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## Abstract

This study examined how practitioners who provide sport psychology support use counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen competent practitioners (Mean age =  $41.2 \pm 10.9$  years old, five men, eight women). Thematic analysis revealed that the participants used a range of counselling principles to develop practitioner-athlete relationships including: the facilitative conditions, self-disclosure, counselling skills, the formation of *working alliances*, and awareness of the *unreal relationship*. The participants also described using non-counselling strategies (e.g., gaining an understanding of the athlete's sporting environment) to build relationships with their athletes. There was considerable variation between the participants both in the training that they had received in counselling principles and skills, and how they applied them. It was concluded that counselling principles and skills play a significant role in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships.

Key words: Professional Practice, Relationships, Counselling

22           **The Use of Counselling Principles and Skills to Develop Practitioner-Athlete**  
23           **Relationships by Practitioners Who provide Sport Psychology Support**

24           Extensive research within sport psychology provides guidance on what sport  
25           psychologists should deliver within consultations (e.g., psychological skills training) but less  
26           exists on how to form and maintain successful practitioner-athlete relationships (Katz &  
27           Hemmings, 2009; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). This is a concern given that athletes identify  
28           interpersonal skills and the ability to build practitioner-athlete relationships as central  
29           characteristics of effective sport psychologists (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney,  
30           2004; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson II, 2008; Sharp & Hodge, 2014). Moreover, it has been  
31           suggested that sound practitioner-athlete relationships are likely to lead to greater athlete  
32           disclosure (Katz & Hemmings, 2009) and adherence to the practice and use of psychological  
33           techniques (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Research indicates that  
34           effective practitioner-athlete relationships are partnerships that positively impact upon  
35           clients' performance and well-being, and are characterised by trust, rapport and respect  
36           (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, in press). However, neophyte sport psychologists have been found  
37           to worry about how to form such relationships with their athletes (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, &  
38           Niven, 2007; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008).

39           Unlike sport psychology, extensive research has examined the formation of successful  
40           counsellor-client relationships in counselling with this aspect of practice deemed important to  
41           the therapeutic outcome (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Sexton & Whiston,  
42           1994). It has been theorised that counsellor-client relationships comprise three components  
43           (the *unreal relationship*, the *working alliance* and the *real relationship*) although the  
44           emphasis placed on them may vary depending on the style of counselling adopted (Gelso &  
45           Carter, 1985; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). This theoretical approach to the counsellor-client  
46           relationship has provided the foundation for much of the research on this aspect of practice.

47 Over the past two decades there have been increasing calls for sport psychologists to consider  
48 the three components of the counsellor-client relationship in the development of the  
49 relationships with their athletes (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Petitpas  
50 et al., 1999). However, only a handful of researchers have provided insight into how sport  
51 psychologists make use of them (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Winstone &  
52 Gervis, 2006). Further evaluation is therefore needed so that appropriate training in  
53 relationship-development can be put in place for neophyte practitioners.

54         The *working alliance* component of the counsellor-client relationship pertains to the  
55 working agreement between the client and counsellor on the goals, tasks and emotional bond  
56 that they share (Bordin, 1979). The quality of the *working alliance* impacts upon how  
57 successful therapy is with suggestions that it makes clients less likely to withdraw from  
58 therapy and fosters a space where different approaches to working with the client can be  
59 adopted (Horvath et al., 2011). Sport psychologists, like counsellors, acknowledge the  
60 importance of developing effective working relationships with their athletes (Cropley et al.,  
61 2007; Tod & Anderson, 2005). Findings from an interview-based study conducted in New  
62 Zealand which examined sport psychologists' perceptions of effective consulting  
63 relationships revealed that they emphasised robust, balanced and collaborative relationships  
64 with their athletes (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Moreover, the practitioners reported a progression  
65 in their working relationships over the course of the consultancy with the sport psychologist  
66 likely to lead in the initial educational phase and the athlete taking increased ownership  
67 during the latter stages. Petitpas and colleagues (1999) postulated that a shared responsibility  
68 between practitioners and athletes for the formulation of goals, tasks and their emotional  
69 bond may increase athlete adherence to psychological programmes. However, further  
70 research is required to examine how sport psychologists develop *working alliances* with their  
71 athletes in order to provide guidance for neophyte practitioners.

72           The *unreal relationship* is a psychodynamic concept and comprises client transference  
73 (how clients feel about, and behave with, their counsellors as a result of past interactions with  
74 others; Sexton & Whiston, 1994; Strean & Strean, 1998) and practitioner countertransference  
75 (the client evokes strong feelings, either positive or negative, in the practitioner; Winstone &  
76 Gervis, 2006). Psychodynamic counsellors argue that client-transference towards the  
77 counsellor is central to the development of a working relationship because it enables clients  
78 to identify and work through issues associated with past relationships (Andersen & Speed,  
79 2010). Sharp and Hodge (2011) recently found that sport psychologists varied in their  
80 perceptions of athlete-transference. Some practitioners felt that athlete-transference  
81 accelerated the practitioner-athlete relationship while others believed that it could lead to a  
82 power imbalance in favour of the practitioner, which could result in athletes being less  
83 willing to divulge information. Regardless of these perceptions it has been argued that a lack  
84 of practitioner-awareness of both transference and countertransference can be detrimental to  
85 the consultancy process (Strean & Strean, 1998). More specifically, Stevens and Andersen  
86 (2007) discussed the role that transference and countertransference can play in the  
87 development of unethical erotic or sexual attractions between practitioners and athletes.  
88 Supervision and personal counselling have been recommended as a means through which to  
89 raise practitioner-awareness of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). However,  
90 sport psychologists have been found to vary in the nature, frequency and amount of  
91 supervision that they have (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Additionally, a quantitative study found  
92 that only one sport psychologist out of 58 reported using personal counselling despite them  
93 deeming self-awareness to be important (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Further research is  
94 needed to determine if and why practitioners neglect this aspect of practice so that  
95 appropriate training can be devised.

96           The *real relationship* is the final component of the counsellor-client relationship and  
97 is defined as, “the personal relationship existing between two or more people as reflected in  
98 the degree to which each is genuine with the other, and perceives and experiences the other in  
99 ways that benefit the other” (p. 6). Research indicates that the formation of genuine  
100 relationships which are based upon reality can strengthen practitioner-client *working*  
101 *alliances* and reduce client transference (Marmarosh et al., 2009). The sport psychology  
102 literature on the *real relationship* has focussed on sport psychologists’ use of the facilitative  
103 conditions (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz & Hemmings, 2009) and appropriate self-  
104 disclosure (Petitpas et al., 1999).

105           The facilitative conditions, founded within the humanistic approach to counselling,  
106 are those that enable clients to grow and develop and include: the counsellor being genuine  
107 within the relationship (congruent), holding the client in unconditional positive regard, being  
108 empathetic to the client’s situation and demonstrating warmth (Rogers, 1957). Watson (2007)  
109 asserted that although the facilitative conditions may not be enough in themselves to promote  
110 client change they enhance the interaction between the practitioner and client. Furthermore, it  
111 has been argued that the facilitative conditions encourage real, open and genuine  
112 relationships where clients feel listened to and understood and as a consequence, more likely  
113 to be to be invigorated to reach their goal (Petitpas et al., 1999). Both sport psychologists  
114 (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) and athletes (Anderson et al., 2004) have  
115 emphasised the importance of the facilitative conditions in the development of practitioner-  
116 athlete relationships. Katz and Hemmings (2009) and Murphy and Murphy (2010) have  
117 encouraged sport psychologists to use active listening skills (a unique form of listening which  
118 happens when sport psychologists encourage their athletes to “tell their story” and they hear  
119 what they are saying both factually and emotionally) to foster caring and genuine  
120 relationships. Active listening is enhanced through the use of summarising, paraphrasing,

121 reflecting and gaining clarification where necessary (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). While there  
122 is intuitive appeal in the use of the facilitative conditions and active listening to develop sport  
123 psychologist-athlete relationships, there is limited understanding of how practitioners make  
124 use of them or how they develop these skills.

125         Practitioner self-disclosure can also be used to foster *real relationships*. Research  
126 within counselling has revealed that counsellor self-disclosure can lead to increased client-  
127 disclosure particularly if the disclosures are similar (Henretty, Currier, Berman, & Levitt,  
128 2014). Research into use of self-disclosure by sport psychologists is limited, although the  
129 sharing of sporting experiences is seen as crucial to the development of practitioner-athlete  
130 relationships (Cropley et al., 2007) as practitioners can empathise with the situations within  
131 which athletes may find themselves (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). In spite of these initial insights,  
132 further research is needed to examine sport psychologists' use of self-disclosure as Petitpas  
133 and colleagues (1999) argued that sport psychologist self-disclosure must be for the benefit of  
134 the athlete and must not detract from their needs.

135         Owing to the potential benefits that the use of counselling principles and skills may  
136 have on the development of sport psychologist-athlete relationships, several training  
137 strategies have been proposed to develop this aspect of sport psychologists' practice. These  
138 include: engaging in role plays, being the client, recording supervision models, keeping  
139 training logs, having personal counselling, and engaging in trainee-supervisor relationships  
140 and networks (Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Petitpas et al., 1999; Tod, 2010; Winstone & Gervis,  
141 2006). Despite sport psychologists acknowledging the importance of undertaking training in  
142 counselling (Cropley et al., 2007; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) no  
143 research has been undertaken to examine their perceptions of, or engagement with, this  
144 training. This is of concern as current training methods on this aspect of practice may not be  
145 fit for purpose.

146 In 1999 Petitpas and colleagues proposed how sport psychologists could apply  
147 principles of counselling to aid the development of sport psychologist-athlete relationships.  
148 Other researchers have since presented similar arguments (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Katz &  
149 Hemmings, 2009; Murphy & Murphy, 2010), yet only limited research has been undertaken  
150 to examine if and how sport psychologists make use of them (Sharp & Hodge, 2011;  
151 Winstone & Gervis, 2006). This avenue of research warrants further examination as the  
152 demands placed on sport psychologists and the environments within which they work differ  
153 to counsellors. For example, unlike counsellors, sport psychologists will often find  
154 themselves socialising with athletes (e.g., at competitions) and may also be required to form  
155 relationships with other support staff (e.g., coaches; Katz & Hemmings, 2009). These factors  
156 may impact upon their use of counselling principles and skills and the nature of the  
157 relationships that they share with their athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to  
158 examine the use of counselling principles and skills by practitioners who provide sport  
159 psychology support, to enhance practitioner-athlete relationships. More specifically, the study  
160 examined: practitioners' development and training in counselling, practitioners' perceptions  
161 of the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships and practitioners' use of counselling  
162 principles and skills to develop of practitioner-athlete relationships.

## 163 Method

### 164 Participants

165 Thirteen participants (Mean age =  $41.2 \pm 10.9$  years old; five men, eight women;  
166 Mean number of years practicing =  $13.0 \pm 8.2$  (inclusive of training), range = 3-29 years)  
167 who were competent in providing sport psychology support to athletes in the United  
168 Kingdom were recruited. A broad sample (e.g., ages, experiences and training) was recruited  
169 to capture the range of ways in which counselling principles and skills may be used to  
170 develop practitioner-athlete relationships. More specifically, professionally active

171 practitioners who were either accredited (by the British Association of Sport and Exercise  
172 Sciences: BASES) Sport and Exercise Scientists (Sport Psychology) or Chartered (by the  
173 British Psychological Society; BPS) Psychologists and registered Sport and Exercise  
174 Psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) were invited to take part  
175 in the study (Cotterill, 2011). Additionally, one participant who was working for a  
176 professional sports team and had completed all of their training hours with the BPS over three  
177 years but was awaiting their final portfolio submission and viva was recruited. This  
178 participant has since fully qualified as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist. Eleven of the  
179 participants were purposively sampled via first and second author networks and a further two  
180 participants were recruited via snowball sampling.

### 181 **Procedure**

182       Upon gaining ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee, semi-structured  
183 interviews were conducted with all of the participants to examine their use of counselling  
184 principles and skills to aid the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Qualitative  
185 interviews were conducted as they enable understanding of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of  
186 phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2010), which directly aligned to the aims of this study. Semi-  
187 structured interviews were undertaken as they provided the interviewer with a general list of  
188 questions but allowed for deviation should they deem it necessary (Gratton & Jones, 2010).  
189 In order to assess the appropriateness of the interview guide, it was reviewed by the second  
190 author who aligned to the participant selection criteria. Subsequent amendments were made  
191 to the ordering of some of the questions.

192       For consistency all interviews were conducted by the first author who had extensive  
193 experience in conducting research interviews. Additionally, the first author had attended an  
194 Introduction to Counselling Course in the year prior to the study taking place which enhanced  
195 their understanding of counselling terminology. Choice in interview times and locations was



196 offered to all participants to make them feel comfortable as this is central to effective  
197 interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Before beginning the interview, all participants were  
198 informed about the purpose of the study and asked to provide informed consent. Their  
199 permission was also sought to record the interviews. For consistency, a definition of  
200 counselling was provided at the start of each interview to aid participant understanding:

201         A professional relationship between a trained counsellor and client... It is designed to  
202         help clients understand and clarify their views of their lifespace, and to learn to reach  
203         their self-determined goals through meaningful, well-informed choices and through  
204         the resolution of problems of an emotional or personal nature (Burks & Stefflre, 1979,  
205         p.14 cited in McLeod, 1994, p. 1).

206 The same semi-structured interview guide was used with all of the participants and was based  
207 upon recommendations made by both Petitpas and colleagues (1999) and Katz and  
208 Hemmings (2009) for how sport psychologists could make use of counselling principles and  
209 skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. The interview guide consisted of six  
210 sections which were aligned to the aims of the study including: participants' background  
211 information and their development and training in counselling, the importance that they  
212 placed on the practitioner-athlete relationship, if and how they applied the three components  
213 of counsellor-client relationship to their sport psychology consultancy (working alliance, the  
214 *real relationship*, awareness of the *unreal relationship*) to enhance practitioner-client  
215 relationships, their confidence in using these methods and perceptions of the  
216 training/supervision that they had received and finally, the consequences of the use of  
217 counselling principles and skills. Probes and follow up questions were used when more  
218 information was wanted from a participant (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviews lasted an  
219 average of 57 minutes (range = 38-91 minutes).

220

**221 Data analysis**

222 All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times by the lead author to  
223 increase their familiarity with the data. Upon completion of this process two phases of  
224 thematic analysis were undertaken by the lead author to identify common categories from the  
225 data (Weber, 1990) whilst also acknowledging rare participant experiences as these are  
226 equally insightful (Krane, Andersen, & Streaun, 1997). Data were firstly deductively analysed.  
227 Deductive analysis involves the use of pre-existing categories to collate and categorise  
228 interview data (Patton, 2002). This phase of analysis was shaped by the three aims of the  
229 study which were to determine practitioners' development and training in counselling,  
230 practitioners' perceptions of the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships and  
231 practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills to develop of practitioner-athlete  
232 relationships. The deductive approach seemed appropriate given the counselling relationship  
233 theory on which the interviews were based (e.g., the *working alliance*, the *unreal*  
234 *relationship*, the *real relationship* and counselling skills).

235 Upon completion of the deductive analysis a second phase of inductive analysis was  
236 undertaken. Inductive analysis was undertaken to categorise interview data that did not fit  
237 into the existing categories (Patton, 2002). As a result of this process two further sections of  
238 analysis were undertaken: challenges to the development of practitioner-athlete relationships  
239 and the use of counselling skills, and practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies to build  
240 practitioner-athlete relationships. Throughout both phases of analysis tags were used to  
241 categorise similar extracts of interview data (Côte, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993).

**242 Trustworthiness and accuracy of the data**

243 Several methods were adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the data.  
244 Participant quotes (Sparkes, 1998) and negative cases which demonstrated contradictory  
245 information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were presented in the results to allow readers to assess

246 the accuracy of the conclusions. Furthermore, once the first author had analysed the data the  
247 second author assessed the accuracy with which the participants' viewpoints and experiences  
248 had been represented to further corroborate the validity of the analysis process. The  
249 transferability of the data was ensured by providing a thorough description of the participants  
250 and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the same interviewer and interview guide was  
251 used with all participants for consistency.

## 252 **Results**

253 In accordance with the aims of the study and the analysis process the results comprise five  
254 sections: practitioners' development and training in counselling/counselling skills, the  
255 importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship, how practitioners' use counselling  
256 principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, challenges to the  
257 development of practitioner-athlete relationships and the use of counselling skills, and finally  
258 practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies used to develop practitioner-athlete  
259 relationships. Within each section the categories (and where relevant sub-categories) that  
260 emerged as a result of the analysis procedure are discussed. Furthermore, owing to the large  
261 volume of data that was generated figures are presented within three sections to illustrate  
262 additional detail that emerged as a result of the coding process. Two sections (Importance of  
263 the practitioner-athlete relationship and challenges to the use of counselling principles and  
264 skills and relationship development) do not make use of figures as the participants discussed  
265 only a limited number of concepts.

### 266 **Practitioners' development and training in counselling/ counselling skills**

267 Figure one provides descriptive information on the four categories that comprise the  
268 participants' development and training in counselling/skills (reasons why training was  
269 undertaken, type of training undertaken, content of training and methods used to equip  
270 practitioners with counselling skills). There was considerable variation between the

271 participants in their training/development in counselling. The most widely reported mode of  
272 training undertaken was a certificate in counselling course, lasting up to 10 weeks, which  
273 covered a range of theoretical counselling approaches and equipped the participants with  
274 basic counselling skills (e.g., active listening) through methods including role plays.

### 275 **FIGURE 1**

276 The reasons for the participants seeking training in counselling were varied.  
277 Participant eight said, “I wanted to upskill myself in counselling techniques to help those  
278 one-to-ones and I suppose it counts towards my BPS (training) as well ... they (the BPS)  
279 don’t specify what you need to do for CPD but it does count towards it.” Although many of  
280 the participants reported being confident in the use of counselling skills participant two was  
281 keen to reiterate that they were, “not a counsellor” but used counselling skills.

282 It is important to acknowledge that although many of the participants had undertaken  
283 some form of training or development in counselling (even if this involved only reading  
284 counselling literature) participant six felt negatively about counselling and had done no  
285 training in it:

286 The bad stereotype of counselling I think I’d want to avoid quite strongly, the sort of  
287 being too empathetic or listening too much because athletes sort of just want a normal  
288 chat with someone. They don’t want to think in this situation that they’re having a  
289 counselling session ... I suppose maybe I haven’t got the right view of counselling.

290 There were suggestions that there should be more training for UK trainees in counselling  
291 skills (e.g., attendance on a short counselling course). Participant 10 also argued that trainees  
292 should engage in personal counselling to develop understanding of what it is like to, “Walk a  
293 mile in their (the athlete) shoes and see what it’s like.”

294

295

**296 The importance of practitioner-athlete relationships**

297 All of the participants emphasised the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships  
298 stating that they could not practice effectively without them. However, participant 13 argued  
299 that the relationships did not have to be based on a mutual liking of one another stating,  
300 “Particularly at elite performance level it (liking one another) isn’t essential. Nonetheless  
301 there needs to be some kind of relating in order for that some kind of usefulness is gained on  
302 both sides and particularly for the client/athlete.”

303 Explanations for the importance of practitioner-athlete relationships included that they  
304 enhanced athlete disclosure and willingness to talk. There was a perception that an increased  
305 willingness to talk enabled the practitioner to gain greater understanding of the athlete, which  
306 allowed them to cater for their needs better. Participant 12 stated, “I think if you haven’t got  
307 that good relationship I don’t think people will tell you things ... what you discuss will be  
308 very superficial and you won’t get to the bottom of what’s going on.” The second explanation  
309 for the importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship was that it positively impacted  
310 athletes’ adherence and willingness to try recommendations made by the practitioner.  
311 Participant three suggested that this was particularly pertinent when the athlete was under  
312 pressure stating, “I think without a strong relationship... when an athlete is under pressure if  
313 they are being asked to do something from someone whom they don’t trust the likelihood of  
314 them doing that, however correct the request is, is quite small.”

**315 Practitioners’ use of counselling principles and skills to develop and maintain  
316 practitioner-athlete relationships**

317 This section comprises four categories; the *unreal relationship*, the *real relationship*,  
318 the *working alliance* and counselling skills. Each category was analysed in terms of 1) the  
319 importance of the counselling principle or skill to the development of practitioner-athlete  
320 relationships and 2) how it was applied/ considered by the participants. Owing to the wide

321 range of ways in which each counselling principle/skill was applied figure 2 is presented to  
322 provide descriptive information.

323 **FIGURE 2**

324 ***Working alliance.*** Although there was variation between the participants in the  
325 *working alliances* that they created with their athletes there was agreement that athletes  
326 should be actively involved in the process. Some of the participants emphasised two-way  
327 working relationships with their athletes, while others preferred to develop alliances that were  
328 driven by the athlete but fostered by the practitioner. Participant seven explained, “I’m almost  
329 like the farmer, I’ll plant the seed and tend to it and it’s up to them (the athlete) to grow ... it  
330 might take one session it might take a number of sessions.” Finally, some of the participants  
331 perceived that the nature of the *working alliance* depended on whether the athlete knew what  
332 they wanted and participant nine argued that it was based upon the practitioner being the  
333 expert. Participant five expressed that the development of a *working alliance* was important  
334 because it ensured that athletes would continue to implement psychological techniques when  
335 they were no longer working together. Participant 13 described the *working alliance* as,  
336 “Allowing us to work with our clients even when we’re having a bad day ... the *working*  
337 *alliance* is the agreement that we turn up and give our best regardless and so does the client.”

338 The participants reported using a range of methods and strategies to develop a  
339 *working alliance* on the goals, tasks and the bond that they shared. Many of the participants  
340 discussed the importance of reiterating to the athlete that the working relationship was  
341 professional and confidential. Participant 12 said, “I feel very strongly that if you don’t have  
342 a good relationship where the client feels comfortable, knowing and believing that everything  
343 he or she says will be kept confidential, I just think you can’t get anywhere.” Despite  
344 emphasising professional and confidential relationships, bonds where they were, “Friendly  
345 but not a friend” were also discussed by several participants. Finally, some participants

346 discussed the importance of being consistent, around and contactable. Participant eight  
347 explained, “If they’re (the athlete) going through something difficult ... I’ll arrange a time  
348 and I’ll say look I’m going to give you a call ... So even if I’m not seeing them daily I’m sort  
349 of there.”

350       **Awareness of the *unreal relationship*.** There was a lot of participant variation in their  
351 consideration of the *unreal relationship*. Some participants suggested that they did not  
352 consider the *unreal relationship* because its principles did not align to the theoretical  
353 framework (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy; CBT) from which they practiced. Participant  
354 one partially considered it when providing psychological support for a sport which they had  
355 previously competed. Some participants discussed an awareness of the *unreal relationship* as  
356 being very important to the practitioner-athlete relationship as it enabled them to avoid being  
357 ‘sucked’ into relationships based on athlete transference, stopped them from assuming what  
358 their athletes were feeling and ensured that they provided the same support to all athletes.  
359 Additionally, participant 13 suggested that it stopped her from questioning her efficacy as a  
360 practitioner:

361       I worked with a footballer who was injured and he was very depressed and he was very  
362 angry. Now I used to, when he left those sessions, I used to feel pretty helpless...I  
363 believe that to have been his helplessness. What would have happened had I not been  
364 able to have worked that through? Well there would have perhaps been a sense of well  
365 actually I’m not very good at this.

366 Self-reflection on practice and in practice, personal supervision, and attendance on  
367 counselling courses were all discussed as means through which to raise practitioner  
368 awareness of the *unreal relationship*.

369       **The real relationship.** The *real relationship* comprises five subcategories: self-  
370 disclosure, empathy, warmth, congruence and holding the athlete in unconditional positive.

371           **Self-disclosure.** The participants reported using self-disclosure only when it was  
372 necessary. It was suggested that the use of practitioner self-disclosure could increase athletes'  
373 trust in the practitioner, break down barriers, demonstrate empathy, make the athlete feel  
374 more understood and less alone and encourage reciprocal disclosure. When using self-  
375 disclosure it was argued that it must be for the benefit of the athlete rather than the  
376 practitioner, be genuine, well-considered and relevant. Participant ten discussed the  
377 importance of taking care in disclosing about past amateur sporting experiences with elite  
378 athletes explaining, "My self-disclosure about sporting contexts, it's not really going to cut  
379 the mustard with most people and that's quite advantageous ... it means I'm more interested  
380 in their (the athlete) experience."

381           **Empathy.** Many of the participants emphasised the importance of being empathic  
382 with their athletes suggesting that it led to a breaking down of barriers, enhanced athlete  
383 disclosure and demonstrated connection and support. However, it was indicated that  
384 practitioner empathy needed to be genuine as athletes would sense if it was not sincere with  
385 participant 13 stating, "It's a necessary quality but if it's used as a pretence then I think it's  
386 very damaging because clients will know that you don't get them they will feel that." It was  
387 also emphasised that practitioners needed to make it clear to their athletes that they can never  
388 fully understand their experience with participant two stating, "I always say all you can try  
389 and do is approximate, closely approximate someone's experiences as close as you can, you  
390 can't live that life of that person, you can't say I understand you." The participants conveyed  
391 empathy through a variety of means including: paraphrasing, showing compassion,  
392 discussing similar experiences with the athlete, implicitly through their body language, and  
393 by being honest with the athlete that they could never possibly fully understand their  
394 experience.



395            ***Being genuine (congruent)***. Some of the participants discussed the importance of  
396 being genuine with their athletes and being genuinely interested in them. It was explained  
397 that being genuine enhances practitioner-athlete relationships because it allows athletes to see  
398 the practitioner as a ‘normal human’ which leads to increased trust and honesty. The  
399 participants indicated that they satisfied this facilitative condition by being themselves with  
400 participant one stating, “It’s not like you’re just going in and acting like you’re someone  
401 you’re not, it’s not like going in a putting on a façade, you know suddenly I’ve got my  
402 practitioner hat on. You know it’s me.” Additionally, participant ten suggested that  
403 acknowledging that they did not have all the answers also showed that they were being  
404 genuine, “If you can show a bit of vulnerability sometimes that can really enhance the  
405 relationship.” Finally, it was advised that it was important to be genuine while controlling  
406 judgement.

407            ***Warmth***. The importance of caring for their athletes and showing them was discussed  
408 with suggestions that it provided a platform for the future work that they did with their  
409 athletes. For example, participant ten stated, “I think it’s a Roosevelt quote rather than a Ken  
410 Ravizza quote but Ken Ravizza’s taken it and run with it, ‘that you’ve shown that you care  
411 before they care what you know.” Participant two showed his athletes that he cared for them  
412 by listening saying, “though it might be a monetary transaction you do care ... people sense  
413 that. You demonstrate by the nothing more grand than the listening and active listening  
414 skills.”

415            ***Unconditional positive regard***. The participants varied in their use of unconditional  
416 positive regard to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. Some of the participants felt that  
417 the concept may sometimes be at odds with being genuine. Instead, a number of the  
418 participants preferred to talk about the importance of being non-judgemental although this  
419 was also sometimes deemed challenging. It was suggested by participant four that being

420 judgemental could act a barrier which would undermine the relationship. As such, she  
421 discussed how she ensured that she was not being judgemental, “You have to remain very  
422 conscious not to react in a personal way ... how you would in sort of in your non-  
423 professional life ... you have to think ... the word that you use and your body language.”  
424 Participant 11 further discussed the importance of not being judgemental at an elite level  
425 stating, “They’re being evaluated in everything that they do and I don’t want them to see that  
426 I’m another layer that they have too.”

427         **Counselling skills.** The participants employed counselling principles and skills  
428 independently of the three components of counselling relationships to develop relationships  
429 with their athletes. For example, there was some discussion around the importance of being  
430 comfortable with silence within the relationship. All of the participants reported that the use  
431 of active listening was central to the development of relationships. Participant ten discussed  
432 the importance of listening to emotional content stating, “Factual listening for sure, most  
433 people appreciate that, but emotional listening, I think people will take you to a different  
434 level in terms of building relationships.” Participant one went as far as to suggest that 80% of  
435 her work with an athlete could be listening. Finally, some of the participants mentioned the  
436 importance of being in a ‘good place’ themselves in the development of practitioner-athlete  
437 relationships. Participant three said, “At times it’s saying no I’m not able to see you (the  
438 athlete) now because I’m not in a position to be sufficiently psychologically robust to meet  
439 your demands.”

#### 440 **Challenges to the use of counselling principles and skills and relationship development**

441         Although it was not a direct objective of the study, several challenges to the use of  
442 counselling principles and skills and the development of practitioner-athlete relationships  
443 were highlighted. The most commonly reported challenges pertained to the environment  
444 within which consultancy was done and also the goals of the team/club. Participant seven

445 stated, “A café has become my office with my cricketer which is interesting because he shuts  
446 up when people walk past.” Participant eight argued, “As much as I like to listen ... the world  
447 of sport doesn’t really allow you to do that for a long period of time and after a point there  
448 has to be some sort of visible change.” Additionally, emotional involvement with the team,  
449 sharing the athletes’ environment and whether the athlete had had any choice in seeing the  
450 practitioner were discussed as impacting the relationship.

### 451 **Non-counselling strategies to develop and maintain practitioner athlete relationships**

452 Although it was not a direct objective of the study to examine the participants’ use of  
453 non-counselling strategies (Figure 3) to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, they  
454 warrant reporting owing to their diversity. For the purpose of analysis the strategies were  
455 collated within the categories; behaviours and actions and content of discussions. Some of the  
456 participants reported using reflection in practice and on practice to aid the development of  
457 practitioner-athlete relationships. Participant five also discussed another strategy used, “If the  
458 kids are having a drinks break in their training, just going over and having a quick little chat  
459 ... it doesn’t have to be that you’re talking about football ... Just to start engaging with them  
460 and it’s a slow process.” Participant three talked about the importance of understanding  
461 hidden meanings and the culture in relationship development:

462 I got feedback from an athlete some years ago, one of the very first trips abroad with  
463 them, they were in the start area for something and they said could I just pass them, I  
464 think it was a bottle of water or some tape, ‘of course.’ I personally didn’t think  
465 anything of it. Fast forward a couple of year. They said had you not done that would  
466 have never spoken to you again.

### 467 **FIGURE 3**

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**Discussion**

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This study examined how practitioners who provide sport psychology support to athletes use counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships. In accordance with recent research (Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Sharp et al., in press) all of the participants in this study emphasised the importance of the practitioner-athlete relationship. Findings indicated that practitioners believe that they cannot work effectively without sound practitioner-athlete relationships because they increase athletes' self-disclosure, and willingness to try and adhere to recommendations made by the practitioner. Both of these factors are linked to effective sport psychology consultancy. For example, sport psychologists require a holistic understanding of their athletes in order to best cater for their needs (Gardner & Moore, 2006; Petitpas et al., 1999). Additionally, the effectiveness of the psychological strategies recommended by sport psychologists are influenced by athletes' adherence to their practice and use (Shambrook & Bull, 1999). Given the importance placed on the practitioner-athlete relationship it was of little surprise to find that most of the participants had undertaken some form of development or training in counselling. Generally, the participants had positive perceptions of the role that counselling principles and skills play in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. However, variation was found between the participants in their use of the three components of counsellor-client relationships (the *unreal relationship*, *real relationship* and working alliance) and counselling skills. Additionally, a number of sport-specific challenges to the formation of relationships and use of counselling principles and skills were discussed. Finally, the participants reported using a range of non-counselling strategies to foster the development of practitioner-athlete relationships.

In order to provide some context to the participants' use of counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships, findings revealed that they varied considerably in their training and development in counselling and counselling skills. The

495 most commonly cited mode of training undertaken was a short-course in counselling which  
496 typically equipped the participants with understanding of a range of theoretical approaches  
497 and developed their basic counselling skills (e.g., active listening, questioning). The variation  
498 between the participants in their development and training in counselling was interesting in  
499 terms of comparisons that can be made with practitioners within the USA. In order to become  
500 a certificated consultant in the USA, trainees are required to undertake educational training  
501 and coursework in basic counselling skills (AASP, 2015). Although trainees within the UK  
502 have to demonstrate knowledge of counselling, attendance on a counselling course is not  
503 mandatory and can be fulfilled by engaging in relevant readings (as was the case by one of  
504 the participants; BPS, 2011). This is a concern given that practitioners acknowledge that  
505 interpersonal skills can be developed through practical experiences (Pope-Rhodus, 2000) and  
506 recognise that attendance on basic counselling courses can support this development (Cropley  
507 et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). The participants in this study argued that greater training  
508 in counselling skills should be provided to UK trainees (e.g., attendance on a short course in  
509 counselling should be mandatory).

510         The participants reported using a range of counselling principles and skills to develop  
511 practitioner-athlete relationships. Findings indicated that practitioners emphasise the  
512 development of *working alliances* where the athletes are actively involved in the process.  
513 This finding is supportive of recent research by Sharp and Hodge (2011; in press). In  
514 accordance Petitpas et al (1999) there were suggestions that the development of a *working*  
515 *alliance* between the practitioner and athlete could positively impact on athlete adherence to  
516 the practice and use of psychological techniques. Although *working alliances* are agreed  
517 between practitioners and clients (Hovarth et al., 2011), the participants provided insight into  
518 how they foster their side of the working relationship. More specifically, the participants  
519 discussed the importance of the bond that they shared with their athletes. Katz and Hemmings

520 (2009) previously argued that practitioners often neglect to agree the bond that they share  
521 with their athletes. However, the participants in this study emphasised the creation of safe,  
522 professional, purposeful and confidential bonds. Additionally, some of the participants  
523 mentioned the importance of being friendly but not a friend. Previous research has similarly  
524 found that sport psychologists nurture informal professional bonds with their athletes because  
525 they believe that they make athletes more at ease and thus more likely to disclose (Sharp &  
526 Hodge, 2011). The importance of being around and consistent, and following up on actions  
527 even if this was over the telephone after the consultancy session was also discussed, and  
528 presented a unique distinction between sport psychologists and counsellors in terms of how  
529 *working alliances* are formed. Counsellor-client relationships will often take place within  
530 agreed consulting sessions. However, in accordance with previous research with both athletes  
531 (Sharp et al., 2014) and sport psychologists (Sharp et al., in press) findings suggest that  
532 successful practitioner-athlete *working alliances* require the practitioner to ‘go beyond’  
533 scheduled sessions and be contactable to their clients.

534         In relation to the development of a *real relationship* the participants varied in their use  
535 of self-disclosure although many used it when necessary to build practitioner-athlete rapport  
536 and reduce an athlete’s sense of isolation. In support of recommendations made by Petitpas et  
537 al. (1999) it was argued that self-disclosure should be well-considered and be for the benefit  
538 of the athlete rather than themselves. Additionally, there were reports that practitioner self-  
539 disclosure should be relevant and comparable to the athlete. Previous research indicates that  
540 sport psychologists sometimes discuss their past sporting experiences with their athletes to  
541 build relationships with them (Cropley et al., 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). However, one  
542 participant within study (who had previously been an amateur athlete) suggested caution in  
543 this approach, particularly when working with elite athletes, arguing that this type of  
544 disclosure could direct interest away from the athlete. Additionally, it is unlikely that this

545 type of disclosure would be comparable to the elite athlete's experience. Research within  
546 counselling indicates that comparable practitioner self-disclosure is more likely to lead to  
547 reciprocal client disclosure (Henretty et al., 2014).

548         The participants were found to vary in their use of the facilitative conditions to  
549 develop *real relationships* with athletes. Some of the participants questioned holding their  
550 athletes in unconditional positive regard because it could be at odds with being genuine. This  
551 notion has previously been discussed within counselling (Irving & Dickson, 2006). Many of  
552 the participants emphasised the importance of being non-judgemental, demonstrating  
553 empathy and warmth and being genuine in the development of practitioner-athlete  
554 relationships. This is supportive of previous research which has found that both athletes  
555 (Anderson et al., 2004) and practitioners (Cropley et al., 2007; Pope-Rhodus., 2000; Sharp &  
556 Hodge, 2011) regard these characteristics as essential characteristics of sport psychologists.  
557 The participants used a range of strategies including active listening, paraphrasing and being  
558 open and honest to foster the facilitative conditions.

559         Although the facilitative conditions and self-disclosure have been emphasised to sport  
560 psychologists to develop *real relationships* it is important to acknowledge the role of the  
561 athlete in this process as *real relationships* unfold between two or more people (Gelso, 2009).  
562 Typically, the practitioner-athlete relationship within sport has been examined from either the  
563 practitioner's (Sharp & Hodge, 2011) or athlete's perspective (Sharp & Hodge, 2014) with  
564 little examination of the interaction between the two parties. Further research on the shared  
565 dynamic between the practitioner and athlete is required in order to provide greater insight  
566 into the workings of the relationship.

567         The *unreal relationship* was most divisive between the participants in terms of the  
568 role that it is believed to play in the development of practitioner-athlete relationships. Some  
569 of the participants did not consider it relevant to their practice because its psycho-analytical

570 origins did not align to the framework within which they practiced (often CBT). The  
571 importance of practicing in accordance with one or more theoretical frameworks has been  
572 emphasised within sport psychology (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). However,  
573 this study provides evidence to suggest that practitioner-confinement to one theoretical  
574 approach may mean that they neglect other important aspects of the practitioner-athlete  
575 relationship e.g., practicing purely from a CBT perspective may mean that concepts such as  
576 transference and countertransference are not considered.

577         The participants that did acknowledge the *unreal relationship* reported that having an  
578 awareness of it ensured that all athletes were catered for equally and that it could stop them  
579 from: developing relationships based on athlete transference, assuming how their athletes  
580 were feeling and experiencing self-doubt. While one of the participants (who was also a  
581 qualified counsellor) used personal supervision to raise her awareness of countertransference  
582 other participants reported engaging in self-reflection (in-practice and on-practice)  
583 independently of a supervisor or counsellor. The role of reflective practice in the  
584 development of practitioner-athlete relationships has been discussed (Cropley, Hanton, Miles  
585 & Niven, 2010), although there is limited information on how it can be used to raise  
586 awareness of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). It is possible that practitioners  
587 who provide sport psychology support rely on self-reflection as a means through which to  
588 raise awareness of countertransference because continued supervision is not mandatory for  
589 sport psychologists as it is for counsellors (BACP, 2015). Further research is needed to  
590 examine how practitioners use independent self-reflection to raise awareness of  
591 countertransference in order to ascertain whether this method is fit for purpose.

592         The participants reported using a range of counselling skills and principles to develop  
593 practitioner-athlete relationships independently of the three components of the counsellor-  
594 client relationships. Counselling skills are interpersonal skills which have emerged from the



595 counselling profession but can be used by other professionals (e.g. health professionals) to  
596 aid their work (Sanders, 2011). Counselling skills include: listening skills, reading body  
597 language, questioning, demonstrating understanding (Nelson-Jones, 1997). The participants  
598 within this study typically emphasised the importance of these skills in developing safe and  
599 secure relationships with their athletes. Additionally, some participants discussed the  
600 importance of being psychologically robust themselves to consult with their athletes. Whilst  
601 the personal well-being of the practitioner is acknowledged within counselling relationships  
602 (Rogers, 1957) less attention has been devoted to sport psychologists' wellbeing. This  
603 warrants consideration as a practitioner acknowledging that they are not able to see an athlete  
604 may be at odds with the need for them to be available and contactable outside of working  
605 hours.

606         Although this study indicated that practitioners deem practitioner-athlete relationships  
607 to be important and the use of counselling principles and skills to be necessary, a number of  
608 sport-specific challenges to their formation and use were identified. For example, some  
609 participants discussed how they were often required to work in a variety of settings (e.g.,  
610 hotel lobbies while on tour, training pitches) which could sometimes blur boundaries and  
611 compromise the practitioner-athlete bond. Sharp and Hodge (2011) recently argued that  
612 working within informal settings could be beneficial in making athletes feel more at ease,  
613 however findings from this study suggest that sport psychology undertaken within public  
614 places can cause athletes to "close up." Additionally, there was evidence that practitioner-  
615 athlete relationships can be influenced by club/team goals. These challenges are unique to  
616 sport psychology and should be acknowledged by practitioners when building relationships  
617 with their athletes.

618         Although it was not a direct objective of the study all of the participants reported the  
619 use of non-counselling strategies (e.g., matching oneself to the athlete, knowing the culture

620 and sport and self-reflection) to develop of practitioner-athlete relationships. The range of  
621 strategies used may be reflective of the lack of literature available to practitioners on this  
622 aspect of practice and their experiential learning. However, it is important to acknowledge  
623 that the strategies used may also be a reflection of the unique demands placed on sport  
624 psychologists. For example, coaches have previously expressed that sport psychologists who  
625 are effective at building relationships with athletes and coaching staff have a sound  
626 knowledge of the team and sporting environment (Sharp et al., 2013). Finally, although  
627 reflective practice for raising awareness of countertransference has already been discussed it  
628 is important to acknowledge that several participants used it to develop their athlete-  
629 relationships more generally. Once again this finding supports the use of reflective practice as  
630 a form of professional development for relationship building.

### 631 **Conclusion**

632 Findings from this study indicate that practitioners who provide sport psychology  
633 support to athletes deem sound practitioner-athlete relationships to be central to their  
634 effectiveness. Despite there being a lack of research on the how to develop practitioner-  
635 athlete relationships, practitioners implement a range of counselling and non-counselling  
636 strategies to aid this aspect of practice. There is evidence to suggest that practitioners feel that  
637 further training on counselling skills would be beneficial in aiding the development of  
638 practitioner-athlete relationships. However, practitioners who provide sport psychology  
639 support to athletes face a number of challenges (e.g., the environment within which they  
640 practice and team/club goals) which may impact upon their ability to form relationships with  
641 their athletes and apply counselling skills.

642 Several practical implications emerged as a result of this study. Firstly, findings  
643 indicate that there should be more formalised training in counselling principles and skills for  
644 UK-based trainees. More specifically, training programmes should seek to develop trainees'

645 theoretical and practical understanding of *real* and *unreal* relationships, *working alliances*  
646 and counselling skills. However, sport psychologists should be consulted in the development  
647 of such training as it is important to acknowledge the unique sporting environments within  
648 which these principles and skills may be applied.

649         Although these findings address an under-researched aspect of practice this  
650 investigation had several limitations. Firstly, there was an under-representation of neophyte  
651 practitioners which may limit understanding of what training current trainees receive in  
652 counselling principles and skills. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that the  
653 participants were based within the UK. Therefore, the transferability of the some of the  
654 findings (e.g., the participants' training in counselling principles and skills) to sport  
655 psychologists in other countries may be limited.

656         In spite of these limitations, several avenues for future research emerged from this  
657 project. Firstly, sport psychologists' competency in the use of counselling principles and  
658 skills should be examined. Moreover, there may be benefit in comparing practitioners who  
659 have undertaken counselling training with those who have not in their ability to form  
660 practitioner-athlete relationships to enable the importance of this aspect of practice to be  
661 quantified. Future research may also seek to explore athletes' perceptions of the importance  
662 of practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills in the development of practitioner-  
663 athlete relationships. Finally, there is a need to undertake a cross-sectional survey to quantify  
664 practitioners' training in and use of counselling skills.

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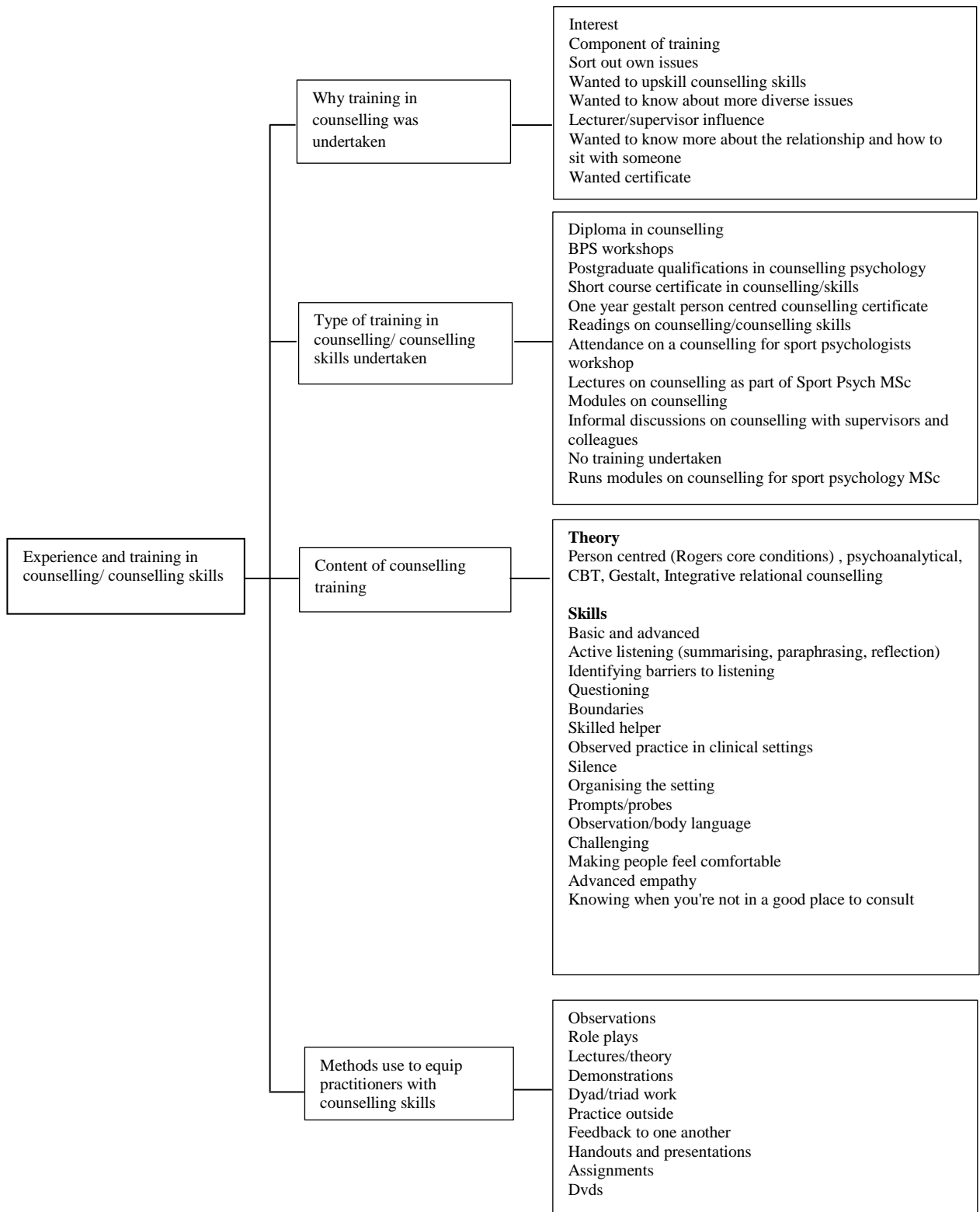


Figure 1. Practitioners' training in counselling/counselling skills.

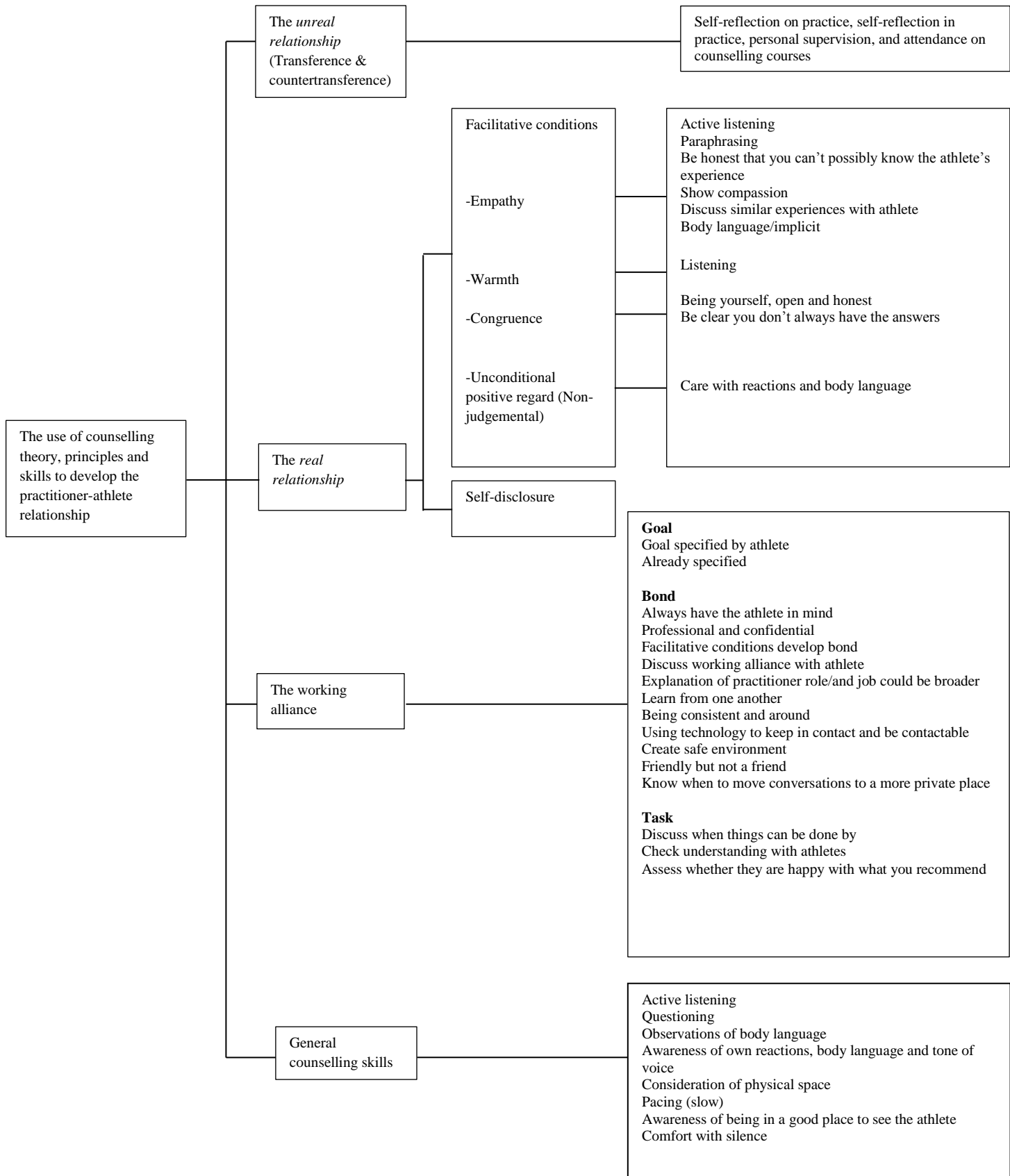


Figure 2. Practitioners' use of counselling principles and skills to develop practitioner-athlete relationships.

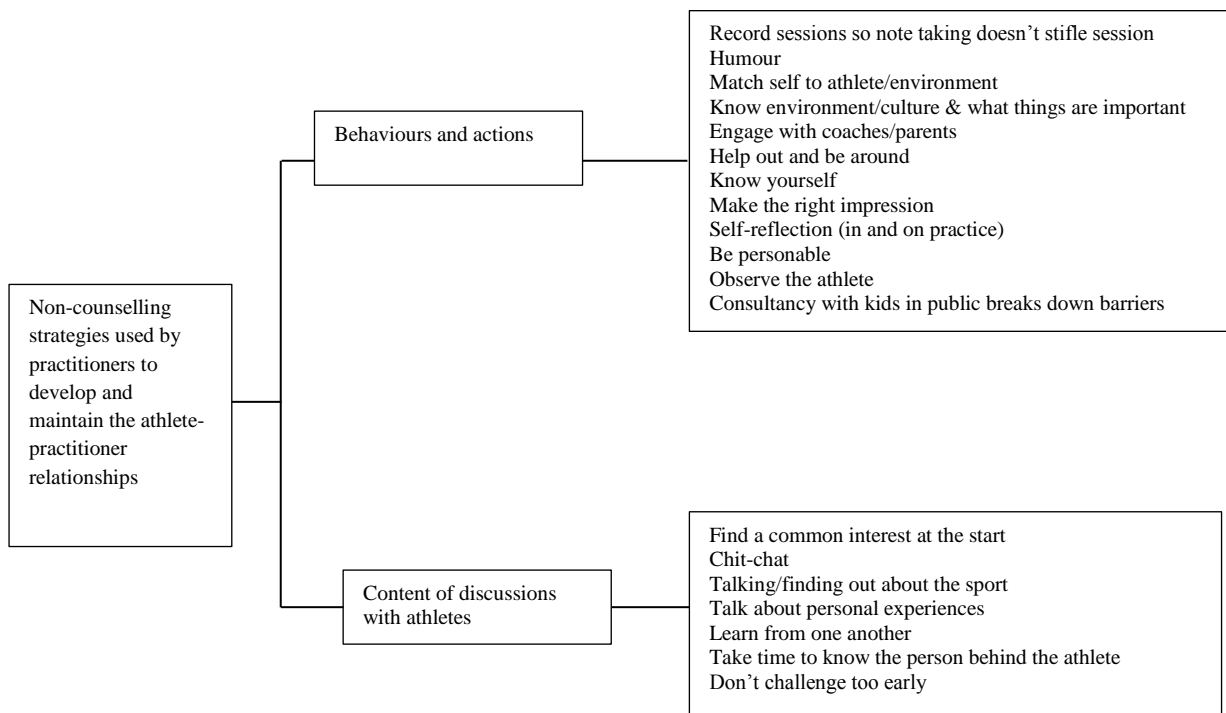


Figure 3. Practitioners' use of non-counselling strategies to develop practitioner-athlete relationships.