

# 'Elephant spotting': The importance of developing shared understanding to work more effectively with talented but challenging athletes

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*This paper explores the use of psychological formulation within elite sport environments as a process to help practitioners and coaches develop a shared understanding of their athlete's challenges and successes. The team formulation process or 'elephant spotting' incorporates the use of psychological knowledge to develop an understanding of the athlete's experience, their wider support system, and the broader environment and is used to inform a coherent, consistent and holistic intervention plan that is open to testing and review.*

**Keywords:** *shared understanding; psychological formulation; athlete; talent; challenging.*

*'That athlete has got an attitude problem'*

*'They just don't want it enough'*

*'He's not mentally tough enough to cope with pressure situations'*

*'We just need to be harder on her to prepare her for the realities of elite sport'*

*'Maybe we should send him to see someone to sort his head out'*

## **The blind men and the elephant parable**

**T**HE PARABLE of the blind men and the elephant suggests that disputes among individuals arise not so much from errors of fact and argument but from differences of perspective – incomplete perceptions, each from a different angle of view, of a more complex reality. In the parable, six blind men were challenged to accurately describe an elephant. To add to the challenge, each man was taken to the elephant alone and allowed to touch only one area of the animal. When they were asked to describe the elephant they each have a completely different perspective:

- One blind man grabs the tusk and says, 'An elephant is like a spear!'
- Another feels the trunk and concludes, 'An elephant is like a snake!'
- The third blind man hugging the leg thinks, 'An elephant is like a tree!'

- The one holding the tail claims, 'An elephant is like a rope!'
- Another feeling the ear believes, 'An elephant is like a fan!'
- The last blind man leaning on the elephant's side exclaims, 'An elephant is like a wall!'

Because each man was trapped in his own unique, but isolated perception, none of the six were able to form a clear mental picture of the elephant. If instead they combined their individual knowledge and openly shared their perspectives, the blind men might arrive at a more accurate conclusion. What the blind men needed was an opportunity to collaboratively engage in purposeful discussion and reflection. Such discussion would allow for the development of a shared understanding of the 'problem' (in this instance, the elephant) and generate a more

appropriate response. When considering the relevance of this experience in an elite sport environment, without a shared understanding and a co-ordinated action plan, the various members of an athlete's support network are like the blind men – struggling in isolation to make sense of an athlete's challenging behaviour. Such challenging behaviour can often lead to 'splitting' and conflict within the group and can frequently result in inconsistent and/or unco-ordinated interventions, which at best lack effectiveness and at worst maintain or reinforce the problem.

### **The role of psychological formulation in understanding complexity**

Practitioner psychologists can use psychological formulation to describe and understand the needs of their clients. It has been described as:

*'The tool used by clinicians to relate theory to practice... It is the lynchpin that holds theory and practice together... Formulations can be best understood as hypotheses to be tested'.*

(Butler, 1998, p.2)

As opposed to simple 'labels' we attach to problems (such as he or she has an 'attitude problem' or lacks 'bottle'), psychological formulation is concerned with understanding the experiences that may have led to any particular presenting concern (or particular strength) and is in effect a hypothesis or range of hypotheses the draw on psychological knowledge and theory and describe how a difficulty (or strength) may have developed, how it is maintained and what may reduce the chances of it continuing. Such hypotheses are open to scientific process, and can guide interventions and action planning. A comprehensive formulation should:

- Summarise the athlete's core challenges (or strengths);
- Suggest how the athlete's challenges or strengths may relate to one another, by drawing on psychological theories and principles;

- Aim to explain, on the basis of psychological theory, the development and maintenance of the difficulties (or strengths), at this time and in these situations;
- Indicate a plan of intervention which is based on the psychological processes and principles already identified;
- Be open to revision and re-formulation.

(Adapted from Johnstone & Dallos, 2006)

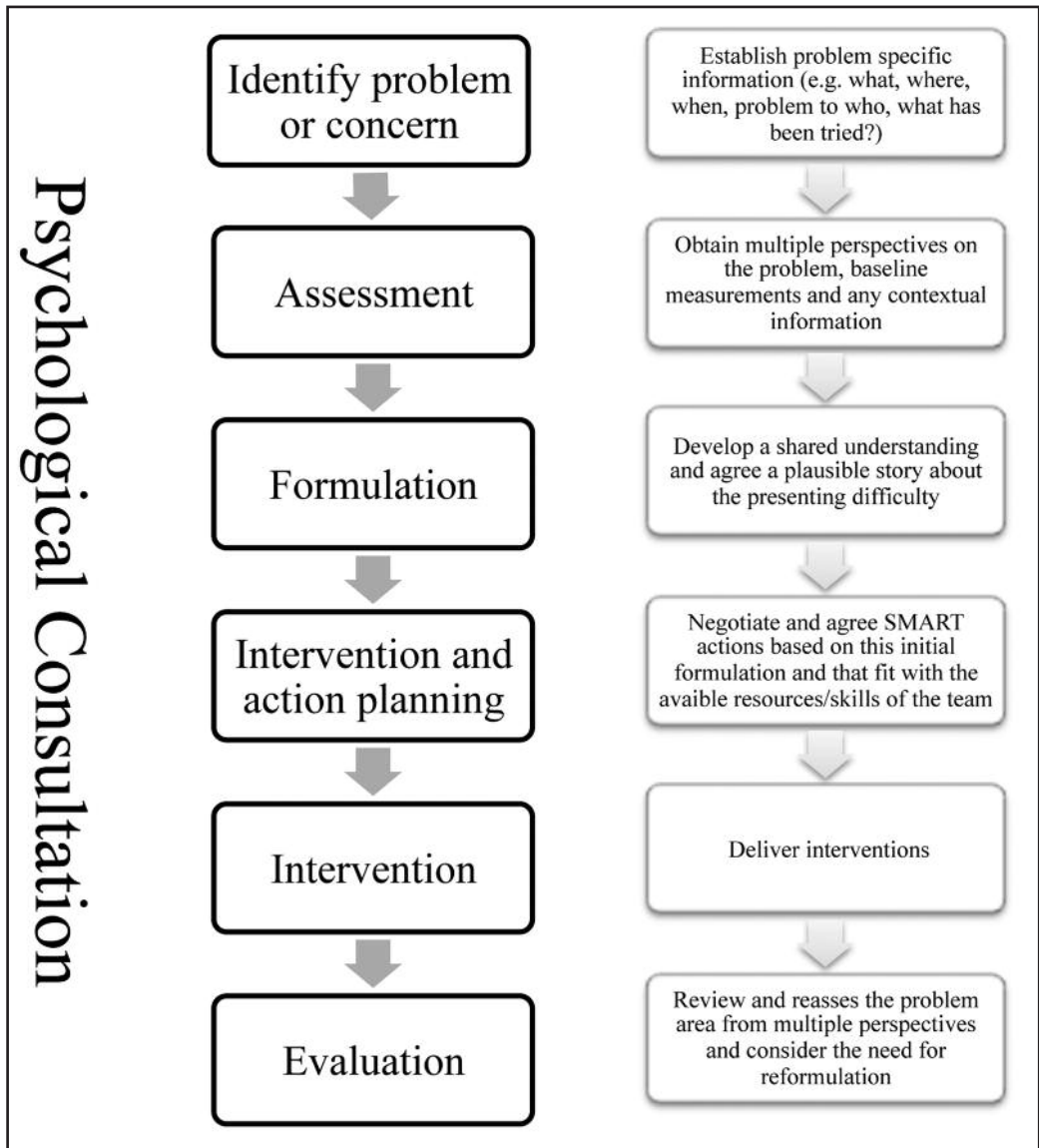
The use of psychological formulation as a process for helping teams develop a shared understanding of complex presentations has proven a promising approach in other demanding environments including complex mental health and criminal justice settings (Jackman, 2013; Rogers et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is viewed as 'best practice' and a core competency of applied psychologists in these settings (BPS, 2011).

### **Developing shared understanding – a team formulation approach**

The Shared Team Formulation Framework (Figure 1) outlines the process of facilitating a group or team of staff in developing a shared understanding about an athlete's presentation. It is common for 'talented' athletes to present with challenging behaviours that can have a major influence on their athletic development, as well as a wider influence on the functioning of others. Challenging behaviours can include:

- Problems with attitude or apparent motivation;
- Failure to access coaching support and/or engage with programme 'rules';
- Being a disruptive influence on other athletes;
- Being demanding and presenting with high levels of need;
- Being withdrawn socially or engaging in 'self-destructive' behaviours (e.g. alcohol/gambling);
- Somatising, fictitious injury behaviour or atypical recovery;
- Poor communication and/or 'splitting' between 'stakeholders'.

Figure 1: Process for developing shared formulation (based on Jackman, 2013).



The aim of the team formulation process (or ‘elephant spotting’) is to facilitate the development of a shared understanding with the whole team about the challenges presented. This draws on psychological knowledge and multiple perspectives (not single ideas or models), and results in an agreed hypothesis (or hypotheses) that can be ‘tested’ and evaluated. The agreed shared formulation then forms the basis for any intervention and/or collaborative work with the athlete.

Careful thought needs to be given as to how to involve the athlete as closely as possible in the process to gain their perspective on the challenging behaviour and to hear the feedback of how such behaviour is potentially influencing their sporting development and relationships with others. Sometimes this is most appropriately done via a one-to-one conversation, or series of conversations with the athlete, rather than a written document and consideration should be given to the athlete’s ‘readiness’ to access this formulation and feedback. However, in this version of formulation practice the main client is, in effect, the team, whose feelings of stuckness, hopelessness, or frustration are likely to have prompted the request for a discussion. In effect, a team formulation meeting is a type of group supervision or consultation. As such, it may not always be appropriate to share the formulation directly with the athlete, especially when it reflects strong subjective opinions and/or reactions from the staff.

It is also important to note that whilst we have described the process with a focus on challenging presentations, this process can be used to develop a shared understanding as to why an athlete may be performing particularly well, and inform interventions to maintain this.

### **Creating a ‘safe’ space**

Our experience has shown there can often be challenges in creating a ‘protected and safe’ space in order for these valuable discus-

sions to take place. Therefore, the team formulation approach is ideally implemented through meetings that are a scheduled part of the sport’s timetable, and attended by all relevant practitioners involved in the athlete’s support network. It is vital to create a dedicated forum, with sufficient time to discuss the athlete’s difficulties or concerns and to generate appropriate actions. However, it is recognised that within some sports there are limited opportunities to come together as a whole support team. As such, it is important to have ‘buy-in’ from the key stakeholders (e.g. the Performance Director or Lead Coach) to ensure that sufficient time and resource is made available to support the process. Although this process might appear to be an additional strain or pressure on the sport, our experience from both the sporting and non-sporting worlds is that often such conversations will frequently already be happening, but in unstructured and sometimes counterproductive ways. This can result in ‘wasted’ time and effort, because of their inability to generate co-ordinated and effective action plans.

Once an appropriate time and forum is identified, it is then important to contract the ‘rules’ of the group. For example, staying in the room or removing other distractors, agreeing confidentiality, and respecting everyone’s views and contributions, etc. It is important that all members of an athlete’s support network feel able to be open about their views and perspectives on an athlete’s presenting difficulties and that they do not feel ‘judged’ or marginalised for sharing these. Failing to do this can result in a significant perspective or information being lost and impairment in an ability to ‘recognise the elephant’.

### **Skillful facilitation**

The team formulation meeting needs a facilitator(s) whose role is to reflect, summarise, clarify, encourage creativity and freethinking and ask questions, not necessarily provide ‘solutions’. This simple but novel approach

can, in our experience, be a powerful and effective means of harnessing the team's collective experience and intuitions, promoting psychosocial understanding, moving away from narrow 'discipline-based' plans or over-reliance on 'experts' and encouraging all staff to take an active and valued part in the athlete's development and performance. In fact, because of their more intimate knowledge of the athlete's lives and circumstances, often staff with potentially marginalised 'status' within the support team (e.g. kit-man or masseuse) may have more to contribute than the Performance Director or Lead Coach, whose views could easily dominate team discussions. It is remarkable how rapidly a reasonably well-functioning team can, with a little guidance, come up with the outline of a psychological formulation.

At one level, formulation as a way of trying to make sense of people's thoughts, feelings and behaviour, is something we all do as human beings, which makes it easy for staff of all levels to understand and contribute to the process. Formulations are perhaps most readily understood if explained to staff as a more explicit and structured version of what they are already doing. At another level, pulling together the complex mixture of information, feelings and intuitions into a coherent, integrated, theory-based narrative that is acceptable to staff and athletes, is a sophisticated and demanding task. Tact and persistence are necessary to get everyone on board; it is hard to preserve the time in busy teams where other crises or daily demands take priority; and the facilitator or nominated practitioner will be required to do quite a bit of chasing up and generally ensuring that the formulation and resulting action plan does not simply get lost in the day-to-day pressures of the sporting world.

The dynamics of the meeting can be tricky. It often feels a bit like 'group therapy', with powerful 'counter-transference' feelings (evoked by the athlete) of anger, frustration, stuckness or sadness being expressed. These

need careful handling, as do the splits and disagreements that sometimes arise within the team, reflecting the athlete's own conflicts and dilemmas. This is crucial information that can be used to enhance our understanding of the athlete rather than, as so often happens, simply being acted out through unintegrated, contradictory and sometimes punitive interventions, based on primitive formulations such as 'She's just doing it for attention' or 'He doesn't want to get better.' The role of the facilitator is, therefore, a challenging one and can bring with it some potential risks. In particular, in our experience within both sporting and other contexts, there are risks associated with the facilitator taking a strongly directive or 'expert' position. Such 'expert' positions while initially seemingly attractive (as providing the definitive 'answer'), can over time serve to foster a sense of 'dependence' and reduce confidence in those tasked with supporting the athlete, rather than empowering the system to become more psychologically informed in their solution generation and decision-making. Therefore, in our experience, it is important for these shared formulation forums to be facilitated by an appropriately qualified applied psychologist, who has the required knowledge and experience in facilitating this process and is trained across a broad range of psychological models.

In summary, team formulation is a way of creating space for two crucially important activities that are routinely squeezed out of day-to-day teamwork: thinking and processing feelings. We need to attend to the information, theory, research and practical experience that underpin our work, and the feelings that we and the athlete are struggling with. These two aspects can be integrated through the team formulation process and framed in terms of personal meaning to the athlete and a clear way forward for all. If done well, team formulation is not just a framework for more effective work with a series of individual athletes, but a way of challenging and changing the whole model on which the athletes' support

and development are based.

### **Identify the problem(s) or concern**

An important first step in the development of a shared understanding or team formulation is the clarification and agreement of the presenting problem or concern. Although often considered to be obvious, our experience suggests that this can take a significant amount of time and result in some initial tensions or potential ‘splitting’ within the group. That is, agreeing the nature and the extent of any difficulties, who is it a problem for, and what has already been tried, can frequently result in some marked differences of opinion depending on people’s roles and responsibilities, personal experience of the difficulties, and/or the strength of their relationship with the athlete.

It is, however, important to narrow the definition of the problem, in order to determine the relevance of the various pieces of information to the understanding of the athlete’s difficulties. Also, it is important to be open about what needs to change in order for the problem or difficulty to have been sufficiently resolved. For example, the athlete turning up on time to training sessions, or taking on board coaching staff’s instructions. An agreed and clear definition of the problem is essential, if this is not done well, then in our experience teams will typically ‘move the goalposts’ by referring to a new problem or difficulty, and often fail to acknowledge the progress on the original concern.

### **Assessment**

This stage of the process involves gathering relevant information that is known about the athlete, the presenting difficulties, and the context. It is important that the team has access to a range of holistic information that includes both the athlete’s current circumstances and early life context. Routine assessment methods and baseline measurement (e.g. profiling, screening or ‘tracking and benchmarking’), should be aligned to a clear model of athlete development and

performance. However, it is also important to recognise that informal assessment is continuous and often the ‘soft’ information (e.g. noticing that they have become more withdrawn in the group) is just as important when it comes to understanding and intervening in an athlete’s difficulties. There is no right or wrong information, but the formulation process should establish the relevance of the information in the understanding of the presenting problem or difficulties.

Our experience suggests that there is often an overwhelming level of data and information held regarding individual athletes, but this can sometimes pose a barrier to developing a shared understanding and co-ordinated way forward, when there is no structure or process for pulling this information together in a coherent way. In addition, there is often a wealth of statistical data, but an absence of a clear understanding of an athlete’s broader life context, and recent significant life events (e.g. break up with partner or an early bereavement). The level of information and data collected about individual athletes can, if used appropriately, provide empirical support for any hypotheses generated through the formulation process. Finally, it is also important to recognise that the formulation process itself might highlight where there are gaps in our current knowledge and the need for additional information to be gathered.

### **Shared formulation**

A shared formulation needs to be able to present a plausible hypothesis of the athlete’s presenting difficulties or concerns within a psychological framework that is accessible to the entire group. Therefore, if it is to be used by the team to inform the care, development and support of the athlete, it needs to be articulated in a way that is understandable to non-psychologists. To help facilitate this process we have found that it is desirable to provide education for those who are required to access the formulation in some of the key theories that are

likely to underpin the understanding of the presenting difficulties. Such training is likely to include an introduction to human development and functioning that makes specific reference to brain development, child and adolescent development, and our early attachment relationships.

Participants are introduced to the process of developing an integrative formulation by outlining the use of the Four P's structure (see Table 1). This includes describing the role of Predisposing (or Historical) Factors to the presenting difficulties and the more proximal role of Precipitating Factors (or Triggers). The formulation also considers factors that play a role in Perpetuating (or Maintaining) the problem and those that are Protective against it. For each of these areas, it is important to consider the individual (or athlete) elements (e.g. biological, cognitive, emotional, behav-

ioural factors) and the broader systemic factors (or context) (e.g. family, peers, coaches and the sport environment). This framework enables the integration of the common theoretical models that are used to understand psychological problems or difficulties (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Theory, Behavioural Theory, Systemic Theory, etc.). Our experience of working within sporting and clinical contexts has shown that complex problems are best met with multifactorial and multimodal understanding and solutions. This is particularly the case when there is no clear 'evidence base' specific to the presenting problems from which to draw on to inform the interventions.

The process of developing a shared understanding is a dynamic and evolving process and this will frequently require summarising, presenting back to the team or system and then enhancing and reformu-

**Table 1: Examples of potential Four P factors in an elite sport environment.**

Four P factors	Individual	Contextual
<b>Predisposing</b>		
Why this athlete?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Early history of consistent high achievement</li> <li>● Little experience of 'failure'</li> <li>● Academic high achievement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family history in sport</li> <li>● Discontinuity of sporting career (e.g. multiple moves)</li> <li>● High family expectations</li> <li>● Critical early sport environment</li> </ul>
<b>Precipitating</b> Why now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Loss of performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Being deselected</li> </ul>
<b>Perpetuating</b> Why does it continue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Poor self-awareness</li> <li>● Poor emotional regulation</li> <li>● High levels of self-criticism and repetitive thinking</li> <li>● Difficulties in peer relationships</li> <li>● Withdrawal (avoidant coping)</li> <li>● Struggles to ask for help – views it as 'weak'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inconsistent boundaries/ messages from stakeholders</li> <li>● High coach anxiety</li> <li>● Lack of communication between parents and support system</li> </ul>
<b>Protective</b> What is there to work with?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Good sense of humour</li> <li>● Recognition of difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong working relationship with S&amp;T coach</li> <li>● Family supportive</li> </ul>

lating as additional information and knowledge is gained. However, another important acknowledgement that we have learned through our experiences to date is that sometimes the problems or difficulties that were considered to be a major concern and generating considerable anxiety, can just 'drop away' when the team is able to come together and just talk this through, with the agreed actions sometimes being very simple (e.g. normalising a response to a stressful life event or agreeing just to talk to the athlete!).

### **Action planning**

The key outcome of any formulation is an agreed action plan that provides a consistent approach to addressing the presenting problem. The action plan should also allow the testing and evaluation of the initial hypothesis. This process of shared hypothesis generating, testing and evaluation, brings some scientific rigour to what we do and helps inform the evidence base.

One common action following an initial formulation discussion is the need to clarify existing information and gather additional information. As already highlighted, this process can sometimes highlight the lack of clear contextual information in relation to the athlete and/or some of the 'myths' and misperceptions that individuals may hold within the support system.

It is important that any goals or actions that are set are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely). Any intervention should also be geared to reducing perpetuating (maintaining) factors and/or promoting protective factors. Where possible, they should draw on existing strengths and resources within individuals and systems (e.g. adopting a 'positive psychology' or 'strengths-based' approach). A good starting point in any action planning is to identify the strengths in any existing relationships in order to help determine 'who does what'. In establishing available resources, it is important to consider the wider system and the individuals within it, rather than being prescriptive based on

people's specific roles. For example, working to promote an athlete's confidence could involve multiple members of a system, rather than individual sessions specifically with a sport psychologist. However, it is also important to consider people's competence when allocating those actions. From experience of applying this process in elite sport environments, there is a need for an identified 'case manager', who is embedded within the sport and takes responsibility for co-ordinating and reviewing the actions. This is not to say that this individual is tasked with completing all of the actions, but is identified as holding the rest of the team to account for follow through on the action plan.

As previously stated, it is important to establish an outcomes framework and means of monitoring progress, in order to support the evaluation of intervention success. This would consider 'what would good enough look like' when identifying change in the presenting difficulty. For example, when a difficulty with an athlete's emotional control has been identified, it would be important to consider what it would look like if it were no longer a problem. This outcomes framework guards against intervention 'drift', whereby the original scale of the problem is lost and the goalposts continue to shift.

Whilst acknowledging the potential to use multiple resources and have a number of concurrent interventions, sometimes this can become so complex that it increases inconsistency and hinders change. Therefore, often in our experience 'less is more' and effective interventions can involve people doing less, or stopping doing something, in order to allow positive change to occur. Complex problems don't necessarily always require complex solutions! This can be a challenging message within systems, when there can be a strong perceived pressure and anxiety about 'justifying' individual roles.

A comprehensive formulation does not result in a simple 'to do' list and recognises that any actions or interventions are likely to be inter-related and have different weight-



ings/priority. A change or move in any part of the system is likely to influence additional change. Therefore, when considering the action plan, the formulation should take into account the dosage, pace and sequence of interventions.

That is, if an athlete is presenting with high risk behaviour then any actions that are designed to address acute risk would take a greater priority in the early stages than those designed to promote skill acquisition. For example, if an athlete's self-harming behaviour is potentially life threatening, then this would understandably place a greater priority on interventions aimed at reducing such behaviour rather than developing their longer-term sporting potential. One such approach to prioritising intervention targets and sequencing could be based around the following framework (adopted from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy):

- Life threatening behaviours;
- Intervention interfering behaviours;
- Quality of life behaviours;
- Skill acquisition.

Formulation also enables consideration of the timing of interventions and readiness for the individual or system to change. For example, in the immediate run up to a major competition, it may well be inappropriate to implement significant change. As previously highlighted, where possible, it is important to involve the athlete and obtain 'buy-in' for any proposed interventions. This will increase ownership and allow the athlete to contribute to any proposed plan.

### **Intervention**

As already indicated, effective interventions for challenging and complex presentations rarely draw on a single model or way of understanding. Neither do individuals exist in a single system (e.g. the sporting world). People live within 'multiple systems' (or relationships), of which sport is just one. Therefore, it is important to consider interventions that utilise this broader context. Interventions are, therefore, likely to be most effective

when they are multi-modal (e.g. talking interventions, rewards and consequences, education), multi-systemic (e.g. involving family, coaches, organisations) and multi-factorial (e.g. addressing physical, emotional or social needs).

Where possible, interventions should be drawn from the existing research evidence base, or practice-based evidence of what has worked previously with that athlete. However, as already acknowledged, sometimes there is not a clear evidence base for complex presentations and/or the evidence-based interventions have proven unsuccessful. In these circumstances, formulation-driven interventions are suggested as best practice.

### **Evaluation and monitoring**

Formulation is a dynamic process and it is important to regularly review progress against the initial formulation and agreed outcomes framework, and if necessary reformulate in order to direct further intervention.

One key challenge to formulation can be that as the problem resolves or becomes less problematic, those involved tend to assume it is 'fixed' and the motivation to review and evaluate reduces. We would strongly caution against this, and would highlight the importance of reviewing the effectiveness of the various components of an intervention in order to establish what has the potential to work again in the future. In addition, in order to prevent 'relapse', it is also vital that agreed actions are either completed or maintained, even if the problem appears to have resolved. As a 'shared' process, it is important to take a variety of perspectives when evaluating the successfulness of any intervention. The role of the case manager is crucial in co-ordinating the review of progress, retaining some objectivity in relation to successfulness and chairing decisions to change or continue interventions. This may be done with external consultation/supervision from the relevant experts.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights the use of psychological formulation as a process for supporting a shared understanding of complex presentations or system difficulties. As indicated earlier, such a process has been shown to have utility when working with complexity in other challenging arenas such as the mental health and criminal justice systems. This process has been used over the past three years across a range of Olympic and professional sports and high performance environments to help those involved provide more coherent and effective support for their athletes with the aim of maintaining wellbeing and enhancing performance. We acknowledge that this implementation remains at the embryonic stage and continues to be a developing process. The authors have piloted the approach within a variety of elite sport environments, and initial feedback appears promising. Quotes from a range of coaches and practitioners involved in the process include:

- *‘Helps the coach to develop a better understanding of their own behaviour and responses to players and to change their management approach as necessary to get the best out of players.’*
- *‘Stopped me repeating patterns of unhelpful behaviour with a particular player.’*
- *‘Related to what needs talking about, rather than “just talking”.’*
- *‘Allows for meaningful focus on the person (player), with coaches as participants rather than leaders.’*
- *‘Provides a vehicle to focus on the needs of the players, which leads to a clear action plan.’*
- *‘Provides a powerful insight into coach and players behaviour.’*
- *‘Importance of ‘objective’ facilitation – some of the discussion processes need to be facilitated by those with competencies to manage the dynamics and create a safe environment.’*

Such ‘practice-based’ evidence appears to suggest that people find the process of ‘elephant spotting’ useful and believe it to be beneficial. We have also received feedback that practitioner and coach practice has been positively influenced by such enhanced understanding. Consequently, we would argue that it has had a direct impact on athlete wellbeing, development and performance. However, currently there is not necessarily any clear empirical evidence to suggest that this process has had a direct impact on performance outcomes. As such, there is a need for further research to explore the potential benefits and pitfalls of such a process within elite sporting environments.

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