maybe I should have, I’m still feeling
512 pretty burnt from that period and managing my energy levels is still a challenge as I feel I’m
513 totally worn out. I still think that to get results you need to not show any negative feelings at
514 work; maybe “the boys” can, but we support staff can’t.

515 Discussion

516 The creative non-fiction illuminates the professional challenges and emotional
517 labor experienced by SMSs to navigate issues in elite sport organizations. By

518 amalgamating the shared experiences of SMSs in elite sport, the creative non-fiction
519 revealed important and novel issues about the personal and professional effects of
520 emotional labor on practitioners. Further, the narratives show how the emotional labor
521 practitioners engaged in was driven by the professional challenges they encountered and
522 indicate the critical processes required to navigate ethical, moral, and emotionally
523 demanding predicaments successfully.

524 In the first vignette, a male sport and exercise psychologist felt obliged to work in an
525 unfamiliar environment and attempted to help an athlete diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When
526 faced with the athlete's unpredictable behavior, the psychologist was compelled to undertake
527 surface acting and suppress negative feelings of fear in favor of more positive or neutral
528 emotions to effectively manage the athlete's emotions. This observation lends support to
529 Gabriel et al (2013), that service employee positive emotional displays have the strongest
530 influence on performance evaluations under low familiarity contexts. To elaborate, positive or
531 neutral emotions are critical to perceptions of friendliness and influence others' behaviors,
532 despite the method of emotion regulation utilized. Hence, a positive emotional performance by
533 the sport psychologist through surface acting was perceived as both unavoidable and critical to
534 a successful outcome. Nevertheless, practitioners might need to reflect on the wide spectrum of
535 emotions they are required to display (i.e., positive, neutral, and negative) in response to the
536 dialogical demands of social interactions (Tamminen & Bennett, 2017).

537 The prevalence of mental health issues and the difficulties of aligning to high
538 performance conditions and personal care has been reported (e.g., Coyle, Gorczynski, &
539 Gibson, 2017). Despite the composite character being equipped with experience, the emotional
540 labor enacted when dealing with clinical mental health issues was debilitating to the
541 practitioner. Indeed, the findings support the need for those in sports professions to engage in
542 surface acting when necessary (Hings et al., 2017), despite potential personal detriment. The
543 incongruence or dissonance between felt and displayed emotions can be effortful and damaging

when sustained over prolonged periods of time, leading to emotional inauthenticity and alienation of the self (Hochschild, 1983). Further, the potential for confrontation occurring due to not handling the situation effectively could put psychologists at risk of physical and emotional harm. Hence, psychologists must be aware of their own and others observable emotional displays in difficult situations which could be enhanced through reflective practice, peer supervision, and counselling (cf. Cropley et al., 2016).

The second creative non-fiction portrayed a female physiotherapist managing the ethical challenge of being asked to fabricate information by a Performance Director (PD) during a major competition, dealing with a passive and pressured athlete, and maintaining emotional equilibrium. The perceived threat of scandal led to the physiotherapist feeling the need to “hide behind the code of conduct” and reject the PD’s demand. As the physiotherapist strongly identified with her professional and moral values, her immediate emotional response was intensified and distressing (Grandey, Krannitz, & Slezak, 2015), yet the need to remain professional in her emotional performance was crucial to maintain. Issues pertaining to power relations common in elite sport affecting emotional labor feature in this vignette, particularly in the hierarchical relationship between the physiotherapist and PD. Specifically, the PD was instrumental in challenging the physiotherapist’s ethical code of conduct and attempted to use their position of power to influence the physiotherapist to cheat. In the context of the tension between ethical and legal practice and achieving performance requirements, significant emotional regulation was necessary in such an intimidating situation. This creative non-fiction highlights the challenges faced by practitioners obliged to adhere to professional codes of conduct in non-traditional work environments such as elite sport (Haberl et al., 2006), where performance priorities dominate decision situations. This signals notable implications for the psychological contract physiotherapists enter into when taking on employment in sport. Although the physiotherapist’s emotional expressions were in line with implicit organizational expectations, disagreeing with the PD on an ethical issue placed strain on their relationship,

perceived as emotional deviance by the PD, which ultimately led to her departure (cf. Wagstaff et al., 2016). Based on these findings, it is recommended that regulatory bodies work to align attitudes towards safe and constructive professional work in elite sport settings through the promotion of emotional labor related competencies.

The third and final creative non-fiction depicted the emotional challenges of separating personal and professional issues, in a working culture that pays scant attention to the ‘outside’ pressures experienced by support staff. Specifically, the interpretation of desirable emotional display requirements by strength and conditioning coaches has a pervasive effect on their decisions and behaviors at work, and can affect their personal lives. Emotions regarded as acceptable or critical to display were related to job based obligations, such as developing a positive motivational environment in the gym. Emotional labor was regarded as positive by the strength and conditioning coaches, with upbeat and encouraging emotions being displayed, and was congruent with their felt emotions (i.e., authenticity and deep acting; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). However, the elite sport culture demanded a masculine persona to be adopted when developing rapport with athletes. Engaging in banter and showing a sense of humor was deemed to be a group acceptance mechanism by athletes and the pressure to comply was felt by the strength and conditioning coach (cf. Wagstaff, Martin, & Thelwell, 2017). Therefore, there was no space for personal emotions unrelated to work, often considered soft and unwanted. As such, the composite character depicted in this creative non-fiction felt the need to conceal bereavement-related feelings from his colleagues. Despite the impact this significant life event had on work duties (e.g., forgetfulness, sleep deprivation), the unwritten obligation to disguise personal struggle at work triumphed at the cost of their own mental well-being. From an ethical perspective, sport organizations have a duty of care to their employees and should encourage disclosure of personal issues through appropriate mediums (e.g., a workplace counsellor, line manager) – as is common in ‘traditional’ organizations where the ubiquity of such life events is accepted.

Given the findings pertaining to the important role of emotional labor in practice, the narratives in this study present several implications for practice in SMS professions. First, the priority of addressing the lack of understanding about physical and emotional reactions to challenging situations which currently remain unacknowledged and unspecified in many ethical codes of conduct and the professional formation processes of SMSs. Our findings indicate a need for cross-disciplinary learning and knowledge transfer into practitioner training to prevent and avoid remit issues. Of particular concern is the lack of welfare services available to these groups who experience such significant challenges. Hence, regulatory bodies and professional associations should prioritize the long-term support of practitioners by adopting a well-being focused strategy with awareness of emotional labor to facilitate the development of strategies by SMSs to prevent or react appropriately to emotionally challenging situations.

To our knowledge, explicit theoretical and practical competency requirements relating directly to emotional labor demands are currently absent from professional training and qualifications in SMS professions. Thus, researchers should endeavor to better understand how and when SMSs are aware of, and adequately understand or demonstrate, skills related to emotional labor (e.g., managing responses to emotionally intense situations). Further, the interpersonal effects of emotional labor have yet to be systematically investigated in this context. As is indicated by the narratives presented here, there is a duty of care to students, trainees, neophytes and experienced practitioners to raise awareness of emotional labor due to the unpredictable, dynamic and complex situations that arise in practice and for the welfare of practitioners. As emotional labor comprises tacit skills and abilities, it is reasonable to assume emotional labor cannot be directly prescribed to different situations in classroom based educational settings. Nevertheless, future research could investigate innovative methods of teaching and discussing emotional labor in education through simulations, virtual reality, reflexive accounts of experience “in the field”, and role plays to overcome ethical issues.

Limitations

Despite the theoretical and practical contributions of the creative non-fiction approach, some limitations are acknowledged. The use of semi-structured interviews, as opposed to life history or unstructured interviews, may have encouraged the production of vignettes along a predetermined research agenda, rather than enabling the exploration of issues as experienced by participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Nevertheless, the first author built rapport with participants and the accounts provided were probed using open questions to reveal meaningful accounts of emotional labor and professional challenges. Also, the interpretive thematic analysis, conducted in stage two of this study, provided a robust narrative framework as the basis for the creative non-fiction. Indeed, the risk of creative non-fiction is that such data representation becomes over-evocative. Nevertheless, our aim was for the voices of the participants to convey rich descriptions of emotional labor in straightforward, practical, resonant narratives.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to illuminate professional challenges experienced by sports medics and scientists (SMSs) in elite sport organizations and provide insight into the emotional labor required to navigate such challenges. In the face of professional challenges, the present work highlights the complexity and variety of emotional labor enactment when SMSs attempt to cope with the disparity between their training, personal emotions and morals, codes of conduct, and performance expectations in work settings. From a practical perspective, this study can aid professional societies, regulatory bodies and employers in sport to better understand the salience of emotional labor and help identify the professional skills set required to operate effectively in elite sport. Further, the creative non-fiction produced in this study can be applied pedagogically on University courses, to help inform neophyte practitioners or trainee SMSs about emotional labor to enhance understanding of the interpersonal skills required in professional practice.

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¹ In the interest of brevity, sports medics and scientists has been abbreviated to SMS. In the context of this manuscript, this includes sport and exercise psychologists, physiotherapists, and strength and conditioning coaches. While we, the authors, group these professional roles for brevity, we do not assume the characteristics of these sports professions as inherently similar, in terms of roles and types of labor enacted. Indeed, despite working towards common performance goals, with similar stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, managers) there are distinct idiosyncrasies that define the types of labor sport professionals enact, due to the requirements of their roles and the nuanced work they undertake within sport organizations.