STRESS AND COPING AMONG SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTANTS

by

Kieran McBride

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

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Examining Committee:

Dr. Desmond McEwan, Assistant Professor, School of Kinesiology, UBC
Supervisor

Dr. Erica Bennett, Assistant Professor, School of Kinesiology, UBC
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Katherine Tamminen, Professor, Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, University of Toronto
Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

The study of coach and athlete wellbeing has been a focal point in recent sport psychology research, in part, as a response to the recognition that participation in sport can potentially lead to detrimental psychological outcomes. A proposed way to help abate negative outcomes in sport has been to introduce more sport psychology consultants (SPCs) into these contexts to promote optimal performance and wellbeing. However, there is limited evidence pertaining to the perspectives of practicing SPCs and their experiences with stress and coping. Framed by cognitive motivational relational theory, the aim of this study was to explore SPCs' experiences with stress (i.e., identify key stressors that SPCs face and how they tend to cope with these stressors). Eleven SPCs practicing in Canada shared their experiences at two time-points via semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. The first interview involved building rapport with participants before exploring their personal and professional journey in becoming a SPC. Discussions around their experiences with stress along that journey were embedded throughout that interview. The second interview involved a more specific investigation of SPCs' experiences with stress and coping. The discussions in this interview were guided by the cognitive motivational relational theory. Using reflexive thematic analysis with abductive coding, three themes were constructed from the qualitative dataset. *Anchored by a Passion for Helping in Sport* related to the development of SPCs' desire to help others in sport and how this passion shaped, and continues to shape, their experiences with stress. *Navigating the Currents of (Shifting) Sociocultural Tides* pertained to SPCs' perceptions of stress working in contexts rife with nescience relating to their work, conflicting expectations from others, and tensions between efforts to enact 'safe sport' versus more 'old school' (i.e., performance-focused) priorities. Finally, *Seeking Elusive Stability in Choppy Waters* outlined experiences of stress as a function

of working within the incessant job- and financial-insecure SPC job landscape in Canada. Insights regarding experiences of stress and coping among SPCs help shed light on the sparsely researched perspectives of SPCs working in Canada, thus responding to calls for progressing evidence-based knowledge on the perspectives of other non-athlete/coach participants in sport.

Lay Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of stress and coping among sport psychology consultants (SPCs) working in Canada across their professional journeys. Eleven SPCs engaged in semi-structured interviews across two time-points. Insights from interviews indicated that experiences of stress were shaped by SPCs' helping goals and values. A lack of understanding for what SPCs do, misalignment of expectations between organization and SPC, as well as job insecurity were prominent stressors experienced by participants. Participants used a variety of problem-focused (e.g., engaging in professional development opportunities) and emotion-focused (e.g., talking to peers) coping strategies to try and manage the demands of their work. This qualitative study contributed insights to the underexplored understanding of what stressors SPCs working in Canada experience, and how they tend to attend to manage these stressors through coping.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished work of Kieran McBride, supported by research supervisor, Dr. Desmond McEwan. In this research, Generative AI was not used in any way. This research was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H24-02602).

Table of Contents

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Heavy is the head that wears the visor, Coach Lasso."

- Dr. Sharon Fieldstone

In a rare depiction of a sport psychology consultant (SPC) in popular media, Dr. Sharon Fieldstone, a fictional sport psychologist from the television series *Ted Lasso*, recognizes the emotional burden that Coach Lasso experiences in his role as a leader in sport. While sport has long been promoted as a fruitful setting for health promotion and positive developmental outcomes (Campbell et al., 2021; Giles et al., 2020; Gould & Carson, 2008), participation in sport can also lead to detrimental outcomes such as increased performance anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (McGraw et al., 2018; Purcell et al., 2020). Thus, the study of athlete and coach wellbeing has been a focal point in contemporary sport psychology research (McLoughlin et al., 2021; Simova et al., 2024; Trainor & Bundon, 2023). Namely, recent consensus statements made by sports-related experts have noted salient propositions to foster athlete and coach wellbeing (Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). Of these propositions, the integration of more informed SPC-related work (e.g., psychological literacy interventions) into amateur and professional sports settings was highlighted as a potentially constructive avenue to enhance wellbeing among participants in sport (Breslin et al., 2019). Although there has been an uptick in the popularity of involving SPCs across an abundance of sport settings, there is a dearth of literature concerning the perspectives of practicing SPCs themselves (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). For example, while there is evidence concerning the burdens of coaching and competing as athletes, there is minimal exploration of how SPCs (e.g., Dr. Sharon Fieldstone) experience and manage the demands of their roles.

With their proficiencies in sport psychology and sport and exercise sciences, SPCs are trained to provide psychological support to key stakeholders in sport (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, n.d.; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). This support includes aiding in their clients' development of mental, emotional, personal, and self-regulatory skills in order to ameliorate client performance and personal development in their chosen domain (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, n.d.; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). Upon completion of a graduate degree in psychology, sport and exercise sciences, or a related field, SPCs are certified by completing a combination of required coursework and applied practical experience as prescribed by their governing sport psychology association (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, n.d.). For example, in Canada, SPCs obtain certification as a Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC) through the Canadian Sport Psychology Association[1] (CSPA). SPCs often work within the context of sport, although they may also be qualified to work in disciplines such as educational psychology, social work, and performance counselling (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, n.d.).

Findings from explorations among general psychologists suggest that the pressure of assuming a counselling role can induce outcomes detrimental to personal wellbeing such as compassion fatigue (i.e., vicarious trauma) and burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion) (Barton, 2019; Killian, 2008; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Given the nature of their profession, SPCs may encounter unique stressors in their work such as feeling responsibility or blame for the outcomes of their clients. As part of their job working within the context of sport, SPCs are expected to

[1] The Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA) is a national organization in Canada focused on applied sport psychology. Through education, training, mentorship, and supervision, the CSPA supports individuals in delivering applied sport psychology services in Canada. Qualified members of the CSPA include registered psychologists and mental performance consultants (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.).

optimize both performance and wellbeing outcomes. Although there has been a recent emphasis on prioritizing wellbeing in sport settings, competition and performance remain as the overwhelming representation of the function and purpose of sport (Maguire, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2020). As such, SPCs may confront additional work-related stressors (e.g., pressures from superiors to prioritize athlete performance) when pursuing outcomes relating to athlete wellbeing rather than performance. The implicit performance-focused nature of sport may impede SPCs' ability to foster wellbeing outcomes among their clients, while simultaneously limiting the potential for SPCs to adhere to their professional duties.

In this study, I aimed to identify the key stressors that SPCs experience and explore how these professionals tend to cope with these stressors. I sought to shed light on the professionals' perspectives over the course of their journeys in becoming and being a SPC to help contextualize their stress experiences. Drawing from evidence derived across the fields of general clinical psychological practices (e.g., McCormack et al., 2018; Sherman & Thelen, 1998; Sim et al., 2016) and applied sport psychology (e.g., Cropley et al. 2016; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018; McDougall et al., 2015), this study provides a deeper contextual understanding of how SPCs perceive their roles and responsibilities within their profession in relation to their own experiences of stress.

Qualitative data were collected using two one-on-one semi-structured interviews with professional members of the CSPA (n = 11). First time-point interviews were conducted to help build rapport between myself (the researcher and interviewer) and participants while also delving into participants' professional journeys as practicing SPCs (e.g., sporting background, experiences with SPC training). Responses from the first time point interviews highlighted participants' experiences becoming a SPC, how they have perceived their professional journey

and development as a SPC, and the role of stress throughout that time. The second semi-structured interview provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their previous responses presented in the first time-point while also exploring more specific perspectives relating to their experiences with stress and coping throughout their professional journey and in their current role(s) as a professional member of the CSPA. Using this two time-point qualitative study design offers a substantive and unique contribution to the current applied sport psychology literature which is laden with single time-point semi-structured interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In using two interviews, participants were encouraged to engage in thorough storytelling; indeed, this approach offered participants the opportunity to share rich previous experiences with stress and coping that may not have been feasible in a single time point interview design (Atkinson, 1998). Further, leaving time for the myself and participants to build rapport in the first interview and reflect on the initial time-point discussion in between interviews promoted comfortability of discussion, allowing for participants to augment their eagerness to engage with the me, the interviewer, more authentically (Hurd Clark, 2003). As there is an absence in the current sport psychology literature of understanding the unique perspectives of SPCs, particularly among those working in Canada, emphasizing elicitation of rich meaning-making using a two time-point study design contributes significant foundational knowledge on this topic.

Drawing upon the cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT) of stress and coping, this study allowed participants to expand on their professional experiences relative to the four general underpinnings of this theory. Specifically, I aimed to gather substantive insights into (a) the distinctive *stressors* SPCs face; (b) how SPCs tend to *appraise* these stressors; (c) the *coping* strategies that SPCs use to manage their stressors; and (d) the *outcomes* SPCs experience as a result of this process (e.g., whether/how certain stressors and/or coping strategies impacted their

emotions, wellbeing, perceived effectiveness as a SPC, etc.; cf. Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This theory-informed study contributes inceptive insights pertaining to the perspectives of SPCs working in Canada while potentially flagging future areas of study that could support improvements in their roles within the Canadian sporting context. Consequently, with their role in supporting performance and wellbeing outcomes of sport participants, support for all individuals involved in sports has the potential to be optimized, responding to calls (e.g., Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019) for advancing evidence-based knowledge on wellbeing among all those involved in sport.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the following section, I will provide an outline of the key literature relevant to this proposed study. This literature review involves an exploration of research relating to (a) the role of a sport psychology consultant, (b) stress and coping in sport, (c) stress and coping among applied psychology practitioners, (d) theoretical underpinnings of stress and coping, and (e) an overall identification of the gaps in literature relevant to the research question of this proposed study.

2.1 The Role of a Sport Psychology Consultant

SPC work has been a growing area of study and practice over the past three decades (Arnold & Sarkar, 2014; Gee, 2010). This may have come as a response to both the increased popularity of applied psychology practices beyond clinical settings (e.g., industrial workplaces), and the recognition that SPCs can help individual and team performance by working with clients to improve sport-related outcomes and health-promoting psychological abilities (American Psychological Association, 2008; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018; Gee, 2010). Although there is a lack of academic consensus concerning the definition of a SPC, broadly, they are trained in applied psychology and sport and exercise sciences (or kinesiology) with an emphasis on providing psychological support to participants in sport (e.g., coaches and athletes; American Psychological Association, 2008; Fortin-Guichard et al, 2018). For example, in Canada, professional members of the CSPA cooperate with athletes and coaches to support them in achieving objectives such as improving time management, emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, imagery techniques, decision making, and positive transitioning out of sport (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). In the case of the CSPA and other governing applied sport psychology organizations (e.g., Association for Applied Sport Psychology, The

British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences), the mission of a SPC is to help foster learning and growth with the goal to elevate and optimize performance and wellbeing (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, n.d.; The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences, n.d.; Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.).

The context in which SPCs work is dictated by their client's needs which is informed by their sport (e.g., soccer or weightlifting), role (e.g., coach or athlete), performance level (e.g., high-performance or recreational competitions), and location of practice (e.g., training or competition; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). As onboarding a SPC requires adequate resources and funding, SPCs have historically practiced predominantly in high-performance sport settings such as National Sport Organizations and professional sports leagues (Fortin-Guichard, 2018; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). However, recent consideration for the health and performance promoting nature of applied sport psychology practices across a variety of domains has contributed to an expansion of the settings in which SPCs work (Barker et al., 2016; Fortin-Guichard, 2018). For example, although participation in youth sport has been long been highlighted as a particularly fertile avenue for eliciting positive youth development outcomes (e.g., resilience, leadership, interpersonal communication skills), SPCs may help further enhance youth's ability to foster positive developmental outcomes through the explicit teaching of psychological skills (e.g., goal-setting and mental imagery; Henriksen et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2010). SPCs can also practice in settings outside of sport such as in workplace contexts undergoing organizational changes (Barker et al., 2016). Characterized by the introduction of new ideas altering group or organizational functioning, organizational change situations in the workplace are paralleled by key tenets of sport in which SPCs are tasked with improving (e.g., enhancing team cohesion by increasing social support and stress management skills; Barker et al., 2016). Thus, key

psychological principles of organizational change situations can be effectively supported by SPCs in a workplace environment (Barker et al., 2016).

The context in which SPC work is also dependent on the specific training that they possess. In Canada, to be a professional member of the governing national sport psychology association, the CSPA, individuals are required to obtain Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC) designation; however, some SPCs also have registered psychologist or clinical counselling accreditation (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). Of these distinctions, there are a variety of scopes in which SPCs may work based on their professional training. For example, CMPCs who lack clinical counselling training (e.g., those who did not complete a graduate degree in clinical/counselling psychology) are ethically required to delimit their scope of practice towards teaching athletes performance-related psychological skills such as self-talk, imagery, goal setting, and arousal-regulation techniques (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). In contrast, a CMPC who has engaged in clinical training and is a clinical counsellor or registered psychologist will be qualified to work with clients not only on performance-related psychological skills, but with clinical-level issues and mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression as well (River Valley Health, 2019). There is also an important distinction between a SPC who is working as a registered clinical counsellor with sport-specific knowledge compared to a SPC who is a registered psychologist with sport-specific knowledge. The primary difference between these two roles is that a clinical psychologist can diagnose and treat mental health conditions, whereas a clinical counsellor cannot (Pajkovic, 2024). Hence, there is a multitude of unique and evolving settings in which SPCs may practice—such diversity that may contribute to the definitional uncertainty and social nescience of SPC work.

2.2 Shifting Priorities in Sport

In Canada, SPCs are professional members of the CSPA who focus on improving clients' performance. However, per the "CSPA Mission", SPCs are also encouraged to foster wellbeing outcomes of their clients (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). When these professional objectives conflict with desired client outcomes, SPCs may confront additional work-related stressors (e.g., incongruent organizational-practitioner expectations; Prior et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2016). For example, a team may hire a SPC exclusively to enhance athletic performance when the SPC's personal professional objectives may be to also focus on other client outcomes such as wellbeing and stress management competencies. While the historic role of a SPC was to focus on encouraging athletes to achieve optimal performance, a recent shift in the sociocultural climate of sport that accentuates participant wellbeing has positioned the role of a SPC in more ambiguity (Brady, 2023; Roberts et al., 2016; Schinke & McGannon, 2014). Within this changing sociocultural landscape, there has been recognition of the psychological harm (e.g., decreases in self-worth and wellbeing) that may ensue when "dehumanizing" an athlete or viewing an athlete as a mere vessel towards performative success in sport (e.g., objectification, demonstrating a lack of empathy towards athletes); this phenomenon has been particularly notable in high-performance sport due to the intense physical and psychological demands required for athletes to participate in these settings (Baker et al., 2015; Brady, 2023; Burrow, 2018; Christoff, 2014; Theberge, 2008). As such, there is growing pervasiveness of sporting philosophies that recognize athletes' autonomy and needs as a person first rather than an athlete whose primary objective is to achieve performative success (Campbell et al., 2021). Recently, this philosophy has been operationalized by the Government of Canada whereby the Canadian Minister of Sport introduced new measures to improve safe sport operations and augment athletes' autonomy in decision making as part of an "ongoing process toward a more

accountable and safer sport system where the wellbeing of sport participants is top of mind" (Canadian Heritage, 2023).

While the shifting dynamic of sport prioritizes the development and maintenance of wellbeing among athletes, the growth in popularity of this person-first philosophy may also come in response to perspectives that highlight the performance benefits of viewing athletes more holistically, beyond the realm of sport (Campbell et al., 2021). There is growing evidence that fostering athletes' wellbeing can positively impact their ability to perform optimally (Brady, 2021). In other words, research has pointed to the notion that athletes who experience greater affect are more likely to perform well (Peris-Delcampo et al., 2024). Therefore, sporting organizations, institutions, and other stakeholders in sport may be increasingly motivated to optimize wellbeing among athletes (Brady, 2021). With this, SPCs—who are often onboarded to foster performance outcomes of clients by teaching them psychological skills—may feel increasing pressure to balance athlete performance and wellbeing as the lines blur between those two outcomes (Roberts et al., 2016).

Current sport psychology research is directing substantial investigation towards fostering favourable wellbeing outcomes of participants in sport as a response to the historical neglect of psychological safety in sport—that is, "the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm" (Vella et al., 2022, p.530; Trainor & Bundon, 2023). As previously alluded to, sport— especially high-performance sport—has been characterized by its highly pressurized environments with an intense focus on performance outcomes and demands of excellence which can come at the expense of participants' perceptions of self-worth beyond sport (Pica et al., 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2023; Walton et al., 2023; Weir, 2018). Thus, participation in sport settings is often perceived as stressful when participants do not have the ability or

resources to manage these potent and perpetual demands (Hanton et al., 2005; Purcell et al., 2020). Although not all SPCs are explicitly trained in treating ill health or clinical-level disorders (as would be a clinical psychologist), SPCs can be potentially integral for eliciting wellbeing outcomes and mitigating negative psychological outcomes for stakeholders in sport by helping clients foster stress management skills (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). The wellbeing of sport participants has been defined in conjunction with success which is often reported as an ability to manage stressors, demonstrate resilience, and possess strong support networks (Gould et al., 2002; Trainor & Bundon, 2023). SPCs can elicit wellbeing outcomes for stakeholders in sport by promoting increased understanding of psychological processes related to wellbeing, enhancing knowledge of sport-related risk factors associated with mental-ill health, and encouraging a shift away from the persistent "win at all costs" narrative in sport (Purcell et al., 2022).

Positive perceptions of SPCs from key stakeholders in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, administrators) have been notably outlined in sport psychology research relating to wellbeing (e.g., improving interpersonal communication among teams, improving 'mental states' of athletes, developing stress management skills; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Thelwell et al., 2018). However, there is minimal exploration into how SPCs perceive their own work and wellbeing (McCormack et al., 2015). Wellbeing of applied psychologists is linked with professionals' experience of work and ability to meet the demands of their profession (American Psychology Association, 2008; Brown et al., 2017; McCormack et al., 2018). As indicated by relevant literature, SPCs may be susceptible to experiencing burnout and facing organizational expectation related stressors due to their multifaceted professional objectives (e.g., simultaneously optimizing the performance and wellbeing outcomes of their clients) Baldock et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2011; Magdaleno & Meyer, 2023; McCarthy & Moffat,

2023; Prior et al., 2025). Furthermore, SPCs work in settings rife with performance-focused demands, settings which other participants in sport (e.g., coaches) often perceive as emotionally taxing and stressful (Baldock et al., 2022; Lazarus, 2000). While SPCs can help foster stress management of their clients, little is known regarding what specific stressors SPCs face in their profession, how they tend to appraise and cope with these stressors, and the various outcomes of their stress-related processes.

2.3 Stress and Coping in Sport

Athlete and coach stress has been a prominent area of study in sport as the various demands in this setting elicit a variety of responses to different stimuli, often with the goal to achieve optimal performance (Baldock et al., 2020). For several decades, Lazarus has been a seminal researcher in the study of psychological stress within the realm of cognitive psychology whose work has been widely applied to the sport setting (e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Since beginning his research on stress in 1966, Lazarus has expanded on a comprehensive stress theory by proposing that psychological stress is a dynamic, relational concept (1991). This theory, coined the cognitive-motivational relational theory (CMRT), outlines stress as a process that involves an iterative interaction between an individual and their environment, centrally mediated by two processes: cognitive appraisals and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). With the myriad of intrapersonal (e.g., motivation, emotional regulation), interpersonal (e.g., organizational expectations, team communication), and extrapersonal (e.g., gendered stereotypes, media scrutiny) demands in sport which influence participants in these settings, researchers in sport psychology have frequently applied Lazarus' CMRT to investigate the stress process within sport (Didymus, 2016; Gentile et al., 2018; Lazarus, 2000; Martinent & Ferrand, 2014; Uphill & Jones, 2007).

2.4 Stressors in Sport

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), psychological stress is a process which involves a "relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her wellbeing" (p.19). With that, Lazarus introduced the CMRT which argues that stress is not a stimulus nor a response, but rather a complex process involving a sequence of relationships or events occurring between the environment, an individual's appraisal of the events, ensuing methods of coping with the events, and finally, an outcome or response to this process (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). According to the CMRT, the stress process begins with an individual being exposed to a stressor, or something in the environment that they perceive as stressful. Participants in sport are exposed to a plethora of different stressors including, but not limited to, events such as sustaining an injury, preparing for a competitive tournament, or communicating with coaches and teammates (Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009; Olusoga et al., 2010).

Different types of stressors occurring within a sport setting can be categorized within three groups: (1) acute and chronic (Anshel & Wells, 2000); (2) expected and unexpected (Dugdale et al., 2002); and (3) competitive and non-competitive (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Acute stressors occur quickly and tend to be experienced intensely such as succumbing to a traumatic injury during a competition (Baum et al., 1990; Epel et al., 2018). In contrast, chronic stressors such as financial instability and managing a long-term injury are ongoing and present themselves over a longer period of time (Baum et al., 1990). McLoughlin et al. (2021) found that exposure to both sport-specific and non-sport specific lifetime stressors (i.e., chronic stressors) were particularly detrimental to sport performers' health and wellbeing, as measured through increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and health complaints. This echoes extensive evidence beyond the sport

setting which indicates that experiencing chronic stressors is predictive of an array of unfavourable health outcomes (e.g., depression, disturbances in cognitive functioning, cardiovascular disease; Marin et al., 2011; Slavich & Shield, 2018; Song et al., 2019; Tian et al., 2022). Stressors may also be expected (e.g., training for a competition) or unexpected (e.g., conceding a goal) depending on whether an individual anticipates a stressor (Dugdale et al., 2002). In a study using questionnaires to investigate the different stress processes that New Zealand athletes experience when facing expected or unexpected stressors, Dugdale et al. (2002) found that athletes perceived unexpected stressors as more threatening and challenging to manage compared to expected stressors hypothesized by the authors as possibly due their unpredictability and athletes' inability to practice for these unexpected events. Perhaps most specific to sporting environments, the third group of stressors can be defined by their occurrence either in competition (e.g., shooting free-throws in a basketball game) or outside of competition (e.g., commuting to basketball practice). In competition, requirements of performance typically elicit more intense emotions and physiological demands compared to non-competitive situations (e.g., training sessions; Lazarus, 2000; Carrasco Páez & Martínez-Díaz, 2021).

It should be noted that there can be overlap between the three types of stressors as they often act in concurrence. For example, a coach might experience an unforeseen and pressing crisis at their other job (i.e., an acute, unexpected, non-competitive stressor) which impeded them from scouting the opposing team before the match, resulting in the coach perceiving that their team is unprepared for competition (i.e., a competitive stressor). Furthermore, although there is extensive research that highlights the detrimental impact of experiencing stress in sport, Lazarus contends that experiencing stress does not inherently lead to unfavourable outcomes (e.g., anxiety; Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Rather, as stress is a *process* as opposed to a

stimulus or a response, it is the manner in which an individual appraises and copes with the stressor that indicates the outcome of the stress process (Lazarus, 1999, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

2.5 Cognitive Appraisals and Emotions

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) contend that exposure to a stressor is followed by an individual's interpretation or cognitive appraisal of a situation which can be broken down into primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals involve assessments of the severity of a stressor or what is potentially at stake for the individual's goals, values, or beliefs in a given situation, whereas secondary appraisals involve the analysis of the available resources to help manage the situation. According to Lazarus (1999), there are three primary appraisals: goal relevance, goal congruence, and goal content. Firstly, goal relevance concerns whether there is anything at stake for the individual and, if so, what is at stake—this appraisal determines whether there is potential for emotion in the process. Should there be something at stake, emotion may ensue and its intensity will be, in part, linked to the importance or magnitude of the goal. Secondly, goal congruence involves appraising an encounter as threatening to their goals—thus predicting an increased likelihood of ensuing negative emotion—or beneficial to their goals—thus predicting an increased likelihood of ensuing positive emotion. Finally, goal content, also known as the type of ego-involvement, in the primary appraisal process distinguishes among specific emotions (e.g., frustration, embarrassment, guilt) depending on the type of goal at stake, for example, acting in accordance with one's own moral values (Lazarus, 1999).

Secondary appraisals, which pertain to the options for coping can be classified into three decisions: direction of blame or credit, potential for coping, and future expectations (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The direction of blame or credit (i.e., who is responsible for

the harm, threat, or benefit and how much are they responsible for the damaging or beneficial actions) is either directed internally (i.e., towards oneself) or externally (e.g., towards others) and can influence the emotional response (e.g., frustration, shame, pride, guilt). Coping potential refers to how an individual can positively impact the person-environment relationship, if at all. For example, whether an athlete has belief that they have the resources to remain calm (emotion-focused coping potential) when participating in a situation appraised as stressful (motivationally relevant and undesired; Smith & Kirby, 2009). Lastly of the secondary appraisal decisions, future expectations allude to an individual's reckoning of the favourable (e.g., enhanced performance outcomes) or unfavourable (e.g., sport withdrawal) consequences of change that will occur by means of effective or ineffective coping (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Together, primary and secondary appraisals distinguish whether a stressor is significant to an individual and, if so, whether it is appraised as a harm/loss (i.e., damage that has already taken place), threat (i.e., potential for future damage), or challenge (i.e., potential for gain or benefit despite obstacles being in the way) (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

As mentioned, throughout the stress process, a variety of appraisals (e.g., threat, challenge, harm/loss), as well as the engendering of emotions shaped by a specific combination of primary and secondary appraisals, contribute to the type and intensity of emotional responses (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Uphill & Jones, 2007). The type and intensity of emotions are also shaped by the importance of a goal that is perceived to be at stake as well as an individual's ability or inability to cope with a stressor (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While emotional responses are typically quick in onset and can be evoked in the absence of coping, they occur following the appraisal process of the situation (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Uphill & Jones, 2007). Indeed, emotions are a key contributor to the CMRT as they

influence individuals' responses to stressors and can affect subsequent subjective experiences. In sport, emotions can have a substantial impact on participants' thinking, behaviour, and performance (Lazarus, 2000). Emotions, often defined within a positive- or negative-toned range, and may serve as counteracts to struggle in sport as staying within an appropriate emotional state prior to and during competition and performance events is a fundamental antecedent to optimizing athletic performance and wellbeing among sport participants (Hanin & Ekkekakis, 2014; Lazarus, 2000). Emotions (e.g., guilt and disappointment) also have the potential to harm athletic performance and athlete wellbeing (Hanin & Ekkekakis, 2014; Lazarus, 2000). However, each emotion, defined partly by its appraisal process, involves a unique action tendency which may be negated by the coping process (Lazarus, 1991).

2.6 Coping in Sport

Coping strategies can impact an individual's appraisals of a situation (e.g., develop a more positive interpretation of a particular situation) and lead to a certain outcome or response which could then affect subsequent perceptions and experiences of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping involves a cognitive appraisal process whereby an individual determines whether they possess the resources (e.g., self-efficacy), capacity (e.g., authority), and/or skills (e.g., prior experience managing with a similar situation) to effectively respond to an event or stressor (Biggs et al., 2017; Dewe & Cooper, 2007; Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Walinga, 2014). Coping is also process-focused and dynamic, involving intentional actions which are engaged when a situation is appraised as stressful (Biggs et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). From a sport perspective, coping has been defined by athletes employing purposeful cognitions and behaviours in order to manage the dynamic adaptation

challenges involved in this context (Crocker et al., 2015; Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Given the various of strategies that sport participants use to cope with stressors and facilitate adaptation, along with the sociocultural factors that may influence one's opportunity to cope (e.g., gender roles), there are a several methods used to classify coping (Aldwin, 2007; Crocker et al., 2015). This classification typically ranges from micro-analytical, which labels specific coping strategies (e.g., self-talk, imagery, seeking social support), to macro-analytical, which groups similar coping strategies together (e.g., approach and avoidance coping; Roth & Cohen, 1986) (Crocket et al., 2015). Perhaps most notably among the macro-analytical approaches, coping strategies can be (a) problem-focused, whereby the coping process is directly focused on managing the stressor (e.g., goal-setting), or (b) emotion-focused, whereby the coping process aims to regulate the emotions that have derived from a stressful experience (e.g., seeking social support) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Other macro-analytic groupings of coping strategies have also been outlined in stress-related literature. These coping strategies grouping include approach and avoidance (i.e., activity towards or away from a threat; Krohne, 1993; Roth & Cohen, 1986), engagement and disengagement (i.e., dealing with or resignation from a stressor; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Gaudreau & Blondin, 2004), and behavioural and cognitive coping (i.e., managing stressors through actions or thoughts; Anshel, 2001) (Crocker et al., 2015; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). However, coping strategies are not mutually exclusive as they can be operated concurrently (Lazarus, 1999).

A critical component of sport requires successfully adapting to meet the specific and changing demands of a situation using effective cognitive and self-regulation skills, often contrived through one's ability to cope with stressors (Crocker et al., 2015; Lazarus, 2000).

Effective coping in sport involves the extent to which a coping strategy (or strategies) are successful in promoting successful adaptation and fostering desirable outcomes (Crocker et al., 2015; Nicholls et al., 2010). With the multitude of stressors that are present in sport, this context has been a fertile setting for the study of the antecedents (e.g., self-esteem, goals) and consequences of coping (e.g., performance, wellbeing) among athletes (Crocker et al., 2015; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). However, parallel to the bulk of sport psychology literature, there is lacking evidence concerning the experiences of coping and stress processes among participants in the sport setting beyond athletes and coaches (e.g., physiotherapists, SPCs).

2.7 Stress and Coping Among Applied Psychology Practitioners

Due to the transaction between the individual and the environment, stress is markedly context-specific (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, different sport stakeholders and practitioners are likely to experience unique stressors, appraisals, coping, and outcomes differently based on their individual roles. For instance, SPCs' experiences of stress may differ in relation to the environment in which they work (e.g., working with a team compared to consulting with an individual). However, SPCs may share common stress processes distinct to their roles as helpers of other participants in sport. Stressors relating to organizational- and role-related demands may contribute to the distinct appraisals and stress responses experienced by SPCs (Fletcher et al., 2011; Reid, et al, 2004). Though they may not compete in sport the same way athletes do, SPCs still have a responsibility to perform effectively in their roles in order to support the needs of their clients (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). As part of their duties, SPCs are often tasked with working with clients to hone cognitive, emotional regulation, and coping skills to elicit more positive and effective adaptations in response to a stressor (i.e., seeking social support; Brown et al., 2017; Fortin-

Guichard et al., 2018; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Participants in sport may seek support from SPCs to help manage the prevalent competitive and organizational demands involved with sport (DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Despite the progress that has been made in understanding stress experiences of athletes and coaches in sport, there has been limited investigation into what stressors SPCs face in their professional practice, how SPCs perceive and experience their own stress responses, and what coping strategies they use to manage job-related stressors (Baldock et al., 2020).

Given the nature of their profession, there is potential for SPCs to experience unique stressors such as feeling responsible or blamed for outcomes of their clients (e.g., athlete stress management, motivation, performance) (Bakker et al., 2014; McCormack et al., 2015). Historically, there has been an underlying expectation for SPCs to focus on optimizing performance when employed within a sports organization (McCormack et al., 2015). However, their professional duties include simultaneously fostering both performance and wellbeing outcomes of their clients (Andersen & Speed, 2010; McCormack et al., 2015). With the historic importance of performance in sport, SPCs may experience additional work-related stressors such as organizational demands from coaches or dignitaries in positions of leadership to focus more on athlete performance rather than their wellbeing (Fletcher et al., 2011; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). Organizational stressors in sport are defined by a continuing transaction between a person and the environmental demands corresponding to the organization within which they are present and have been flagged as being highly prevalent in sport due to the highly intricate social and organizational nature of competitive sport (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2011; Hanton et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2023).

In sport, organizational pressure can lead to an athlete's negative primary appraisal (e.g., threat) of a situation thus impeding their capacity to perform and undermining their wellbeing (Neil et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 2021). In a study exploring sport psychologists' experiences with organizational stressors, Fletcher et al. (2011) highlighted that discrepancies between organizational expectations and client wishes challenged sport psychologists' ethical standards and procedures. This study also outlined challenges that sport psychologists face within their organization such as role ambiguity, job insecurity, and lack of social support. However, it is important to note that the participants involved in that study (Fletcher et al., 2011) consisted of twelve 'sport psychologists', six of whom were sport psychology academics who were not practicing SPCs and who reported experiencing more organizational stressors compared to practicing SPCs. Being that practicing SPCs work within similar contexts and organizations as athletes (e.g., National Sport Organizations), SPCs and athletes may share similar performance-focused organizational expectations. The amassing of organizational stressors in sport can invoke negative outcomes such as burnout, substandard practice/performance, and unhealthy risk-taking (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2011). Again, however, research pertaining to non-athlete and coach perspectives in this domain are limited.

As outlined in the literature pertaining to the influence of the stress process on performance and wellbeing among athletes, inappropriate or insufficient coping resources may hinder one's ability to effectively cope with stressors (Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls et al., 2016; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Given their training, expertise, and professional objectives, SPCs are likely to possess knowledge relating to the essential components necessary for optimizing outcomes from the stress process (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.; Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). However, evidence from research on general applied psychology

professionals (e.g., psychotherapists) suggests that playing the role of 'solutionist', 'helper', and 'counselor of problems' can lead to professionals experiencing compassion fatigue, burnout, and other detrimental effects to their overall wellbeing (Barton, 2019; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). In a study investigating contributors to the stress of psychotherapists, another group of professionals employed to supply psychological support of their clients, Rabin et al. (1999) outlined some general stressors contributing to these mental supporting professionals' chronic stress which included (a) preserving the therapeutic relationship, (b) scheduling, (c) role ambiguity, and (d) emotional exhaustion.

Various types of appraisals and coping strategies have the potential to encourage or undermine effective holistic functioning (i.e., the joint experience of subjective performance and wellbeing; Brown et al., 2017). For example, challenge appraisals can encourage engagement in a task, thus creating opportunities for positive adaptation and, consequently, favourable performance and wellbeing outcomes (Brown et al., 2017; Carver, 1998, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whereas, lacking in resources and capacity to adaptively cope with a stressor (e.g., threat appraisals) may limit one's ability to perform optimally (Brown et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, it should be noted that coping strategies are not inherently effective or ineffective. Rather, the effectiveness of coping strategies depends on the specific iterative process between an individual and their environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the workplace, effective holistic functioning (Brown et al., 2017) does not simply occur in the absence of a stressor; rather, it is the manner in which a professional *responds* to this stressor (i.e., appraisals and coping) which determines their performance and wellbeing outcomes (Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer et al., 2005). There may be a perfusion of stressors that occur in the occupational settings in which SPCs work (e.g., organizational stressors; Fletcher et al., 2011).

Given the limited academic literature focused on the subjective experiences of SPCs, it is unknown how the unique stressors that SPCs face, along with the coping strategies that they use to help abate these stressors, influences experiences of stress among this population.

There has been extensive investigation into experiences of stress and coping among applied psychology practitioners, much of which highlights demands of the profession exceeding professionals' resources and capacity to cope with stressors thus resulting in unfavourable outcomes such as burnout and declining professional performance (McCormack et al., 2015; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Sherman & Thelen, 1998; Sim et al., 2016). For example, in an assessment of trauma therapists' compassion fatigue and burnout, Killian (2008) found that profession-related stress was associated with therapists' use of avoidant coping strategies (e.g., denial). Although the demands of psychotherapy (i.e., supporting those with mental *illness*) may not mirror the demands involved with SPC work (who focus on supporting mental *health* and performance), there are many overlapping expectations relating to client outcomes (e.g., optimizing holistic functioning) which may, in turn, elicit similar responses to stressors. Cropley et al. (2016) established that SPCs used problem-focused coping strategies to help manage their stressors, and coping strategies were developed by reflecting on previous experiences. While this provides a notable contribution to foundational knowledge on the popular coping strategies used among the SPC population, this study did not investigate other key tenets of the CMRT (i.e., stressors, appraisals, and outcomes) in conjunction with each other, thus limiting understanding of SPCs' experiences with the stress process. However, reflecting on previous experiences may be an important component of the stress process to consider as these experiences can influence subsequent responses to stress. Doing so also emphasizes the importance of understanding the

contextual factors (e.g., sport, profession) involved when an individual experiences the relational stress process (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

With calls to foster wellbeing among participants in sport (Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019), understanding the stress process of SPCs may serve as an important antecedent towards discerning the wellbeing status of this sport-related population. While there has been movement towards prioritizing wellbeing in sport settings, the hegemonic competition and performance-focused nature of 'Westernized' sport, especially high-performance sport, persists in the settings in which SPCs operate (Maguire, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2020). Furthermore, sport is a setting rife with various sociocultural-related issues (e.g., gender stereotypes) which may influence sport participants' responses to stressors within these environments (Gentile et al., 2018; Hoar et al., 2010). However, it remains to be seen how the unique sport-related contexts in which SPCs work intersect with SPCs' experiences of stress. As such, exploring the dynamic contexts in which SPCs experience stress in their professions may serve as a useful avenue for understanding the unique and underrepresented perspectives of this population.

2.8 Summary of Literature Review

The prior sections have summarized the existing literature pertaining to the role of a sport psychology consultant, potentially shifting priorities in the sport setting, stress and coping in sport, cognitive appraisals and emotions, and stress and coping among applied psychology consultants. SPCs have been identified as important contributors to sport performance by supporting sport participants through the teaching of psychological skills. As wellbeing in sport continues to become a more principal consideration for sport participants and organizations, SPCs have also been flagged as a potentially important population for fostering wellbeing alongside performance among individuals within this setting. Stress is a necessary and

omnipresent aspect of sport, and SPCs are often tasked with supporting athletes and coaches in their learning of adaptive responses to stress. Lazarus' (1991, 1999) CMRT was outlined as an integral underpinning framework used to explain and assess the stress response in this context which involves an interaction between an individual and their environment. The CMRT proposes that there are two types of appraisals (primary and secondary) that predict one's coping strategies and, ultimately, the outcomes that they experience as part of the stress process. Although often working with athletes to optimize their stress responses, there is little evidence indicating how SPCs experience the stress process and how this may influence their professional experiences. Research involving other applied psychology practitioners suggests that these professionals are faced with stressors unique to their work (e.g., organizational stressors) which influence the responses and outcomes to experiencing stress. Considering the influence that stress experiences can have on performance and wellbeing, exploring how SPCs experience stress in their professions was flagged as a potentially useful contribution to calls for improving wellbeing among participants in sport.

2.9 Gaps in Literature and Research Question

There is a dearth of literature on the perceptions and experiences of SPCs themselves, as relevant research is often focused on coach and athlete perspectives (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). Further, there is little evidence concerning what stressors SPCs face and how these professionals appraise and cope with their stressors. In their preliminary investigation of the organizational stressors SPCs face, Fletcher et al. (2011) propose that future research be directed towards exploring how each component of the CMRT relates to practicing SPCs given the prominence of stress-related pressures and emotions in the competitive sporting environment. Additionally, in their systematic review of organizational stress and wellbeing in competitive

sport, Simpson et al. (2023) outlined that research on support staff in sport (e.g., sport psychology practitioners) is scant and that more research should focus on the perspectives of non-athlete populations in sport due to their significant role in fostering health-promoting environments. With the calls to foster wellbeing across all individuals involved in sport, understanding the perceptions of SPCs' own professional practices may be an important avenue for research as this population is claimed to be integral to the pursuit of enhancing wellbeing and performance of participants in sport (Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). Prior et al. (2025) provide recent insights into sport psychologists' experiences and challenges in offering mental health support working in elite sport settings in the UK. While insights from this study allude to several unique stressors faced by sport psychologists (e.g., misaligned expectations between practitioner and organization), the variety in SPC training, role titles and expectations between countries renders it unclear whether these findings can be transferable to the Canadian sport system.

As the CMRT contends that the stress process involves an interaction between an individual and their environment, the first aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the context in which SPCs work and their perceptions of their professional journeys (e.g., role expectations, career development and transitions, discrepancies between expectations and realities; Lazarus, 1991, 1999). This helped inform how the environmental context in which SPCs' work influences their experiences of stress (and vice versa). The second aim was to identify how SPCs experience the stress process specifically—as guided by CMRT—by investigating what stressors SPCs face, and how they appraise and cope with these stressors. Research involving stress in sport often relies on single time point interviews to generate knowledge; however, using this technique may limit the depth of responses by not allowing

adequate opportunity for follow-up generation of insights and thorough reflection (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In consideration of this limitation, this study involved multiple interviews to diversify the qualitative research in this field and better address the study aims (compared to a single-interview approach). Furthermore, understanding the experiences of SPCs working within the Canadian sport system offers unique insights into the Canadian-specific landscape of SPC work. In sum, the aim of this research was to explore SPCs' experiences with stress throughout their professional journeys in sport, and how the context in which they work (i.e., the Canadian sport system) has shaped, and continues to shape, their stress experiences.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study involved a two-part qualitative inquiry into the experiences of stress and coping among SPCs working in Canada. The first part included a one-on-one semi-structured interview focused on (a) building rapport between the interviewer and the participant, and (b) better understanding the participants' professional journey becoming and beginning as a SPC and how they have experienced stress throughout this process. The second part was a one-on-one semi-structured interview focused more specifically on participants' current experiences with the process of stress and coping (informed by CMRT) in their profession. In this methods section, I will outline the paradigmatic and philosophical underpinnings that helped shape this research. Then, I will discuss how data was constructed using reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews guided by the CMRT (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Lazarus, 1991, 1999). Finally, I will explore the ethical considerations of this research and consider how my positionality as a researcher influenced this study.

3.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

Throughout this research, I worked within a constructivist paradigm to understand and interpret meaning among participants' responses (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). In taking a constructivist philosophical stance, I focused on the reckoning that participants construct multiple subjective realities without assuming underlying truths exist beyond human experience (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). As I aimed to explore multiple perceptions of professional experiences, it was important to attribute ultimate value to the subjective realities of participants. To achieve this, I used open-ended questions to prompt conversation and find meaning in SPCs' personal experiences of complex, subjective experiences such as stress and coping (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Woike, 2008). This allowed for emphasis on the position that individuals are

meaning makers and construct narratives based on their responses to different situations or stimuli (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). These responses shape how narratives are formed and how emotions affect experiences, resembling the structure of the CMRT (Lazarus, 1999; Smith, 2016).

In taking a constructivist position, I operated this research by assuming a relativist ontological position and a subjectivist and transactional epistemology (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). In doing so, I recognized that as a researcher, I contributed to the knowledge creation process which was shaped through a variety of participants' and my own lived experiences (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Assuming these philosophical positions may have been particularly salient due to the current setting of relevant sport psychology literature, as well as my positionality as a researcher. The lack of evidence relating to the perspectives of SPCs working in Canada vitalizes the demand for more subjective, professional-focused interpretations of meaning to provide introductory understanding of this population. As a master's student and someone who is not a SPC, researching under these philosophical underpinnings positioned this proposed study within a similar emergent domain, allowing space for prominent foundational co-construction of knowledge. Further discussion regarding my positionality is provided at the end of this methods section (see 3.6 below).

3.2 Recruitment Process

Recruitment of participants took place within the Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA), thus using a purposive sampling technique. In the case of this study, purposive sampling can be defined by its recruitment and sampling within a national sport psychology organization as was is most relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2016). Sampling was carried out among professional members within the CSPA and was not limited to professionals

who share a particular professional context (e.g., professionals working with Olympians) as this research aimed to explore the broad experiences of SPCs (Palinkas et al., 2015). All professional members of the CSPA must have CMPC designation. However, in the pursuit of gathering a breadth of perspectives from SPCs, professionals who were trained to be clinical level psychologists and registered psychologists in addition to their CMPC distinction were not excluded from the recruitment for this study. Information regarding professional credentials was inquired about in a demographic questionnaire, and some credentials are noted in the Results chapter. The term 'sport psychologist' was not used to classify the participants in this research as this population in Canada requires a Masters or PhD in Clinical Psychology and includes both practical and academic professionals. It is important to note that in Canada, CMPCs who lack registered psychologist and clinical counsellor designation do not use the term 'SPC' to define their professional role in sport because the term 'psychology' is deemed legally protected and could be potentially misconstrued (Association for Applied Psychology, 2017). However, in the context of this study, using the term 'CMPC' to define participants who also have clinical counsellor and/or registered psychologist distinction could exclude insights from the experiences of participants in their roles as both a CMPC and clinical counsellor and/or registered psychologist working in sport. Therefore, 'SPC' was chosen as the term to encompass the target population of this study to broaden the scope of experiences within applied sport psychology professionals, broadening the potential for a wide representation of applied SPC experiences.

The recruitment process also consisted of snowball sampling within the CSPA. Snowball sampling involves initially sampling a smaller group of participants who then encourage or promote other individuals with similar experiences or characteristics relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2016). My thesis supervisor, Dr. Desmond McEwan who is both an academic

(non-practicing) member of the CSPA and well-connected with several professional members of the CSPA, helped begin the snowball sampling process by disseminating calls for participants for this proposed study and contacted members who were potentially willing to participate and/or assist with advertising the study to other members of the CSPA. Advertising for the study was in the form of an e-newsletter sent via email (Appendix A) and an online post on UBC's Sport and Performance Psychology Lab website (Appendix B) which outlined the details of the study and the researcher's contact information. 11 Practicing Members of the CSPA (i.e., SPCs) expressed interest in participating in the study and were sent a follow-up letter of introduction via email with further information about the study (Appendix C) containing the following documents: a consent form (Appendix D) and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix E), both were asked to be reviewed and signed. The demographic questionnaire was typically completed between first and second interviews or following the second interview. The demographic questionnaire consisted of questions pertaining to information on participant age, gender identity, and general professional experience (e.g., "How long have you been a SPC?"). Professional experience was discussed in detail during the first semi-structured interview, information which helped me personalize the second semi-structured interview questions and build rapport with participants.

3.3 Participant Sample

While there is a lack of academic consensus regarding an optimal or required number of participants when conducting qualitative research, a key underpinning of qualitative research involves denoting significant value to the depth of unique responses (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). With Lazarus' contentions regarding the unique transactions between an individual and the context in which they experience stress, relying on strengths of qualitative research (e.g., eliciting in-depth responses) was integral when considering the sample size of this study (Braun

& Clarke, 2021; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Due to the importance of understanding each participant's individualized experiences of stress, it was important to attribute significant time to participants' individualized perspectives with the aim to obtain rich, in-depth perspectives (Bryman, 2016). This research was positioned within a relativist ontology which assumes that there is no single reality that exists separate from the individual (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Therefore, in seeking to understand multiple in-depth subjective realities from a variety of SPCs, the number of participants was chosen to allow for a thorough exploration of each participant's unique perspectives. Ultimately, 11 SPCs took part in the study. Of those 11 SPCs, ages ranged from 27 – 61 years old (M_{age} = 41.5). Participants described their gender identities as female (n = 5), male (n = 3), and woman (n = 3). Nine of the eleven participants were born in Canada. Years of experience as a SPC ranged from 3 – 30 years. Participants practiced across 4 provinces: Alberta (n = 1), British Columbia (n = 8), Newfoundland (n = 1), Quebec (n = 1).

3.4 Data Construction

As previously alluded to, the data construction process began with a one-on-one semi-structured interview that focused on building rapport and understanding the participants' professional journey becoming a SPC and how they experienced stress throughout their previous professional endeavours. The second one-on-one semi-structured interview focused more specifically on participants' experiences with stress and coping as a SPC. Time between first and second part interviews was dependent on participants' availability to meet and ranged from one week to three months. Time between interviews allowed participants to reflect on their responses, thus helping to guide the structure of the second interview (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Time between interviews also allowed me to engage in a preliminary analysis of the first time-point interviews that was used to help guide questions asked in the second semi-structured

interviews. Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, a popular and widely accessible video communication tool. Virtual interviews limited scheduling- and travel-related barriers and provided myself and participants with greater flexibility in their ability to meet (Keen et al., 2022). Data from both interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and Zoom's video and audio recording function. All recordings were stored on a password-protected computer and, shortly after the interviews, were uploaded to Otter.ai, a virtual artificial intelligence transcription tool used to transcribe audio recordings. Transcripts generated by Otter.ai were then listened to multiple times in order to familiarize myself with the data (step one of Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis (see 3.5 below). Otter.ai-generated transcripts contained many errors, therefore, I amended the transcripts by correcting the transcripts while listening to the original audio recordings.

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interview #1: Becoming and Being a SPC

To gain a better understanding of SPCs' experiences with stress, and how their perceptions of work have changed over the course of their careers, this study first included a semi-structured interview focused on the participants' life and career journeys. Semi-structured interviews involve using a preplanned but open-ended set of questions to evoke discussion related to a relatively focused topic (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In this study, using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to expand on their subjective experiences while still being framed by a particular topic—CMRT, thus adhering to the constructivist approach of this research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020).

Time one interviews (n = 11) ranged from 58 to 113 minutes (M_{time} = 75 minutes). The first semi-structured interview was focused on SPCs' professional journey and consisted of open-ended questions promoting the recounting of subjective interpretations of personal stories and

explorations of individuals' interpretations of life and career progression, expanding on their inner life and perceptions (Atkinson, 1998). As this study aimed to capture recollections of stress- and coping-related experiences throughout their journeys as practicing SPCs, interviews centered around participant's reflections concerning specific 'chapters' in their careers (i.e., beginning with questions about how they came to be a SPC followed by questions about their first role practicing as a SPC) (Smith, 2015). Using semi-structured interviews that follow the professional journeys of SPCs allowed a development of more thorough understanding of the context in which SPCs work, providing important context for the myself to engage in rich and meaningful conversations with participants. Moreover, with previous research alluding to growing calls to transition sporting contexts away from a 'win-at-all-costs' culture to an environment that strives to promote wellbeing in conjunction with performance, prominent consideration was given to the notion that practicing SPCs may have experienced changing work-related stressors and expectations through their careers. Furthermore, consideration was given to the notion that SPCs may have changed the way in which they approach their work and their professional expectations in order to adhere to the current landscape of sport. Thus, using a semi-structured interview technique—which guided participants through the recounting of their professional journeys as a SPC—sought to provide me, the interviewer, with a unique contextual understanding of their experiences working as a SPC, while also helping the me build rapport with the interviewees and better understand the individualized perspectives of each participant.

With the lack of explorations into the experiences of SPCs, semi-structured interviews provided a fruitful ground for generating foundational interpretations of their career progression and how this contributes to their experiences of stress. Semi-structured interviews used a preplanned guide with open-ended questions beginning with rapport-building questions (e.g.,

"Could you start by telling me a little bit about yourself?"), followed by questions about SPCs' career progression (e.g., "What were your expectations for your role as a SPC before you began your career and how are these expectations different than the realities you face today?"). Towards the end of the first semi-structured interview, questions were structured to prompt preliminary discussion on stress and coping (e.g., "How have the stressors you face as a SPC changed throughout your career?"). This helped prime participants to reflect on their experiences with stress and coping as a SPC before the ensuing interview with the aim of enriching their capacity to provide profound interpretations of their experiences in the second interview. The full interview guide for *Semi-structured interview #1: Becoming and Being a SPC* is provided in Appendix F.

3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interview #2: Stress and Coping through the Professional Journey

Following the first interview, participants had time to reflect our conversations. Allowing this time between interviews permitted participants to reflect on their responses, and space was allotted at the beginning of the second interview for the participant to share these reflections with the interviewer (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In the time between interviews, preliminary analysis of the first time-point interviews was conducted to guide questions posed in the second semi-structured interviews. Preliminary analysis of first-time point interviews included noting key topics of discussion (e.g., previous experiences as athletes, current employment settings) in my reflexive journal (see Appendix H) and formulating questions relating to stress based on these unique perspectives.

Time two interviews (n = 11) ranged from 30 to 96 minutes (M_{time} = 76 minutes). While the first interview consisted of questions pertaining to the participants' previous general experiences with stress, the second interview used a preplanned guide with open-ended questions

that were more specifically framed around Lazarus' CMRT (1991, 1999). The CMRT describes an interaction between an individual and their environment, thus indicating that the context in which stressors materialize is an important consideration when studying stress and coping (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). In using the CMRT, I asked participants questions guided by the four general underpinnings of this theory. This is a typical method in developing interview guides among current sport psychology literature on stress and coping (e.g., Baldock et al., 2022; Poulus & Polman, 2022). First, I sought to understand the unique stressors participants face as SPCs (e.g., What are some of the most prominent stress inducers in your current role?). Then, I asked about how they tend to appraise these stressors (e.g., "How, if at all, did your reactions or interpretations of stress change as you moved through your professional journey?") and the coping strategies they use to manage the stressors (e.g., "What kind of strategies have you found to be most effective for you to help manage your stressors, if any?"). Finally, I enquired about the outcomes they tend to experience as a result of this process (e.g., "Do certain stressors and/or coping mechanisms impact your wellbeing?"). While these interview guides (Appendices F and G) were guided by the CMRT, semi-structured interviews allowed for loosely organized discussion where the participant and the interviewer collaborated in letting the conversation progress naturally while still being framed to reach the overarching research aims (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Asking questions relevant to SPCs' professional stressors, appraisals, and coping was fundamental in building a comprehensive understanding of this population's experiences with work-related stress processes. It is for this reason that responses from the first interview were instrumental in laying the foundation for interpretations to be made regarding SPCs' experiences

with stress and coping. The full interview guide for *Semi-structured interview #2: Stress and Coping Throughout the Professional Journey* is provided in Appendix G.

3.5 Reflexive Data Analysis

Once interviews were transcribed, data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with abductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Thematic analysis involves flexibly moving through six steps: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data; (2) initial coding; (3) developing themes; (4) refining themes; (5) naming themes; and (6) writing up the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this reflexive thematic analysis process is to differentiate, amalgamate, interpret, and analyze the various insights from the qualitative dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the context of this study, data from the interviews was assessed and structured to be presented within a cohesive 'story' in this ensuing chapter of this thesis document. This chronological presentation of Results was similar to the chronological structure of semi-structured interviews. In short, participants' recounting of previous experiences in sport seemed to lay the foundation for exploring how participants experience stress in their roles as SPCs. Initial analysis of the data included grouping core tenets of the CMRT (e.g., stressors, coping strategies) separately from the contextual factors that seemed to influence experiences of stress among SPCs. However, based on the transactional nature of stress, it was deemed necessary to explore both individual factors (e.g., personal values and goals) in conjunction with the contextual factors (e.g., entrepreneurial landscape of SPC work) to explore stress among SPCs more thoroughly. See Appendix H for a more detailed description of the reflexive thematic analysis process.

Adopting a reflexive stance when engaging in data analysis requires critical self-reflection through the challenging of one's own assumptions, beliefs, and preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Being reflexive involves striving towards perspective-taking or acting with empathy and being cognizant of the researcher's influence on the research and knowledge creation process (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Throughout this study, reflexive thematic analysis encouraged myself, the researcher, to be thoughtful in my practices and interpretations when engaging with the qualitative dataset (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Acting in a reflexive manner during each step of the data analysis phase allowed me to act in alignment with my guiding philosophical underpinnings. Reflexive thematic analysis invoked the opportunity for meaning to be created by participants' interpretations, adhering to a constructivist paradigm (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Being reflexive during the analysis also allowed me to remain philosophically coherent as this approach accepts that knowledge was created through a combination of participants' and my own lived experiences (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Further, taking a relativist approach promoted quality by creating an open-ended and ever-changing set of criteria when coding (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Also, in taking a relativist ontological position, I engaged in reflexive practice through being exposed to different realities which challenged my subjective views and prejudicial thinking (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020).

Abductive coding required creative movement between theory (i.e. deductive coding) and inceptions from participants' experiences (i.e. inductive coding; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In this study, inductive coding was based on interpretations of participant responses, while deductive coding was informed by the CMRT (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). Taking an abductive approach aligned with the epistemological and ontological positions guiding this study as it allowed me to

interpret SPCs' lived experiences more holistically while still being guided by a particular framework to remain consistent with the aims of the research question (Simpson et al., 2023; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). There was a risk that using reflexive abductive thematic analysis loses the integral structural feature of a narrative recounted by the participant (Smith, 2015). However, given the primary aim of the research question (i.e., how do SPCs experience stress and coping), it was deemed necessary to engage in abductive thematic analysis using the CMRT. Since the CMRT is a commonly used theory in understanding stress and coping in sport, using this theory to construct foundational knowledge of the perspectives of SPCs adjacent to other participants in sport sought to enhance the salience of results (Lazarus, 1991, 1999, 2000).

Another way in which I practiced reflexivity in this study was by engaging in reflexive journaling (Appendix H) (Smith, 1999). Reflexive journaling of field notes to record my reasoning and judgements during the data collection and construction process helped me engage with my subjective responses to the data (McAdams, 2011). Writing in this journal also allowed me to lament my own emotional responses to data, why I made a data-analysis-related decision, and my positionality within the study. Additionally, keeping a reflexive journal during the first interviews served as an opportunity for me to jot down and research topics of discussion that were unfamiliar to me regarding the experiences of SPCs. Ultimately, journaling helped me construct meaning of participants' responses and aided in structuring the second interviews.

3.6 Positionality

As I worked under the philosophical assumption that researchers contribute to the co-construction of knowledge, I continued to demonstrate reflexivity of my positionality throughout the research process. In regards to this specific study, while I do have a keen interest and athletic background in sport, I do not have a background in high-performance or professional sport. As a

researcher, I have experience working with a community-based youth sport program. However, since the participants in this study have experience working as a professional in a sports context, I, the researcher, was positioned as an outsider to the group of participants that I interviewed. Although being an outsider may have helped prevent role confusion and partiality of view, it also may have limited the advantages of being familiar with the nuances akin to working as a SPC (Berger, 2015). As I lacked familiarity and experience with the role of a SPC, it may have been more challenging for me to gain access into deep and refined interpretations of professionals' experiences. For this reason, I worked closely with my supervisor, Dr. McEwan, who is a member of the CSPA and thus an insider to this group to develop the interview guides and review the dataset. Furthermore, insights from a pilot interview with one of Dr. McEwan's former graduate students and CMPC, Dr. Katie Crawford (see 3.8 below) as well as feedback from my committee members, Dr. McEwan, Dr. Bennett, and Dr. Tamminen during the proposal of this study helped shape my inceptive knowledge on the topic of SPC work prior to engaging in interviews.

Being an outsider to the group of participants allowed me to raise questions and challenge the professionally perceived mundane and taken-for-granted tenets of working as a SPC (Berger, 2015). This, along with my limited research experience in this field, positioned this study within a similar emergent domain as the current literature relating to the experiences and perceptions of SPCs is scant. Being that this is an exploratory study, my inexperience in research and outsider status to the group of participants allowed space for prominent foundational co-construction of knowledge regarding the perspectives of SPCs. However, to further ensure quality and rigour based on my outsider-status positionality within this research, I engaged in member reflections

with participants to allow for additional co-participatory generation of insights (Smith & McGannon, 2017; see Section 3.8 below).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

From a procedural ethics perspective, this study was reviewed by UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H24-02602) to ensure that the intended procedures and outcomes involved in this study adequately protected the participants (Palmer, 2016). The way in which this research adhered to the procedural ethical considerations judged by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board was to consider matters of informed consent, confidentiality, and potential outcomes for participants. Thus, I obtained ongoing informed consent by sending a consent form (Appendix D) prior to the interview, as well as engaging in check-ins before, after, and throughout the interviews. Informed consent refers to the process whereby participants are notified and understand the goals and purpose of the research, the methods the study will adopt, the method in which data will be presented, the benefits and risks of engaging in the research, and the intended outcomes of the study (Palmer, 2016). Rather than considering informed consent simply as a process which avoids liability, engaging in informed consent through check-ins throughout the research (e.g., member reflections) facilitates transparency between the research and the participants by promoting participant autonomy (Potts & Brown, 2005). In terms of confidentiality, responses from interviews were safeguarded by ensuring all identifiable information was stored on a password protected virtual space (Palmer, 2016). Additionally, pseudonyms have been attributed to each participant to provide anonymity of participants' identity. Member reflections with participants allowed participants the opportunity to retract any data that they no longer wish to be discussed in the data analysis process (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

From a personal ethics lens, since the topic of study had potential to veer toward anguished conversations about stress and mental health, I ensured that I stay within my role as a researcher by communicating as an empathetic listener and ensuring that there are safeguards (e.g., proximity to a phone to access crisis centre resources) in place to protect myself and participants in the case that conversation got too emotionally burdensome. In preparation for engaging in this research, I participated in a "Skillfully Responding to Distress" training course (on July 17, 2024) hosted by the Crisis Centre of BC to develop skills in responding and de-escalating emotional distress among individuals in crisis (Crisis Centre of BC, 2024). I also engaged in continuous reflection of the power imbalances at play throughout the interviews in consideration of my positionality as a researcher and outsider of the group. As a researcher, it was my responsibility to decide what features of the dataset to include in the ensuing chapters and how to interpret these subjective experiences (Steffen, 2015). However, due to my outsider position and limited research experience, I worked to emphasize agency among the narrative shared by participants while remaining reflexive in my approach as my epistemological position (subjectivist and transactional) highlights the knowledge creation process as collaborative between the participant and researcher (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Due to power imbalances that exist between an outsider researcher and insider participants, there was potential for participants to limit the depth in which they shared their experiences. To help encourage participants to feel comfortable to share their genuine perspectives and narratives, I attempted to build rapport with the participants by explicitly exposing my positionality and adopting an empathetic and active listening approach when engaging in conversation.

3.8 Quality and Rigour

Addressing rigour in qualitative research is an important consideration to ascertain accuracy and establish confidence in the findings (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Demonstrating rigour in qualitative research has included methods such as member checking, inter-rater reliability, and the idea of universal criteria (Tracey, 2010); however, qualitative academics have argued that these methods are problematic as they do not adhere to core philosophies of qualitative research (e.g., accepting a fixed set of criteria rather than acknowledging nuance; Smith & McGannon, 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Smith and McGannon (2017) proposed various solutions to demonstrate rigour in qualitative research, some of which were employed in this study: member reflections, using critical friends, and adopting a relativist approach.

Member reflections involve a co-participatory process whereby the researcher and the participants review the findings to explore any gaps or resemblances regarding the interpretations of the results (Schinke et al., 2013; Smith & McGannon, 2017). This promotes additional generation of insights that may have not been acknowledged in the preliminary data collection process (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Adhering to the subjectivist and transactional epistemological stance underpinning this research, when this process elicited discrepancies in the results, they were discussed contextually within the findings, highlighting the co-participatory nature of insight generation (Smith & McGannon, 2017; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). In this study, after interviews were conducted and the data were analyzed, I created a summary from each participants' two transcripts (11 summaries total) and sent them to each participant for their review. Each participant was given the opportunity to provide feedback or additional insights to their individualized summary. Participants were asked to engage in member reflections over email in consideration of the accessibility, time, and workload restraints of the participants. Five participants provided additional feedback and amendments to the summary of their interviews

which were honoured in the Results. For example, several participants emphasized that they did not want identifiable information (e.g., location of academic institutions where they were trained, specific sport that they work with) to end up in any future write-ups. Therefore, in the ensuing Results and Discussion, I sought to exclude any passages or discussion that could inhibit confidentiality of participants. In addition to generating more insights regarding the experiences of SPCs, member reflections enhanced understanding of responses and built additional collaborative rapport between myself and the participants (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Another way in which rigour was considered in this study was by involving critical friends throughout all stages of the research process. In the academic context, critical friends are individuals who engage in dialogue with the researcher to provide critical feedback and encourage reflexivity throughout the research process (Smith & McGannon, 2017; Wolcott, 1994). Dr. Desmond McEwan, my thesis supervisor, served as a critical friend during all stages in the progress of this research. As mentioned, Dr. McEwan is an academic (non-practicing) member of the CSPA and has researched, and taught about, stress and coping in sport. In regards to my positionality as an outsider to the participant group, having a critical friend who is an insider to the CSPA provided valuable knowledge of the intricacies involved with being a member of this group. Once semi-structured interviews began, Dr. McEwan and I engaged in regular meetings to discuss and review my interviewing strengths and potential areas for improvement. Once data was transcribed, Dr. McEwan and I, along with Katy Stewart—a graduate (MA) student focused on sport psychology and an additional critical friend in this study—reviewed the qualitative dataset together and discussed their interpretations of the results. Katy has an undergraduate degree in psychology (whereas my undergraduate degree was in Health & Exercise Sciences) as well as experience working with a SPC during her time as an

athlete in high-performance sport (i.e., training in her sport's Olympic pathway program). Being an initial outsider to this study, working with Katy offered a unique outlook and "fresh" perspective on this study. Dr. McEwan's former graduate student, Dr. Katie Crawford, was another critical friend who participated in a pilot interview whereby semi-structured questions were trialed, reviewed, and edited depending on the insights provided in that piloting (Smith, 2016). For example, Dr. Crawford alluded to the recently changed qualification process within the CSPA to obtain CMPC distinction. Thus, additional consideration was given in interview guides to the training process undertaken by SPCs. For context, Dr. Crawford is a CMPC and was in the process of completing a PhD in sport psychology at the time of the pilot interview.

While this study was guided by Lazarus' CMRT, using semi-structured interviews encouraged loosely organized discussion where the conversation could advance naturally rather than being restrained by a theory or set of criteria (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Data were analyzed reflexively in a similar approach where abductive coding, although deductively being guided by the CMRT, allowed for inductive construction of insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As such, rigour was considered by using a relativist approach rather than using a strict and rigid set of criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Using this relativist approach reflected the constructivist underpinning of this research through the recognition that truths exist subjectively and within a particular social context (Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Chapter 4: Results

The data constructed through reflexive thematic analysis will be presented under three overarching sections: (1) *Anchored by a Passion for Helping in Sport*; (2) *Navigating the Currents of (Shifting) Sociocultural Tides*; and (3) *Seeking Elusive Stability in Choppy Waters*. In line with Lazarus' contentions, building understanding of the context in which these individuals have progressed throughout their careers may help yield unique insights into the interpretation of how they experience and perceive stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As such, within themes, recounting of the personal and professional experiences of participants will be presented in chronological order to help lay the foundation of the ensuing results which will also serve to scaffold the subsequent discussion.

4.1 Anchored by a Passion for Helping in Sport

The first theme is focused on participants' backgrounds as participants in sport, with a particular emphasis on how their previous experiences as athletes have shaped their experiences of stress, their allure and pursuit towards a helping role in their professional careers, and the realities of working in a helping role as a SPC. Participants outlined a multitude of previous sporting influences and experiences in the first interview, with conversations accentuating an authentic passion for sport and working in a helping capacity among SPCs. For many participants, sport and adopting a helping role have been an integral part of their identity throughout their lives, dating back to a time well before their careers as SPCs. Participants spoke to an array of stress-related experiences in pursuing a helping role in sport and now in their helping role as SPCs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants reflected on having a significant passion for sport from an early age, which originally motivated them to participate as athletes. One possible reason why participation in sport resonated so strongly with them seemed to relate to the

interpersonal components of sport (e.g., developing connections with others through sport). This interpersonal aspect of sport continues to resonate in their roles as SPCs, as participants are constantly engaging with other individuals involved in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches) in a helping manner. More specifically, participants made reference to the appeal of adopting positions of leadership in sport as athletes, a role that they have carried into their current position as SPCs. For example, Taylor, a current PhD student and a former youth coach and varsity athlete often found herself in leadership positions on her teams because she's "always had a desire to help." Engaging in leader positions in sport as an athlete and coach helped Taylor develop leadership skills, which contributed to her aspiration to work as a SPC. Possessing a passion for helping, particularly in sport contexts, was echoed by all participants. This passion was considered to 'anchor' their pursuit towards engagement in sport beyond athletic ventures and into their careers as SPCs, despite challenges akin with becoming and being a SPC. However, being anchored by a passion for helping in sport also considered to contribute unique experiences of stress as a SPC.

To illustrate participants' enthusiasm for sport, their passion for helping in sport, and how this has shaped and continues to shape their experiences with stress in their professions, three subthemes have been constructed from the data: (1) *"I wish someone would've sat in the mud with me": Reconciling Past Athletic Experiences*; (2) *"Progression is still a steep learning curve": Building Competencies*; (3) *"How do I continue dancing, maybe a slower dance?": Handling the Weight of Helping*. Subthemes are presented in chronological order with respect to participants' life experiences prior to becoming a SPC, training to be a SPC, and working as a SPC.

4.1.1 "I wish someone would've sat in the mud with me": Reconciling Past Athletic Experiences

Participants recounted an array of experiences in sport that have shaped their roles as SPCs. Reflections included passages pertaining to grievances of high-performance participation, possessing a high-achieving mentality, receiving a lack of psychological support as an athlete, and transitioning identities between athlete and SPC.

Most participants either explicitly described their athletic ventures in sport as being high-performance or outlined a setting that was deemed high-performance by definition from the 2019 Canadian High Performance Sport Strategy (Government of Canada, 2019). Participants referred to adverse and psychologically distressing experiences they had with various leaders (e.g., coaches) in high-performance sport as athletes. In her transition into high-performance sport, Anne, a neophyte SPC and recently certified clinical counselor, remembered "associat[ing] the higher levels with worse coaching" from an emotional support perspective describing these environments as "quite verbally aggressive and psychologically unsafe." Along with struggling with confidence as an athlete, challenging coaching experiences contributed to deterring her from competing in high-performance sport. In a similar vein, Jaida, a SPC with over 25 years of consulting experience, recalled transitioning into a high-performance environment with a coach that "just had no compassion." Jaida continued in high-performance sport where she eventually developed performance anxiety, which both halted her pursuits as an athlete and inspired a curiosity into the psychological component of athletic performance because she "[didn't] want people to lose out on opportunities" like she did. In both Anne and Jaida's cases, exposure to unjust treatment from leaders in a performance-focused sporting environment appeared to have sown the seeds of future help-related careers as SPCs.

Striving for high achievement across various settings (e.g., sports, academics) was a prevalent characteristic shared by several participants. Taylor described herself as "somebody that gets pretty stressed, but that also really helps [her] perform.", indicating a challenge

appraisal of competition-related stressors in sport (which she perceived as relevant due to her drive for high-achievement and authentic passion for competition) with the outcome of her stress process being optimized performance. However, Taylor also struggled with performance anxiety as an athlete, perhaps indicating a lack of capacity to cope with the stressors akin with her personal high-performance expectations (i.e., internalized accountability). As an athlete, Taylor recognized that she struggled with performance anxiety, which contributed to her curiosity about her distinct psychological abilities as an athlete (e.g. possessing a strong devotion to sport and leadership). Curiosity about her stress process, along with her salient desire to help others in a leadership capacity, inspired her to learn more about how she can help others perform to the best of their abilities by managing their stress.

Few participants were exposed to SPC work as young athletes, and those who were experienced minimal support. This lack of support during their athletic ventures signaled an opportunity to pursue SPC work and evoked a sense of responsibility among participants to fulfill this mental performance supporting role that they were deprived of as athletes (i.e., challenge appraisal leading to approach coping). For instance, Megan outlined how she wished she could have been supported by a SPC during her time as a student athlete.

> **Megan**: As an athlete, with my performance anxiety and how much I cared about performance as a young athlete, it became all-consuming… I really wish I had somebody looking out for my well-being when I was a student athlete. And so I've made it my mission to make sure I'm looking out for all these athletes' well-being, too.

The culmination of overlapping academic and athletic stressors being appraised as unmanageable, along with Megan's high-achieving personality, resulted in detrimental outcome to stress (e.g., feeling overwhelmed). During her SPC training, Megan learned stress-management skills, knowledge that she now feels a responsibility to pass on to future athletes. Similarly, Taylor takes a practical approach to reconciling her previous experiences in sport by

supporting current athletes. While Taylor is currently a PhD student, she hopes to transition out of academia and immerse herself in the practical side of sport psychology. As Taylor put it, she wants to "sit in the mud" because she "wish[es] someone would have sat in the mud with [her] and talked about [her feelings] and helped [her] try and figure it out." As a former high-achieving and nervous athlete, Taylor is privy to the adverse outcomes of experiencing a lack of mental performance support in sport and how this lack of support can hinder an athlete's ability to optimize performance and wellbeing. Hence, participants such as Megan and Taylor felt a responsibility to express their authentic leadership abilities through the vessel of SPC work. In filling the SPC void that they experienced as athletes, participants who were former athletes sough to reconcile their personal athletic experiences by providing SPC-related services to the next generation of athletes in need of support.

Discussions pertaining to athletic identity and transitions out of performing as an athlete were at the forefront of several conversations relating to early experiences in sport. Alexandra, a former varsity athlete, reflected on her transition out of sport (as an athlete) and into the field of applied sport psychology after sustaining an injury that impeded her ability to continue as a high-performance athlete.

> **Alexandra**: I'm still transitioning… there's still a loss there. I still miss it… The other part is using the part of my personality that I suppose I was defining as high-performance … applying that drive to something else was the way I could access that part of my identity and live that part of my identity that helped me move on from it.

Alexandra uses her role as a SPC to manage her loss of identity as an athlete. Now working as a SPC, Alexandra noted a greater sense of control (secondary appraisal) over her ability to help in sport settings, a dimension of herself that she lost as an athlete due to her history with injuries. Alexandra also made reference to her high-performance and high-achieving personality as an important component of her work and her transition out of sport and into SPC work. Thus,

although her injury resulted in a perceived loss of identity as an athlete, the components of her work as a SPC (e.g., the drive required to work in high-performance environments) have helped Alexandra engage in an approach style of coping with that unexpected stressor, allowing her to develop a new sense of self in sport.

This subtheme underscores how past experiences in sport shaped participants' early experiences of stress in these settings and how these experiences influenced their pursuit of a role as a SPC. A strong affinity for engaging in a leadership role in sport, along with a genuine desire to help, inspired several participants to transition from athlete to SPC. Furthermore, being former high-achieving athletes, some participants suggested that their perceived inadequacy of mental performance support during their athletic ventures may have evoked some participants' desire to engage in a helping role in sport to help reconcile their previous helping deficiencies.

4.1.2 "Progression is still a steep learning curve": Building Consulting Competencies

This subtheme involves an exploration of participant experiences of stress while developing competencies as a SPC and becoming professional members of the CSPA. In other words, this subtheme is focused on participants' transition from early training experiences and applied sport psychology education into practicing SPCs. This included leaning on mentors to navigate the SPC training process as well as salient early consultancy experiences that involved unpredictable one-on-one client sessions and planned group workshops.

As mentioned, individuals must be a CMPC to apply for professional membership from the CSPA. Although the CSPA requires a standardized approach through a combination of coursework and practical training, participants took a variety of avenues in obtaining their required credentials. Participants described at length the uniqueness of the system for training to work as a SPC in Canada. Participants alluded to a "do-it-yourself" process when it came to obtaining CSPA credentials. As outlined by Tess, constructing a combination of required SPC-

related experience and coursework can be a challenge for prospective SPCs. Indeed, the plethora of potential paths towards CSPA accreditation was often described as overwhelming and resource-intensive insofar as it "required a lot of navigating the system and kind of piecing together those courses and those experiences of supervision". Thus, the important role of a supervisor in helping abate some of these challenges in navigating CSPA accreditation and SPC work was extensively referenced. Participants noted that role-playing exercises and reviewing recorded consulting sessions with their supervisors was an important component of their SPC training, which helped build confidence in their consulting abilities. As Anne described, having "really good supervision" and intimate peer support were seminal resources during of her learning as a SPC that she will continue accessing "for the rest of [her] career." Consistent mentorship and peer support helped Anne navigate stressors of preliminary exposures to consulting by grounding her in the learning process, taking a progress-focused approach to learning. This may have helped Anne reappraise her incompetence-related stressors from being harmful, to challenging, ultimately fostering her perceived ability to cope with her stressors during a time when her consulting abilities were limited. Relying on others for help in an often-lonesome profession has contributed to bolstering Anne's potential for coping with the demands of working as a SPC and, in turn, strengthened her perceived competence in her role.

While supervisors offered support during role-playing exercises and retrospective analysis of consulting practices, trainees must eventually engage in consultancy work alone as part of their training. Thus, a prominent stressor during this training period was participants' perceived lack of education in their first exposure to applied work in the field. A common stressor for participants at the beginning of their careers was the unforeseeable nature of one-on-one consulting. Tess admitted that she would "get more nervous for [one-on-one consults] because they're a little bit more athlete driven, whereas a group workshop, you can really prepare."

Megan also outlined that she felt “more in control” leading group workshops, whereas in one-on-one sessions, she had to “roll with where the client wanted to go and be adaptable, but [she] didn't feel like [she] had all the skills and tools to help them if they went in a direction [she] wasn't prepared for.” Hence, SPCs can prepare for the expected stressor of facilitating a group workshop, as these scenarios are structured and the responsibility lies with the facilitator—namely, the SPC. Expecting a stressor can allow SPCs to prepare for the demands that may surface when facilitating a workshop (e.g., clients expressing disengaged body language) and could proactively adopt techniques that may help manage these stressors, ultimately easing pre-facilitation anxiety and allowing them to express themselves authentically in their workshops. In contrast, stressors involved with one-on-one consulting sessions (e.g., engaging in a topic of discussion that they are unfamiliar with) are often unexpected. Early in her career, Megan appraised unexpected one-on-one consulting stressors as threatening to her helping goals as her perceived lack of competence limited her perceived ability to adequately meet her help-related goals and engage in effective, problem-focused coping, thus prompting her to feel inept in performing professional duties. However, as her career has progressed, Megan now prefers one-on-one consulting sessions to facilitating workshops as she has reappraised the unexpected stressors involved with of one-on-one consulting as a challenge to “be in [the] moment and not look at it as [she has] to perform and succeed.” As Megan stated, when consulting “feels like a human moment… that really helps with stress.” Here, Megan highlighted that her potential for coping is bolstered when she avoids appraising one-on-one consulting stressors as threatening and can authentically engage in her helping role. As such, Megan now focuses on building rapport and connection rather than immediately attempting to provide tools and resources for her clients. In doing so, she experiences greater satisfaction and authenticity in her role.

Control over one's ability to prepare for a group workshop was also appraised as threatening due to the additional expectations placed upon themselves to provide a workshop that was deemed helpful by their clients. Some participants felt that the longer they had to prepare for a workshop, the more they should prepare in order to optimize the usefulness of the workshops. Jaida admitted that when she was "really stressed about an upcoming workshop, [she] would plan for hours what [she] was doing, what [she] would say, how to drive home these messages in a way that resonated with those athletes." Jaida has learned to manage her personal expectations by acknowledging that "there's only so much [she] can do… [She's] one piece of their puzzle to support [athletes] in their athletic journey." Learning to manage these personal expectations allows Jaida to reconsider the direction of credit or blame beyond herself, thus reappraising the stressors that accompany taking ultimate responsibility for the learning and actions of others. Similarly, Anne highlighted both the advantages and grievances of over-preparing. On one hand, Anne is "very aware [that] when [she] gets into that planning mode, [she's] very stressed" and "at [her] tipping point"; on the other hand, Anne attributed much of her ability to manage work-related stressors to "resources saved", and "a lot of knowledge and different workshop templates" that have "helped [her] long-term stress" because she is "not reinventing the wheel every time." Intensive planning allowed Anne to build the resources required to cope with the demands of the engaging in her habitual duties as a SPC, contributing to her feeling more confident in her consulting abilities. However, now that she has progressed in her career and having developed greater competence as a SPC, she is mindful that feeling intense obligation to over-prepare in her role is unsustainable and may deplete her ability to cope with the demands of her job, potentiating experiences of burnout. Anne noted "progression is still a steep learning curve", highlighting that the nature of the job requires continuous learning in both how she engages with clients and how she copes with the demands in her helping role.

In sum, from training to initial consulting practices, participants outlined how they navigated seminal experiences of stress at the beginning of their careers (i.e., during training and initial exposures to one-on-one consulting and group workshops). Participants underscored the dynamic nature of managing stressors and develop competencies in their roles. While participants underscored that learning to manage job-related demands is an ongoing pursuit, authentic engagement in their roles as helpers and learners, particularly at the start of their careers, helped SPCs engage in challenge appraisals and more effective coping strategies, which resulted in SPCs feeling more confident in their ability to meet their professional goals (i.e., helping clients optimize their performance and wellbeing).

4.1.3 "How do I continue dancing, maybe a slower dance?": Handling the Weight of Helping

The consequences of working in a helping role (e.g., psychotherapists) have been discussed at length in applied psychology-related literature (e.g., Barton, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). Although their professions are uniquely sport-related, SPCs are also subjected to similar expectations as other applied psychology professionals in their roles as helpers (e.g., maintaining confidentiality, abiding by the CSPA's code of ethics). Stress-related experiences of working in a helping capacity included feeling a responsibility to help, exhausting resources as a helper, and establishing boundaries.

Participants felt a strong moral responsibility to help in their SPC roles. A prevalent stressor experienced by SPCs was the holistic demand of working in a helping capacity and meeting the needs of their clients while balancing their personal expectations. Being in this helping role, Dominga, a former elite athlete, described how her "obsessive passion" and "full in" approach to helping contributes to her stress experience. To manage the "tension" of having

an obsessive passion for helping, Dominga emphasized the importance of establishing boundaries with herself and her clients to promote self-recovery as the outcomes of ineffectively coping with stressors in this helping role can be unfavourable for both herself and her clients, particularly as she is in the later stages of her career.

> **Dominga**: What I need now is to have a break, to have time that I recover because it is that tension, the stress is cumulative, right?... I've been in that zone where it's very dark because you're completely burnt out… I am obsessive, but no, I don't have the vitality that I once had. And so how do I manage this? How do I continue dancing, maybe a slower dance?

As an elite athlete, Dominga felt that she could relieve the pressure of experiencing obsessive passion by appraising competitive stressors as a challenge through physical expression in sport, resulting in engagement coping strategies (e.g., "sweat it out", run faster). However, as a SPC, Dominga has struggled with managing the non-competitive stressors in her work as her obsessive passion in sport has manifested into an obsessive passion for helping as a SPC. Dominga is challenged with investing time and resources towards herself when her obsessive passion in her role as a SPC has surfaced as a pursuit towards helping and investing in others. Dominga has taken an emotion-focused approach to coping with the intense demands of her obsessive passion for helping as a SPC by focusing on allocating time and resources to taking breaks and concentrating on recovery. Although Dominga continues to grapple with the tension of meeting her own expectations, taking an emotion-focused approach to coping helps her engage in her work more calmly, thus limiting her perceived potential for experiencing burnout.

Feeling a responsibility to help in their roles alludes to the notion that participants appraise having something at stake in their jobs as SPCs: helping foster favourable outcomes for their clients. Despite possessing an intrinsic motivation for engagement in their professional duties (i.e., to help others) that was cultivated from previous experiences in sport (as detailed in

subtheme 1.1), being a SPC also presented non-trivial challenges. Tess outlined a persistent dilemma whereby her credentials limit the extent to which she can help in more grave situations (e.g., engaging in acute support for athletes with mental health difficulties). The tension of managing the appropriate next steps for her clients stems from a desire to help to the best of her abilities combined with a concern that "throwing" her client to an external support will evoke "a sense of abandonment" among her client. Tess' perceived lack of control and her concern that seeking external support could potentially harm her client may be appraised as incongruent to her helping role. As Tess stated: "It's stressful because you want to provide the right support, and I don't want to be doing work that's causing any harm."

Megan reflected on the "draining" nature of helping during one-on-one consulting sessions which require "intense focus" because "you're just giving everything you have" during sessions. Engagement in these emotionally exhausting consulting sessions can result in Megan experiencing a limited capacity to perform authentically in her role. Not only does engaging in these consultations exhaust significant resources during the sessions, but preparation for sessions and post-session recovery require extensive resources to cope with the demands of these all-encompassing sessions. This seemingly chronic stressor may result in SPCs experiencing burnout should they repeatedly engage in exhausting consulting sessions without reprieve. SPCs must also reckon with issues relating to managing confidentiality. Rhonda described herself as "the vault", holding onto the sometimes emotionally heavy, confidential information that emerges from conversations with her clients. Potential for coping with stressors appraised as emotionally taxing and highly relevant to their duties as consulting as a SPC requires substantive resources which, when perceived as incapacitated, may result in experiencing burnout and/or compassion fatigue.

Several participants discussed how they manage the demands of working in a helping role. Gavin, who works both as a CMPC and clinical counsellor, deals with an array of different clients from various backgrounds. By working across contexts in a variety of roles, Gavin can pull tools and resources across settings to help him cope with the demands of his SPC work. However, since some participants only have a CMPC designation, SPCs must remain diligently cognizant of the ethical and moral consequences involved with working beyond their scope. While Gavin admitted that it can be exhausting to be exposed to a plethora of intimate conversation and sensitive information, he avoids unfavourable outcomes of stress (e.g., frustration, exhaustion) by disconnecting from his job once his workday is complete in an intentional and "clinical" manner. Gavin has developed "concrete techniques to end [his] day", such as "[being] very deliberate about putting [his] computer away" and changing his physical clothing when switching finishing his work day, perhaps alluding to both emotion-focused (e.g. mentally disengaging from work to relax) and problem-focused (e.g., scheduling downtime at home) of work-related demands. Establishing clear boundaries allows Gavin to "create separation" between his professional and personal lives, prohibiting the opportunity for work-related stressors to infiltrate his personal life at home. By establishing these boundaries, Gavin limits his exposure to stressors and requirement to cope with the demands of his role beyond the confines of work.

Rhonda highlighted the importance of practicing self-care and mindfully engaging in recovery processes to help manage the demands of helping as a practicing SPC. However, at the beginning of her career, Rhonda did not prioritize recovery, rather, the importance of emphasizing recovery was learned over the course of her career.

> **Rhonda**: When I was younger… I was really invested in my work, in my athletes, and I actually got sick… I'm pretty sure that came from the way that I didn't manage my stress

> … I'm not willing to sacrifice my body in the same way I did before… There's just certain boundaries that I've put up that I'm just, like, 'it has to be this way.'

Rhonda's experience underscores the importance of engaging in recovery processes due to the emotional load that SPCs must take on as part of their jobs as helpers. In Rhonda's case, taking on unmanaged emotional load as a young SPC resulted in her perceiving that her unmanaged stress manifested in her experiencing ill-health. Rhonda now refrains from overexerting herself by establishing boundaries in her work and practices explicit recovery-related techniques (e.g., exercising) to promote her physical and mental health and wellbeing. Management of the day-to-day pressures in their roles as SPCs was often referred to as self-care, which was a topic of discussion across several interviews. Self-care was operationalized by SPCs in several ways including exercising, eating well, journaling, and practicing spirituality. In relation to practicing self-care, several participants alluded to the notion of "practicing what they preach", meaning to take their in-depth knowledge on mental performance skills and applying it in their own lives. While the demands of their clients differ from those that SPCs face, due to their training in teaching coping-related practices to their clients, SPCs may be equipped with the tools to engage in these practices themselves. The presence of peer support was also perceived as helpful for SPC to ease the weight of working in a helping capacity. Relying on peers to help manage the demands of helping allowed SPCs to feel a sense of belonging in their job. Feeling a sense of loneliness may have contribute to SPCs feeling overwhelmed when taking sole responsibility (i.e., direction of blame/credit) for managing their job-related stressors (e.g., managing ethical conflicts).

In sum, the weight of helping as a SPC was experienced as a pressure to provide resource-intensive focus for their clients. Stress-related experiences of holding onto confidentiality was

managed by participants through a range of emotion-focused (e.g., taking breaks) and problem-focused (e.g., referring to code of ethics) coping.

4.2 Navigating the Currents of (Shifting) Sociocultural Tides

As mentioned, efforts have been made by some key stakeholders in sport to shift priorities away from 'performance first' cultures and towards placing greater emphasis on sport participants' safety and wellbeing. With their unique positionality as helpers in sport from both a performance and wellbeing lens, SPCs may be called upon to help guide their clients through this shifting sociocultural landscape. That said, as there are limited practitioner-based perspectives on this matter, this theme is focused on how SPCs perceive the status of this sociocultural shift in sport and how the sociocultural climate in sport shaped their experiences of stress in their helping roles.

Although some participants alluded to a growing potential for the work of a SPC in Canadian sport settings, it remains a relatively new profession in sport (compared to other careers in sport such as strength and conditioning coaches). Working in a role that is novel to athletes and teams appeared to evoke a range of stress-related experiences for SPCs, including working within organizations nescient of their roles, feeling the need to prove themselves and their professional worth, and managing the expectations of the organizations with which they are working. These reflections point towards the challenges of working within an environment that may not implicitly understand the value, purpose, or reality of SPC work. Moreover, questions pertaining to the shifting sociocultural landscape of sport also prompted conversations about gender differences in SPC work and how placing a greater emphasis on safety in sport has impacted their work. To illustrate these experiences, this theme is split into four subthemes: (1) *Social and Organizational Nescience: Feeling the "pressure to prove" Their Worth*, (2) *"That's*

not really how the field works": Managing Expectations of Success or a "quick fix", (3) *A "strong model of the old guard" Resisting the Shift: Dignitaries and Stigmas*, and (4) *Caught in Middle of a "swinging pendulum" Evoked by Safe Sport*.

4.2.1 Organizational Nescience: Feeling the "pressure to prove" Their Worth

Participants spoke to the role that organizational nescience has played in their experiences of stress. Organizational nescience prompted SPCs to feel the need to "prove" their value and "sell" their work so that organizations are "bought in" and accepting of SPCs' engagement with their regular duties. Due to the nescience of SPC work, participants were often required to manage deep-rooted ignorance of their roles. When asked about what organizations expected from her prior to beginning her work, Alexandra outlined that establishing boundaries and providing education is a "big part of the early work when you're working with a team or an organization." Alexandra also described how nescience about her role can position her in challenging ethical positions where she may be expected to compromise her personal values or her code of ethics. Similarly, Tess explained that when she was beginning her consulting work, she felt "a bit of pressure to prove that [she] can be helpful" or "contribut[e] something in [her] role" as athletes are not inherently accepting that her work is "worthy of their time." Thus, she must engage in "impression management" that can often feel like a "sales pitch" which "can feel a little bit uncomfortable." Tess described this sales pitch as "a whole different type of stress or pressure… convincing people that what you're offering is useful", perhaps indicating that this is an unexpected stressor appraised as a threat and difficult to prepare for. Perceiving a limited potential to cope with these unexpected stressors evoked a feeling of being "uncomfortable" because their fundamental role is not to convince others that their services are valuable. Similarly, Taylor feels "pressure to make [workshops] interesting and engaging" which is

ultimately where “a lot of the stress comes from” in her role. Taylor feels a strong desire for her clients to “care and listen to what [she] say[s]”, which is perceived as stressful due to appraising that this responsibility “fall[s] on how [she] facilitate[s]” her workshops. Taylor outlined that clients do not inherently find her work unimportant, however, she appraises nescience of her role as challenging her ability to help. Taylor takes a problem-focused approach to coping with this stressor by working hard to make people realize that she is there to help. While Taylor admitted that convincing people that she can help in her role can be time- and resource-intensive, she feels great pride and satisfaction in her role when others recognize the value of her work.

Despite the misunderstandings that stakeholders sometimes have about SPCs, participants also noted that they often work in environments that endorse the role of a SPC because, ultimately, it is the administrators and decision-makers who choose whether a SPC will provide services for their organization. Anne described how working in a setting where an organization is already ‘bought in’ and “very committed to supporting their athlete” is “so much more fun and so much easier” because “you don't feel like you’re pushing a ball uphill… you can be way more adaptive with how you do the work, way more creative with it.” However, Anne contrasted this type of experience with other more adverse experiences she has had. Specifically, she referred to a “tick box” whereby some organizations may feel obliged to engage in SPC-related services perhaps due to external pressures from governing bodies who are seeking to adhere to the sociocultural shift in expectations within sport. Anne described entering these disingenuous situations as challenging because they required her to prove her value while continuing to fulfill her duty to support athletes, a combination that requires a great deal of time and effort. Anne appraises these stressors as harmful due to the “really draining” nature of managing conflicting demands. In these cases, Anne’s potential for coping is undermined as she exhausts substantive

resources to both supporting athletes and 'selling' the value of her work. The outcome of this process often involved Anne experiencing emotional exhaustion. Brian, who works regularly with National Sport Organizations and receives contracts through a governing entity that provides him with work, echoes the notion that coherence between organization and practitioner simplifies his role as a SPC. In Brian's situation, "the work comes to [him]"; therefore, his position as a practitioner who is not required to "sell" his professional value allows him to focus on his SPC-related tasks. In cases where organizations are already "bought in", practitioners spend less time educating others on the value of their roles and can practice within their expected roles. In these expected roles, it may be easier to cope with the regular and expected stressors in their jobs without having to work beyond their scope of practice dealing with extraneous stressors.

Interestingly, it seems that even when organizations are seeking SPC work, they are not always aware of how the duties of a SPC are realistically operationalized. Regarding Anne's insights, perhaps these organizations are 'ticking a box' meaning optically, they are reflecting the sociocultural shift towards psychological wellbeing-promoting sport but may not be earnestly willing to engage in the services provided by SPCs. Rhonda shared her perspective on this matter by outlining key misconceptions when it comes to SPC work and how it feels to work in environments that continue to perpetuate these misconceptions. Rhonda explained that SPC work is often treated similarly to other members of the integrated support team (IST). Organizations often use a "body-approach" whereby different SPCs are "swapped in and out." Although, the nature of SPC work is more intimate relationally insofar as it requires trust between practitioner and client to yield beneficial outcomes (e.g., stress management). Working within an organization that does not recognize the importance of this trusting relationship may leave

practitioners feeling frustrated as their ability to engage thoroughly in their helping roles is undermined. When reflecting on this apparent disconnect, Rhonda said it's "incredibly frustrating" and "very stressful because you want to have impact, and you want to be given the best opportunity to have impact by the client that pays you, or by the organization that's paying you to deliver the service to their clientele." This organizational ignorance is appraised as threatening to SPCs as their ability to help their clients is hindered. In this case, threat appraisals evoked feelings of frustration as their duties are oppressed by governing entities.

In sum, organizational nescience prompts SPCs to work beyond their bounds by spending significant time and resources educating others about their work. Feeling the need to "sell" their work was appraised as threatening to their helping goals and evoked feelings of frustration and discomfort, whereas working in environments that inherently understand their value allows SPCs perform and cope with the demands of their work with more authenticity.

4.2.2 "That's not really how the field works": Managing Expectations of Success or a "quick fix"

Per the CSPA, SPCs focus on providing support for athletic performance and wellbeing. However, with the hegemonic competition- and performance-focused nature of sport, many assume that the value of SPC work is in prioritizing and cultivating performance outcomes rather than taking a development-focused and wellbeing-supportive approach. As such, there may be conflicting expectations between the organizations and systems that employ SPCs, and the SPCs themselves. For example, Tess explained that when an organization is "spending this time with you or paying for this service, [they] expect some sort of performance outcome to be associated with that." Tess also referenced employers expecting a "quick fix" when working with athletes and teams, an expectation which several participants mentioned being thrust upon them in their

roles. Tess pointed out that expecting immediate beneficial outcomes from working with a SPC is a misguided conviction that is misaligned with the true principles of SPC work because “that's not really how the field works”. Misaligned expectations may lead to unfavourable outcomes of the stress process (e.g., frustration) as SPCs reckon with their abilities to manage external expectation-related stressors. In this subtheme, SPCs’ experiences with stress in managing ‘quick-fix’ attitudes, handling performance expectations, and working in high-performance or professional sport settings that prioritize performance are outlined.

Gavin described the challenge of working with clients who expect quick fixes or take a “band aid approach” to SPC work. Gavin attempts to restructure this narrative by “hav[ing] a presence within the team and be in the downtimes, not just only there when there's crisis” which “breaks all the urgency down” and allows him to perform his duties more thoroughly. Gavin also outlined that SPC work is often seen as less important than other members of the IST (e.g., physiotherapists, strength and conditioning specialists) and only needed when “things aren’t going well”. Gavin appraises these stressors as a challenge and takes a problem-focused approach to managing situations in which clients are looking for a “band aid strategy” by integrating himself within the team, thus becoming visible in non-crises settings and reshaping his role as proactive (i.e., helping athletes foster skills prior to competition, thus promoting athlete autonomy) rather than reactive (i.e., fostering skills to support athletes during or after competition). Taking this proactive approach limits Gavin’s exposure to acute stressors stemming from clients expecting a quick fix which Gavin appraises as threatening as he does not perceive that he can adequately manage panicked and unrealistic client and organizational demands. By taking a problem-focused, proactive approach to managing unrealistic expectation-

related stressors, Gavin experiences greater potential for coping and perceived proficiency in his role.

Jaida recalled her own desire to "want to do it all, and want to 'fix'" earlier in her career because of both her strong aspiration to help along with other external expectations (e.g., demands from coaches). She described reshaping this "fixing" attitude towards more "growth-oriented and progression-oriented" approach as a "career-long learning curve when you have the system saying, 'fix this, we need a result now.'" Jaida highlighted that it is not only governing bodies that must manage expectations. Rather, Jaida's eagerness to help along with the pervasive performance-first narrative in sport requires her to continuously reflect on how to balance these quick fix and results-focused expectations that are often incongruent with her role. Working in a role that requires patience and a recognition of individuality in the development of skills was appraised by Jaida as threatening to her ultimate helping goals which resulted in her feeling frustration in her profession. However, taking a process-focused approach to consulting (i.e., focusing on skill development rather than performance outcomes) allows her to practice patience and engage more thoroughly with her clients. SPCs may appraise unrealistic expectations of coaches and other stakeholders in sport as a threat as their workloads extends beyond her expected scope of practice, thereby depleting their potential for coping and contributing to unfavourable stress outcomes (e.g., burnout).

Participants emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations prior to engaging in consulting work to help abate external expectations of performance outcomes. Jim sets the expectation of "build[ing] a number of small strategies that lead to big things," thereby taking a process-focused approach. This allows Jim to "avoid that feeling of, 'oh, I have to prove myself.'" Furthermore, Jim teaches his clients that "if you define success in a way that's

controllable, it's hard to feel stressed about that." This notion of "tak[ing] control over the things that you need to do" is a teaching that Jim employs in his own life. Being explicit about his realistic deliverables eases the pressure of proving himself through external performance-based outcomes. Specifically, in setting these expectations, Jim adheres to what he believes is his true consulting role, thus limiting allocation of resources to uncontrollable outcomes, ultimately benefitting his wellbeing and helping him perform more optimally in his role. Similarly, Rhonda is proactive in her outlining of her duties to her clients. When beginning a role, Rhonda distributes a contract that clarifies how her service is operationalized, a practice that is shared by several participants. Rhonda limits her engagement with those with nonviable expectations, which helps mitigate unjust performance expectations in her role. Establishing clear time-related boundaries can also help Rhonda manage stressors relating to demands of performance outcomes in her role. Over time, Rhonda has learned to avoid taking on roles beyond her perceived capacity, something that she struggled with early in her career when she wanted to be "everything to everyone".

As a SPC, being fully integrated into a team can be helpful for clients to harness a greater appreciation for their roles. However, several participants spoke to the rarity of SPC positions in which full integration is possible, as they are often delimited to work with professional teams. Anne spoke directly to her experiences during a stint of being fully integrated in a professional team overseas where being stressed "is sort of the baseline." In this setting, Anne recalled chronic stress among professionals being normalized, deemed necessary, and marked as a competition between staff.

> **Anne**: It's the competition of like, 'Oh, I got less sleep, that makes me better.' All of these stereotypical things of prioritizing performance over wellbeing, was very prominent so, it becomes so part of the culture that, like, everyone's stressed. So then in that, you end up minimizing your own stress because, like, 'oh, I don't have it as bad as Joe Schmo in

> marketing'… I didn't realize how stressed I was and everyone around me was, until, basically my health started plummeting, … I was sick all the time. My mental health dropped, but I was so far in it at that point that it took so long to recover from that.

When working in a setting that prioritized performance over wellbeing, Anne felt obligated to suppress her experiences of stress due to an incessant performance-focused and stress-laden work culture. Feeling required to engage in avoidant and disengagement coping, Anne experienced burnout in this role. The outcome of this socially-influenced stress suppression eventually had deleterious effects on Anne's psychological (e.g., reduced mental health) and physical health (e.g., sickness). In Anne's experience working in professional sport, SPCs were subjected to a similar set of performance-based and competitive standards by the culture in which they work in. Like in Anne's experience, imposing performance-focused demands within an organization may limit SPCs' opportunities to engage in health-promoting practices.

Professional sport settings are often subject to quick budget cuts and job restructuring, especially when athletic performance is deemed as subpar. Gavin highlighted a perceived double standard set by organizations in professional sport settings: when athletes or teams are "successful, they take the credit and when they when they don't, they put the fingers on anyone else." In other words, more established members of the IST (e.g., strength and conditioning coaches) often take credit for desirable performance outcomes, whereas blame is pointed towards less established professionals (e.g., SPCs, dieticians) when performance is suboptimal. This perceived hierarchy of importance between members of the IST can result in SPCs feelings of inadequacy and concern for their employment. Participants alluded to the notion that IST hierarchy-related stressors were appraised as threatening to their employment status. Threat appraisals led to SPCs feeling inferior to more established members of the IST, often referencing physiotherapists, eliciting lowered perceived self-esteem as practitioners.

Regular staff turnover within settings emphasizing performance outcomes consistently positions the role of the progression-focused SPC at stake. However, SPCs also felt a strong sense of purpose in their role when working in elite sport settings. Working in a high-stakes role with a high-performance team whose goal is to foster elite performance evoked challenge appraisals of stressors. Appraising these stressors as a challenge helped foster a sense of empowerment and fulfillment in their roles where, as Rhonda put it, "you felt you were very integral to [the team] … you could say that you were part of those medals… it's super rewarding that way." When integrated into a team, exposure to stressors relating to performance outcomes may have enabled some SPCs to engage in challenge appraisals and problem-focused coping which resulted in SPCs experiences of job satisfaction and proficiency in their roles. Experiencing proficiency as a SPC also resulted in participants feeling a sense of relatedness within their roles.

4.2.3 A "strong model of the old guard" Resisting the Shift

As previous contentions in this theme have highlighted, although a sociocultural shift in sport was perceived by participants, there remains apprehension towards a sport-wide alignment of priorities and values between SPCs and other stakeholders in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, administrators). In this subtheme, participant reflections outline SPCs' experiences working among dignitaries inclined to preserve existing norms in sport, as well as managing mental support stigma and gendered stereotypes in their roles.

Megan referred to an immovable group of leaders in sport who are "often older men in positions of power… that are very close minded, that are very harsh and critical" and are often only leaders "because they're loud and they take up space, not because they have good leadership skills." Megan emphasized that it can be "destabilizing or uncomfortable" to be in these settings

because she is “very aware that their approach is not backed by the science,” but finds it “very hard to make [leaders in sport] realize that.” While Megan possesses knowledge and education from her experiences as an athlete and through her SPC training, Megan feels unable to relay her knowledge to leaders in sport due to their close-mindedness. In this case, the stressor relating to engaging with close-minded leaders in sport is appraised as threatening to Megan’s helping goals and limits her potential for coping, thereby resulting in Megan feeling helplessness. When asked about why the resistance to the shift towards prioritizing wellbeing in sport exists, Gavin—a SPC who has worked in both clinical and sport settings over 30 years—postulates that the strong dignitary institutionalization of sport may be responsible by noting that “there's still, unfortunately, a strong model of the old guard in sport.” Gavin claims that “decision makers, the one who hold the purse strings, are more interested in protecting their jobs than protecting their athletes who create the finances for their jobs.” Reservation of power among decision makers and dignitaries in sport can impede the prospect of change, a stressor relating to the prevalence of oppressive politics in sport which Gavin appraises as threatening and incongruent to his professional goals. Gavin externally directs blame for these stressors, resulting in feeling frustration as his capacity to work in congruence with his professional duties is limited. Gavin underscores lack of accountability faced by executives and decision-makers in sport as their financial status provides them with job security.

The influence of positionality was also discussed by Jim, who stated that he does not experience much, if any, stress in his consulting role. Jim admitted that a reason that he may experience limited unfavourable outcomes of stress in his role may be due to his having “a number of privileges [his] life” such as being a “tall, white male” working in sport. Working within a system that is not “pushing back against [him]”, Jim’s positionality makes it “a lot

easier…to make mistakes in any environment and be okay." Jim's positionality allows him to appraise work-related stressors as challenges as he possesses a perceived controllability to manage his stressors, thereby giving him confidence in his ability to meet job-related demands. In contrast, Jim spoke to how his SPC colleague, a woman "doing the same stuff as [him]", faces significant pressure to prove her competence to rectify the pervasive gendered stereotypes in sport. Organizations often "automatically default" to the belief that "Jim must know about the sports because he's a guy, and [the other SPC who is a woman], maybe she doesn't know as much about them because she's a girl." Compared to his colleague who must continuously prove her competence in sporting environments, Jim reflected on the notion that "the way [he's] integrated into the environment… is different" because of his positionality as a man. Interestingly, Jim also highlighted that around two thirds of his clientele are "female" athletes and he feels that there is greater resistance to SPC work from "male" athletes.

> **Jim**: I still think for males, there's a big stigma around mental skills training… they look at mental skills training as, 'You go there if you're weak', and so to go there is almost like admitting vulnerability right off the bat… that stigma still exists… whereas for the female athletes… there's no shame or embarrassment or anything or stigma that goes along with that. It's just directly… I want to make these things better.

Comparing SPC work to physical training, Jim explains that there is unique resistance to the SPC component of skill development among the male athlete population due to stigmas around admitting vulnerability and accessing psychological-related support. Yet, Jim's experiences with female athletes are that they bypass the stigma of thinking accessing support from a SPC is weak, and, therefore, can more engage more readily with mental skills training.

While Jim noted that his positionality allows him to manage stressors in settings laden with gender expectations, other SPCs may not be able to avoid the consequences (e.g., gender-related macroaggressions) of these social phenomena with such ease. Although she works in a

professional sport setting and was a former high-performance athlete herself, Alexandra, a woman-identifying SPC, feels required to prove herself in men's sport settings because of her gender identity.

> **Alexandra**: It first feels pretty intimidating… I need some street cred,… I need to be tough, and I think tough in this gentle and warm and inviting way, but that was important to establish that respect and presence. And I wonder if it was a man or someone older, if they would have had to do as much as I did in that respect…. I feel like I experienced sexism at times, and you know, like men won't take you seriously, or they'll dismiss you… there's these things that are lobbed at you that probably aren't lobbed at men.

Alexandra directs significant effort to prove herself in men's team sport settings, a venture that may not be necessary for men-identifying SPCs due to prevalent gender stereotypes in sport. In the pursuit towards earning respect in these settings, Alexandra takes a problem-focused approach to managing feelings of intimidation by incorporating features typically associated with masculinity (e.g., "being tough") with helper-related attributes (e.g., being "gentle and warm and inviting"). Alexandra also uses her athletic experiences to cultivate relatability in her work settings. This requirement to 'speak their language' (so to speak) perpetuates a pervasive narrative in sport whereby women must prove their value to gain respect. Alexandra worries if her experiences are enough to satisfy the expectations of her clients. Alexandra also explained that "women working in various fields that are male dominated are just so persistently exposed to sexualized comments …[and] harassment… even if it's just microaggression level, and it's very rampant." Alexandra noted that since gender stereotypes are pervasive and expected in these environments, she feels numb to these types of stressors, stating "to some extent, it doesn't even bother [her]. You just have to deal with it, even though sometimes it feels really awkward." Constantly dealing with a plethora of gender-related stressors is appraised as harmful by Alexandra and managing these stressors prompts Alexandra to engage in avoidant coping to endure the discomfort in these persistent interactions in men's sport.

This subtheme outlines how SPCs experience stress in relation to the dominant hierarchies involved in sport, particularly high-performance and professional sport settings. Dignitaries impeding SPCs from engaging in their duties was highlighted as a stressor. Gendered expectations and stereotypes were also prevalent among participants' recounting of stress-related experiences which involved various appraisals (e.g., threat) and coping processes (e.g., avoidant coping).

4.2.4 Caught in Middle of a "swinging pendulum" Evoked by Safe Sport

During discussions relating to the sociocultural state of sport and how this has continued to change throughout their careers, participants made several references to the term 'safe sport'. Safe sport refers to the corroboration towards sport implementation which strives to promote psychological, emotional, physical, and cultural safety simultaneously discouraging sport settings that foster danger and vulnerability to unsafe conditions (Sport for Life, 2025). Due to the nature of their roles in helping with psychological processes of performance and wellbeing in sport, SPCs may be expected to be at the forefront of this shift. In this subtheme, reflections relate to safe sport impeding SPCs' ability to perform their duties, mediating between sport stakeholders, managing culture crises, and working with a heightened vigilance for legal actions.

Perhaps due to the nature of their roles as helpers, there was a consensus that participants took a person-first approach to care when working with athletes. As such, participants were wholly in favour of supporting clients' psychological safety and, by extension, generally approved of the shift towards emphasizing safety in sport. However, the emergence of safe sport has changed the roles and expectations of SPCs. Dominga expressed how her role has changed as a function of the emergence of safe sport. More specifically, through substantial efforts towards protecting athlete safety, Dominga feels "stressed" in some circumstances as safe sport

has impeded on her perceived ability to help athletes. More specifically, Dominga indicated that the process of referring an athlete to another practitioner has become "very bizarre" because she can "no longer connect with the athlete" which seems to contrast to her helping role as she becomes "estranged to this individual." Dominga indicates that although the sport system is seeking to prioritize athlete safety, requirements to disconnect with athletes minimizes her ability to support athletes. In essence, the protocol of distancing herself from her clients (i.e., ceasing to communicate with clients once she refers them to another practitioner) feels tedious, constraining, and counterintuitive for Dominga, indicating a tension between helping athletes and abiding with new and ever-changing safe sport protocols.

The scale and speed at which prioritization of safe sport practices has emerged has also provided SPCs with challenging stress-related experiences. Jaida spoke to the abruptness of the safe sport movement and how this impacted her work. More specifically, Jaida alludes to the consequences of a shifting power dynamic in sport evoked by safe sport prioritization whereby athletes now hold more power that was historically was held by coaches.

> **Jaida**: The common word was that the pendulum swung way over to the athlete side… if I gave any sort of support for the coach, they were like, 'you're on their side.'... it became really divisive at times… it's been really hard, because I'm having to support both sides, forwardly and behind the scenes… they're all fighting. I'm in the middle… You really had to ground your boundaries and stay as professional and ethical as possible.

The apprehension towards the abrupt rise of safe sport does not seem to stem from a reluctance to boost support for athlete wellbeing, rather, it appears to be the scale at which SPCs feel responsible for supporting other participants in sport (e.g., coaches) that is being perceived as stressful. As the pendulum swings towards the athletes, non-athlete participants in sport may require additional support from SPCs. With the onus being placed on SPCs to succor non-athlete clients in adverse safe sport situations, some SPCs appraised this responsibility as threatening to

their ability to engage in other professional duties (e.g., promoting athlete wellbeing). With the increased workload caused by this "swinging pendulum", some SPCs appraised their potential for coping to be limited, resulting in feeling overwhelmed by their expanded work-related demands. For example, Jaida manages these stressors by rooting herself in her professional boundaries and ethical principles, taking a problem-focused approach to coping. However, Jaida highlighted that since managing these polarizing situations is far removed from her expected duties as a SPC, she appraises these stressors as threatening and requiring ample resources to help manage—this limits her potential to cope and results in feeling overwhelmed in her role.

Although not having been directly employed in these positions, Brian spoke to these different and unexpected duties that a SPC may face working in settings when there is a "culture crisis that blows up." Brian says that SPCs are "seen as someone that is there to help manage the culture", which can be part of their roles, however, managing culture crises "can be hard" because it "all of a sudden take[s] over, because no one's in a learning mode anymore, and so [the] role totally changes in terms of how [SPCs] are used to help remedy the situation." Some participants also felt that amending adverse ethical situations was beyond their control. Anne reflected on the notion that although there may be greater emphasis on athlete safety and wellbeing, the stagnant organizational structures and ever-present bureaucracy in sport oppresses the opportunity to elicit positive change as a SPC.

> **Anne**: It's like, really frustrating how broken the system is, and sitting with the injustice of it, and also in my perceived lack of power in the situations, like, there are a lot of things being done to support athletes and or victims of verbal and sexual harassment but, the process, the system is broken, and personally, sitting with the injustice and the frustration of all that is really challenging.

Feeling a sense of helplessness in the face of injustice was a widely discussed outcome of stress experienced by participants. SPCs also experienced frustration when their desired helping goals

were undermined by the systems that are inimical to their work in promoting safety and well-being in sport. Ultimately, adverse safe sport situations may prompt organizational leaders to restructure the role of the SPCs adapt to the needs of the organization. The expectation to amend a culture crisis was often considered threatening to their professional goals. SPCs appraised their potential for coping as being limited when their resources were distributed across various expected duties (e.g., supporting the wellbeing of both athletes and coaches), resulting in feeling intimidated by their expanded demands.

When being tasked with working in a setting in which a morally distressing situation occurred, Jaida appraised stressors relating to engagement in these settings as harmful to her goals as "somebody who protects people". When holding a perceived a lack of resources to effectively cope with these demands, potential for coping among SPCs was limited. Jaida also alluded to appraising stressors relating to "safe sport investigations" as threatening and beyond her locus of control, resulting in Jaida being fearful of legal consequences that may result from these investigations. Jaida's positionality as a SPC in these situations designates that she possesses great responsibility in scenarios in which there is a great deal at stake (e.g., legal actions). Fear of the consequences of these worst-case scenarios evokes a requisite for preparedness and taking problem-focused approach whereby she "gather[s] every bit of information" that may be helpful in a future legal situation. Although Jaida takes a problem-focused approach to coping with these stressors, the unpredictable nature of these scenarios in sport was appraised as threatening to her ability to adequately manage these stressors. Jaida admits to taking a problem-focused approach to coping by sparing no effort to be prepared for managing undesirable safe sport-related confrontations, forcing her to constantly review codes of ethics and retrospectively worry about her work. The chronic stressor of being concerned that

she is insufficiently supporting her clients was appraised as harmful and limited her perceived ability to cope. Experiencing this particular stress process has had health implications for Jaida who admitted that she has "lost a lot of sleep over that." While the helping nature of SPC work requires professionals to use significant resources to manage the emotional load relating to confidentiality and act in accordance with professional codes of ethics, in the new "era" of safe sport, Jaida's capacity to manage safe sport related stressors is limited as she attempts to balance her time and resources between her professional expectations and her own morality, potentiating unfavourable outcomes of this stress process (e.g., frustration, exhaustion).

In conclusion, the emergence of safe sport has altered SPCs' workload and expectations whereby they may be expected to engage in challenging situations in which their moral obligations as helpers are tested. The "swinging pendulum" of safe sport has positioned SPCs in situations (often perceived as helpless) where they operate in sustained fear of legal consequences.

4.3 Seeking Elusive Stability in Choppy Waters

As a growing professional field, participants described a career as a SPC as being ripe with opportunity. Several participants pointed out that there is also a growing number of individuals who are becoming trained as SPCs with the interest of pursuing a professional career in sport. However, in Canada, there remain limited opportunities to work as a full-time SPC. With a select few SPCs being contracted to work full-time by National Sport Organizations or professional sport organizations, most SPCs must navigate a professional field laden with sporadic contract work and irregular salaries. Thus, many SPCs are self-employed and work across a variety of settings in sport and beyond (e.g., interdisciplinary health clinics) to make ends meet. This theme focuses on participants' experiences of working within a system in which

long-term contracts are sparse and self-employment is the norm. Framed by the topic of stress, two subthemes were constructed to highlight participants' experiences in navigating this entrepreneurial landscape of SPC work within the Canadian sport system: (1) *"I like the mix. It's also… really hard": Maneuvering through the Entrepreneurial Landscape of SPC*, and (2) *"You're replaceable": Competition and Support Between Professionals*.

4.3.1 "I like the mix. It's also… really hard": Maneuvering through the Entrepreneurial Landscape of SPC

A common topic in interviews with participants was the sparsity of well-paid work available for SPCs in Canada. As Tess put it, "jobs are limited and the ones that are available can be more precarious or more part-time." With Tess keen on pursuing a career in academic settings, a lack of guaranteed full-time employment was perceived as a threat to job security, thus contributing to her problem-focused coping with this stressor by prioritizing work in another more financially stable domain (e.g., academic) and avoiding exclusively practicing as a SPC. However, participants also referenced a desire to pursue a career as an SPC despite the expected stressors related to financial instability in this field. In this subtheme, reflections pertaining to the stressors relating to the financial and entrepreneurial realities of working as a SPC are explored. Topics of conversation included diversifying workloads to abate financial instability, challenges and benefits of self-employment, working in a helping role with a profuse lack of business training and intuition, and taking consideration of incongruences between taking a business-focused or helping-focused approach.

To abate the financial constraints of working in a field with relatively few paid jobs, many participants have diversified their workloads for more consistent salaries. For example, Gavin has both clinical counselling and CMPC credentials and practices across a variety of clinical

health, business, and sport settings. Gavin pieced together several part-time jobs within, and separate from sport so that he "knew [he] had some money coming in", limiting his reliance on "fragile" sport funding. Gavin attributes the expansion of his workload beyond sport (i.e., problem-focused coping) as a principal reason why he does not experience much financial stress as a SPC. Anne reflected on her experience with having several jobs as a SPC and clinical counsellor, admitting she "likes the mix" of working across various contexts; however, it can also be resource intensive and "really hard." Anne found that working across different roles was exciting and "fun", allowing her to practice adaptability, learn consulting skills in a variety of settings, and refrain from working in a repetitive manner. However, working several jobs was also appraised as harmful when demands on time were expanded, resulting in SPCs feeling emotionally drained in their multiple roles. Brian outlined that managing different roles in sport throughout his professional journey was "challenging at times… it was long, but it's what [he] wanted to do." Brian admitted that he appraised his diversified workload as harmful when "trying to spread yourself out" and "having to be in two places at once", requiring "a lot of "work ethic" and "mental energy" which limited his potential for coping and, ultimately, was perceived as "exhausting." Self-coined as a "success story", Brian was able to turn his sporadic contracts into more consistent work which alleviated some of the stressors relating to having a diversified workload. Brian outlined that his working multiple jobs in sport "wasn't awful" but required significant discipline when working across different sport settings. He also admitted that engaging in sporadic contract work now that he is older would be more challenging as his personal life requires greater time and resources compared to when he was a neophyte SPC. Taking control of his workload by streamlining his duties (i.e., problem-focused coping) has allowed him to focus on the true nature of his job (i.e., helping sport participants) rather than

experiencing the pressure and time- and resource-consuming "nickel and diming" of his time across various workplaces.

Due to the scarcity of paid jobs available in Canada, many SPCs are self-employed. Experiences of self-employment were regarded as both a privilege and a challenge. For example, in a discussion about how she feels being responsible for managing her self-employed role by herself, Anne said it was "way harder than [she] would have expected, but so fun" because of the freedom derived from self-employment. Time management was a key component to managing stressors related to self-employment and managing contracts across various settings. Autonomy in this aspect of her work allows Anne to strike a balance between work and personal life, preventing work from becoming all-encompassing and contributing to greater life and work satisfaction. Similarly, Megan spoke to the benefits of having ultimate authority over her schedule indicating that she can "spot moments that are going to be overwhelming" and "take a day to recharge." Self-scheduling allows Megan create space for emotion-focused coping through engagement with self-care practices that encourage Megan to "recharge" by allowing time to recover from the demands of her professional roles, ultimately limiting her potential for experiencing burnout.

Physical workspaces were also highlighted as an important consideration for managing stressors as a self-employed SPC. Participants referenced the cultural acceptance around working from home following the COVID-19 pandemic as being beneficial to their time management, as they were allowed to restructure their work in an online format. At a time when Brian's familial life was becoming more demanding, having the opportunity to work from home helped him attenuate some of the demands akin with consistently commuting for work—a common stressor among self-employed SPCs—by giving him "another degree of flexibility where [he] can

mitigate travel time to still get work done." Brian engaged in problem-focused coping by using the cultural changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic to restructure his physical work environment which ultimately aided in his management of work-related stressors (e.g., commuting to and from work).

Aside from Anne who has an academic background in business, participants referred to their profuse lack of business training as a stressor in their roles as SPCs. When first starting SPC work, Taylor described feeling disorientated about how she would acquire and retain clients. She described this confusion as an anticipated and prevalent stressor in her work that she continues to "figure out as [she] go[es]." While these business-related challenges were expected, Taylor suggested that she remains unprepared in managing the logistics of running her own business (e.g., navigating taxes, invoicing clients). The extensive organization and knowledge required to run a business were not learned through SPC-related education; thus, SPCs may perceive navigating the non-consulting aspects of SPC work as overwhelming. Taylor described learning business-related skills as "baptism by fire", indicating an intense initiation and pursuit towards acquiring entrepreneurial knowledge. Megan indicated that the intensity of this initial learning may stem from the assumption of financial responsibility as a self-employer because "your livelihood depends on your business skills." As Megan points out, the income of self-employed SPCs may hinge on their business prowess. Assuming these financial responsibilities with minimal business-related supports and teachings during their SPC training was appraised as harmful to their financial stability. Managing the logistical concerns of self-employment alongside the often emotionally taxing nature of SPC work may overwhelm self-employed SPCs when "everything is on you" as their capacity to manage both can be cumbersome and exhausting. The tension for SPCs may lie in the exhaustion of resources directed towards an

important yet unknown endeavour (i.e., business operations) while simultaneously dealing with the regular demands of SPC work.

Megan also highlighted an interesting effect of the importance of business in a markedly non-business field.

> **Megan**: You could be a really shitty MPC, but really good at business and make tons of money. You could be an amazing MPC, but really shitty at business and make no money… we got all this training be MPCs and nothing to be business people.

Megan's point speaks to a greater issue that the accentuation of the value of business skills over consulting skills runs counter to the ultimate goal of a SPC: to help those involved in sport. Prioritizing the business aspect of their roles was met with discomfort among participants. Taylor appraises the stressor of deciding how much to charge for her services as harmful to get helping goals, resulting in her experiencing "imposter syndrome" when deciding how much to charge for her services. Taylor continues to grapple with the morality of charging clients in need money for her helping services admitting that it "feels weird to charge for [her services]." The work itself remains consistent with her values; however, the act of helping for personal financial gains is appraised as incongruent with her values, resulting in Taylor feeling a sense of discomfort when exposed to these business-related stressors. Taylor's lack of a business-first mentality is evident in that her practice of invoicing clients is "one of [her] biggest stressors." Charging clients for helping services was appraised as harmful, prompting Taylor to take an avoidant approach to coping this stressor described as putting her "head in the sand" when exposed to the stressor of invoicing clients. Using this approach resulted in Taylor delaying engagement in the stress experience which helped relieve discomfort in the short term, but lead to future feeling of discomfort when required to track down her clients for payment. Part of self-employed SPC work involves direct communication between client and practitioner. In many clinical and

counselling settings, there is an administrative buffer managing financial tasks. This lack of separation between client and practitioner may accentuate feelings of discomfort relating to managing business duties as SPCs. Again, with their primary goal to help, invoicing clients directly can be perceived as incongruent to their roles, accentuating unfavourable outcomes of stress as SPCs receive intimate insight into the adverse consequences of their work (e.g., putting financial strain on their clients).

Like several other participants, Taylor spoke to her strong desire to "get more support" and guidance on managing the business components of SPC work as she "lack[s] knowledge and time to educate [herself]" on these matters. Taylor expressed that she "ha[s] friends that will be more than happy to help [her], but it would be great to not [put] that labor on my friends." These reflections point to the notion that Taylor wishes to engage in problem-focused coping to manage business-related demands, however, her lack of resources in this realm prevents her from adequately coping with business-related stressors appraised as threatening to her financial security, resulting in perceived helplessness. Furthermore, engagement in self-teaching of business skills requires ample time and emotional resources which may limit SPCs' ability to engage in their consulting roles. As Taylor highlighted, teaching business-related skills to SPCs may equip these professionals with greater resources to cope with business-related stressors. Thus, teaching SPCs business-related skills during their SPC training may optimize their consulting reach and advance the field by providing SPCs with the opportunity to focus their resources more significantly on the consulting-related demands of SPC work.

Participants experienced an array of financial- and business-related stressors as SPCs due to the scarcity of well-paying work available in sport. Working in this entrepreneurial landscape requires SPCs to diversify their workloads, engage in self-employed work, learn business-related

skills, and balance their helping roles with personal fiscal responsibilities. Notable outcomes of participants' stress processes relating to business-related stressors included feeling overwhelmed by the prominence of business-related demands in their roles and feeling discomfort from asking clients to pay for their services.

4.3.2 "You're replaceable" - Competition and Support Between Professionals

Despite prospective SPCs generally expecting stressors relating to financial instability, diversification of work, and self-employment, the number of new CSPA members continues to rise. Participants noticed this uptick of interest in the field through their interactions with prospective SPCs. Several participants explicitly mentioned that they field frequent calls and emails from optimistic prospective SPCs inquiring about their roles and how they can obtain employment in these positions. Participants reflected on being encouraged by these interactions with prospective SPCs, as this highlights the growth of the role. However, conversing with prospective SPCs can also be a challenge as they must explain that they are entering a field where jobs are scarce. In this subtheme, reflections pertaining to inter-professional relations are outlined such as prospective SPCs seeking their jobs, competition between SPCs, and support between SPCs.

Jaida is regularly challenged by this notion that there is a growing number of individuals who would be thrilled to assume her role, keeping a note in her office reading "you're replaceable." Jaida is constantly aware of the vast number of people who desire her job should she leave her post. This evokes a fear that her job is persistently facing evaluation and that any missteps may result in her losing her job. As Jaida put it, "if people don't feel like I'm really doing a good job or relating… they won't pay the money to have me." Jaida appraises this chronic stressor as a challenge and to manage this stressor, she uses a problem-focused coping

approach by “keeping up with professional development” and engaging in her role with authenticity and vitality. In doing so, Jaida builds her professional competence, helping manage stressors appraised as threatening to contract termination and resulting in her feeling more security in her employment status.

Part of Jaida’s competence-building process is also reliant on the sharing of information and experiences with other practitioners. However, the scarcity of jobs may have also resulted in greater between-practitioner competition, thus limiting knowledge sharing between practitioners. When comparing age groups, Jaida outlined that in the more experienced group of practitioners, “there's still some competition, and they're not always willing to share a lot of their things” which Jaida finds “frustrating because [she will] share pretty much everything to help [other SPCs].” Jaida attributes this unwillingness to share knowledge to the notion that “there's not a lot of well-paying work to go around… so, the people that are in those positions are very protective of that.” SPCs may appraise limited collaboration between SPCs as incongruent and harmful to their helping goals. When the systemic job competition impedes opportunities to collaborate with other SPCs, participants felt limited in their potential to effectively engage in their work and cope their professional demands, resulting in feelings of frustration.

Gavin also described the competitive nature of SPC work in a National Sport Organization setting. In these cases, Gavin was employed alongside another SPC, with the work being distributed geographically or by gender. Gavin unexpectedly found SPCs working in these settings to be “territorial”, something that limited the opportunity for knowledge sharing and efficacious collaboration. Again, competition between practitioners impeded Gavin’s ability to adhere to his overarching goal of his work: helping their clients to the best of his abilities. Gavin admits that experiencing this incongruence in practice between professionals was appraised as

harmful because SPCs' "number one priority is professional conduct and ethics." Further, Gavin felt that professionals often put their pursuit towards "climbing the professional ladder" ahead of their fundamental helping duties as SPCs. In some cases, Gavin described this being on display when colleagues attempt to "poach" high-ranking athletes who are working with other SPCs to advance their careers. Gavin felt "really weird" when working in situations where SPCs place their professional gains ahead of the needs of their clients.

To contrast, some participants indicated that they found the community of SPCs to be supportive. The nature of these helpful peer interactions was a surprise to some. For example, having conversed with other long-tenured SPCs who alluded to an inter-professional competitiveness among SPCs, Tess found the field of SPC work to be less competitive than expected as her colleagues were "willing to pass along work that they don't have capacity to take on" and expressed an eagerness to share their knowledge. This unexpectedly supportive and uncompetitive environment helped bolster participants' perceived potential for coping when managing the stressor of consulting in isolation. As Anne highlighted, collaborating with and learning from other SPCs resulted in experiencing enhanced potential to manage from work-related demands. Being another relatively young practitioner, Anne described a "community-oriented" SPC landscape, distinguishing that practitioners early in their careers may experience a more collaborative landscape compared to older SPCs. Younger practitioners' openness to share information may be a byproduct of the growing number of SPCs operating in the field. Although rising numbers of SPCs saturate the job field, there is also growing recognition of the potential benefits and opportunities for expanding these roles in sport. Thus, younger practitioners may feel that collaboration between practitioners helps grow the field itself, which will ultimately result in more positions becoming available.

In sum, the entrepreneurial-focused landscape of SPC work compels professionals to reckon with tensions between making financial gains and performing in their duties as helpers. As paid roles are highly desirable in this field, SPCs are under constant threat of job loss, particularly with the vast number of neophyte SPCs and SPC trainees entering the workforce. Furthermore, the scarcity of paid work available obliges SPCs to be self-employed which was perceived as both helpful and harmful in their experiences of stress.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore SPCs' experiences with stress and coping throughout their professional journeys. By using Lazarus' CMRT to guide this research, substantial emphasis was designated to the context in which SPCs work in seeking to understand how they experience stress. To explore these experiences, 11 SPCs participated in two semi-structured interviews (i.e., 22 interviews total). Using reflexive abductive thematic analysis, results were presented within three themes. The first theme focused on how SPCs developed a passion for helping in sport and how this passion for helping has influenced, and continues to influence, their experiences with stress (e.g., appraising stressors as threatening to their ability to help clients, resulting in feelings of frustration). As previously noted, Lazarus (1991) contends that stress is a transactional process between individuals and their environment. In the current study, participants' passion for helping (an individual factor) appeared to act as an 'anchor' in this transactional process and, as such, was interpreted to permeate throughout (i.e., was relevant to) the other two themes (environmental factors). The second theme pertained to the stress experiences that SPCs faced in terms of navigating the sociocultural tides that are seemingly changing in sport. Namely, participants discussed rampant nescience and incongruent organizational expectations, which have the potential to challenge their values and abilities to work within their roles, ultimately resulting in SPCs experiencing a variety of outcomes to the stress process (e.g., competence, exhaustion). Finally, the third theme focused on participants' experiences of stress working within a sport system that is laden with job- and financial-insecurity which encourages self-employment and entrepreneurialism among SPCs. Specifically, participants noted that their work in Canada is generally unstable, requires entrepreneurial

prowess, and is competitive due to the rather limited number of SPC roles available, all of which contribute to various outcomes of the stress process (e.g., feeling overwhelmed).

Similar to the Results chapter, the Discussion is split into three sections. The first section is based on a predominantly individual factor (i.e., SPCs' passion for helping) which anchored participants' experiences of stress, while other two sections are based on the factors that are more contextual/environmental (i.e., the sociocultural climate of sport and the financial- and job-sparsity of SPC work) which interact to shape their stress experiences. Although these individual and environmental tenets are being presented separately with the intention of fostering readability by providing continuity between the Results and the Discussion, it is prudent to reiterate that stress is an iterative process which involves dynamic and continuous transactions between an individual and their environment (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Indeed, participants' experiences of stress were interpreted as a product of an interaction between their passion for helping, the (seemingly changing) sociocultural climate of sport, and the reality of job conditions for SPCs in Canada. While these discussion points are being presented as "individual" or "environmental", none of them are exclusively "individual" or "environmental" (e.g., a passion for helping was not fostered innately; rather, this passion was cultivated, in part, from previous experiences in sport—an environmental constituent of their stress experience).

5.1 The Individual: A Journey Anchored by a Passion for Helping in Sport

Considering that stress is an interactive process between individual and environmental influences (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), I aimed to contextualize this research by first understanding why and how the participants in this study pursue a career as a SPC. As outlined in Theme 1, possessing a desire to help and work in a helping capacity was highlighted as a key consideration in SPCs' (i.e., the individual) experiences of stress within the

context of sport (i.e., the environment). Such a passion to help was shared amongst participants when discussing their role and may be relevant to understanding the process of stress within their role as a SPC. Two salient, related questions were constructed from the data relating to this insight: *from where did this passion stem* and *how has this contributed to (and how does it continue to contribute to) the process of stress*?

In this study, participants highlighted sport as an opportunistic setting to express their penchant for developing interpersonal connections and acting in a leadership role. Effective leaders in sport can empower and elicit positive developmental outcomes for their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Turnnidge & Côté, 2016). However, sport is also a setting rife with toxic leadership and abuse which can lead to detrimental outcomes for participants (e.g., dropout, distrust; Lundqvist et al., 2025; Willson et al., 2021). In this study, participants recounted engaging with non-compassionate coaches and experiencing performance anxiety as athletes. Enduring these adversities in sport helped lay the foundation for participants' desire to reconcile their past experiences. This aligns with insights from professionals in other psychological helping-related roles (e.g., psychotherapists), whereby early adverse experiences can contribute to individuals' motivation to work in a helping role (Cruciani et al., 2024; Huynh & Rhodes, 2011). Reconciliation of previous sporting experiences could be interpreted as a secondary appraisal of stressors whereby SPCs seek to answer the question: *what can be done to cope*? On one hand, nothing can be done to change their past experiences in sport; on the other hand, SPCs may seek to improve the sporting experiences of others, inciting an amendment of their previous experiences through their passion for helping others. This reappraisal of past stressors may have contributed to participants experiencing a remediation of sport-related losses through their work in a non-athletic leadership role. In pursuing reconciliation of previous experiences, SPCs could

be taking a problem-focused approach to coping as they sought to gain a sense of control in their management of past sport-related stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While perceiving a sense of control over a situation does not inherently evoke a more favourable outcome to stress, in this study, perception of control over one's ability to help in sport and cope with the demands of their work (e.g., through setting professional boundaries) allowed some participants to experience greater job satisfaction and competence in their roles.

It was not only adverse athletic experiences that contributed to participants' desire to work as a SPC, but also a lack of exposure to SPC support. Importantly, some participants indicated that they possessed a strong desire to strive for high-achievement in their athletic endeavours which predicted over-arousal and anxiety, a common experience for athletes due to the expansive competitive demands involved with sport participation (Arent & Landers, 2003; Martens et al., 1990). Psychological-related support for athletes has recently been flagged as important due to the intense demands associated with performing in these settings (Lane, 2024; Pilkington et al., 2024). Experiencing a lack of support in managing these high-achieving tendencies can lead to significant mental health issues (e.g., depression; Rice et al., 2016). Participants flagged their personal insufficiency of psychological support as motivation to help others in this regard. This reiterates the notion that, in reckoning with their previous experiences with stress in sport, SPCs sought to take accountability for helping others (perhaps indicating problem-focused coping), ultimately bolstering their sense of control in these settings.

Participants identified SPC work as an opportunity to redirect previous athletic-based passion for sport towards helping in a non-athlete leadership role in sport. However, some participants described this passion for helping as obsessive. Vallerand et al. (2003) propose that there are two types of passion: (1) obsessive passion, which involves feeling an internal pressure

to engage in an activity central to one's identity and (2) harmonious passion, which involves autonomously selecting to engage in an activity and is related to job satisfaction. In sport, research has indicated that athletes who score higher on obsessive passion may use more disengagement coping and thus, may be more vulnerable to experiencing burnout (Crocker et al., 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2011; Schellenberg et al., 2013). Similarly, research across other contexts has outlined that compared to harmonious passion, obsessive passion for helping has been linked to greater burnout among helpers (e.g., nurses, community support volunteers; Maslach, 2003; St-Louis et al., 2014; Vallerand et al., 2010). Perspectives in this study highlighted that using coping mechanisms such as emotion-focused coping (e.g., mentally detaching from work) to manage demands of non-competitive stressors in sport (e.g., pursuit of helping outcomes) was conducive to limiting potential for burnout in their roles as SPCs. This echoes research from Magdaleno and Meyer (2023) who found that occupation recovery (a process involving restoration of resources depleted by work-related stressors) mitigated experiences of burnout among CMPCs. By using emotion-focused coping (e.g., taking breaks to emphasize recovery), some participants also perceived a shift in their obsessive passion towards a more harmonious passion in their roles. This aligns with coping-based research whereby problem-focused coping strategies are effective when personal control is established; however, as their goal of helping others is ultimately unpredictable, emotion-focused coping may be more effective for SPCs managing helping-related stressors (Cropley et al., 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

Armed with a propensity to help in sport, participants sought to learn and develop SPC-specific skills and knowledge by becoming professional members of the CSPA. Although engaging in the required SPC training was a challenge, participants' strong aspiration to help

fueled their desire to pursue a career in this setting. In becoming professional members of the CSPA, participants highlighted that navigating training requirements (i.e., course and practical experiences) alone in a system perceived as unstructured was a significant stressor. Training to become SPCs also involved an array of stress-related experiences similar to those experienced by trainees pursuing other helping-related careers (e.g., psychotherapists) such as practicing with an intent to help without possessing adequate knowledge and resources and holding unrealistic expectations for their work (Pakenham & Stafford-Brown, 2012; Van Hoy & Rzeszutek, 2022). Working without the required knowledge and/or tools to manage regular work-related stressors may result in reduced wellbeing if the professional demands exceed personal resources needed to cope (Bakker & de Vries, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, much like research from other areas of professional education (e.g., medical school), working with supervisors/mentors was critical in the skills development and learning about the job landscape (i.e., taking a problem-focused approach to coping with stressors relating to ineptitude in their roles) (Rothwell et al., 2021; Van Hoy & Rzeszutek, 2022). Gaining practical experience with support from supervisors/mentors allows mentees to develop tools and establish realistic expectations for their work which, in turn, can help manage job-related stressors more effectively and lead to greater perceived competence in their roles (Rothwell et al., 2021; Saletnik, 2018; Van Hoy & Rzeszutek, 2022).

Following completion of their practical training and CSPA accreditation, SPCs can work as helpers in sport both in group and one-on-one settings (Barker et al., 2016). At the beginning of their careers, participants alluded to the controllable nature of group facilitation enhancing their ability to manage the expected stressors involved with facilitating a group workshop (e.g., using problem-focused coping strategies such as speaking notes in case they forget their lines).

However, over the course of their careers, participants learned to manage the persistent stressor of the unexpected nature of one-on-one consulting by embracing a client-led approach of consulting and presenting authentically in their work. Similar to findings from McEwan and Tod (2023), developing such proficiencies allowed SPCs to develop consultant individuality (i.e., their 'own' approach) and work in line with their moral values (i.e., goal content; Lazarus, 1991, 1999). As their careers progressed, some participants found that the expected stressors involved with group workshops required greater resources in managing these stressors (e.g., feeling the need to over-prepare). While appraising a situation as controllable often leads to more favourable outcomes of stress, possessing greater controllability can also potentially *intensify* threat perceptions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study, having ample time to prepare for expected stressors of facilitating a group workshop was perceived as being more resource-intensive as their perceived responsibility to help their clients was expanded. SPCs sought to manage these demands by reappraising their responsibility to foster favourable outcomes of their clients (a task that is ultimately beyond their locus of control) by acknowledging that there are limits to their influence in their role. In taking this emotion-focused approach to coping, SPCs may limit their potential for experiencing unfavourable stress outcomes (e.g., frustration, burnout).

While participants discerned that leading consulting sessions adheres to their helping goals, one-on-one consulting was also deemed as emotionally taxing and resource-intensive. Burnout is a common component of stress experiences among applied psychologists (McCormack et al., 2018). In this study, participants reflected on the emotional exhaustion of consulting sessions which require significant preparation and hyper-attentive focus in order to meet the needs of their clients. The consequences of working in this intimate helping role paralleled the extensive research pertaining to stress among psychologists, clinical counsellors, and other psychological

helping-related professions (e.g., Barton, 2019; Rabin et al., 1999; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). For the most part, helping-related stressors (e.g., holding onto emotionally heavy confidential information) were expected for participants; however, with their strong desire to help others and elicit positive change through their work, they accepted these stressors as a reality of performing in these roles (i.e., emotion-focused coping; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Volpe et al., 2014).

While all professional members of the CSPA must have CMPC designation, some SPCs also work in sport as a registered psychologist or clinical counsellor (Canadian Sport Psychology Association, n.d.). Working within the bounds of practitioner credentials is an important ethical consideration among psychology-related professionals (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Friedman & Martinez, 2019). SPCs without registered psychologist or clinical counsellor credentials are in a unique position as helpers whereby they may be the first point of contact for athletes experiencing mental health concerns (e.g., mental illness such as depression or anxiety), however, are not legally or ethically able to treat clients presenting such concerns (Prior et al., 2025). Some participants felt a tension between their desire to help and their ethical duty to refrain from working beyond their scope of practice. When clients required help beyond the ethical reach of their scope, a tenet of SPCs' work which may be perpetuated by the increased prioritization of safe sport practices, participants appraised the stressor of being unable to help as incongruent with their goals (i.e., goal content), resulting in feeling concern for the wellbeing of their client and helplessness in their roles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Establishing personal and professional boundaries is an important consideration for helping professionals limit experiences of burnout (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). In this study, establishing such boundaries included emotion-focused coping (e.g., setting realistic expectations) and problem-focused coping (e.g. referring an athlete to another

practitioner). Establishing separation between work and personal life may also be especially important for those in helping roles due to the emotionally taxing relationships that are required in their work (Barton, 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020). SPCs may be particularly susceptible to the emotionally taxing nature of consulting as they manage helping-related stressors in conjunction with an array of stressors specific to sport (e.g., performance expectations) and the SPC job landscape that will be discussed in subsequent discussion (Prior et al., 2025).

The vitality of engaging in self-care and peer support as helpers is extensively outlined in relevant literature (e.g., Dennis, 2003; McCormack et al., 2015; Posluns & Gall, 2020) and was a cornerstone of conversations relating to stress and coping in this study. The emotionally taxing nature of their work, particularly the exposure to emotionally-loaded confidential information and requirement of intense focus during consulting, necessitates helpers (including SPCs in this study) to engage in self-care practices to limit unfavourable outcomes of stress (e.g., burnout) (Posluns & Gall, 2020; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011; Volpe et al., 2014). Similar to findings from Barton (2019), participants alluded to the notion that they had to learn how to engage in self-care practices over the course of their careers. Self-care practices (e.g., diet, exercise, spirituality practices) grounded in participants' personal values were flagged as important emotion-focused coping strategies to manage work-related demands, insights from SPC perspectives which were also highlighted by Quartiroli and colleagues (2018, 2022). If self-care is not prioritized by SPCs, there is potential for practitioner effectiveness and well-being to be restricted (Hings et al., 2019; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Quartiroli et al., 2022; Sharp & Hodge, 2024). Peer support, a mutually beneficial interaction, from colleagues and supervisors was another emotion- and problem-focused coping strategy used by SPCs to manage the, often overwhelming, helping-related work demands as well as the lonesome nature of their work

(Hayes & Balcazar, 2008; McCormack et al., 2015). Sharing experiences with others capable of empathizing with professionals' experiences can help ease the burden of helping, bolster SPCs' ability to cope with work-related stressors, thus enhancing practitioner wellbeing and limiting burnout (Bruce et al., 2005; McCormack et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2008).

5.2 The Environment: Working Among the (Shifting) Priorities in Sport

As mentioned, consensus statements made by governing sporting entities suggests a shift towards more inclusive, psychologically safe sporting contexts which promote wellbeing among participants in sport (Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). While these consensus statements indicate the potential for increased involvement of SPCs within sport settings, participants in this study outlined that their roles were often met with confusion and misunderstanding among their clients and employers. Amid the limited research relating to the perspectives of SPCs, role ambiguity has been a pertinent topic of discussion (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2007; Prior et al., 2025). Working under conditions with role ambiguity have led to professionals experiencing increased emotional exhaustion linked to burnout (Capel et al., 1987; Jones et al., 2007). Although employers pay for their services, perspectives from this study indicate that some organizations may only employ SPCs for performative reasons (i.e., 'ticking a box' of supporting athletes), thus lacking an authentic desire to adhere to the helping-objectives of SPCs (i.e., optimizing both performance and wellbeing). The general nescience surrounding their roles, prevalent even in high-performance and professional sport, prompted SPCs to feel the need to 'sell' the value of their work, a component of their profession that can be interpreted as incongruent to their professional demands (Dean et al., 2022; Quartiroli et al., 2025). Feeling a pressure to prove themselves in this way may challenge SPCs' professional identity by limiting the opportunity for SPCs to work in alignment with their values and goals

(McDougall et al., 2015; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020). Similar to relevant literature on the professional identity of SPCs (e.g., Friesen & Orlick, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015), participants indicated that working within an organization that immediately valued their role allowed them to authentically express themselves and fulfill their work-related goals. In this study, SPCs highlighted that working among organizations who understand the value of their work allows them to be more creative in their roles, enjoy their work, and cope with work-related stressors rather than allocating significant resources to proving or selling their worth.

In line with previous research on this topic, prominent stressors experienced by SPCs included exposure to misaligned expectations between practitioner and organization (Fletcher et al., 2011; McEwan et al., 2019; Prior et al., 2025). SPCs work within a sporting context whereby performance-focused narratives (e.g., 'win at all costs') remain pervasive (Maguire, 2006; Thorpe et al., 2020). As such, SPCs can be subjected to similar performance expectations as other participants in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches) which, due to their multifaceted professional objectives (e.g., simultaneously optimizing the performance and wellbeing outcomes of their clients), may be perceived as overwhelming and incongruent to their ultimate goals (Baldock et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2011; McCarthy & Moffat, 2023; Prior et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2024). As highlighted by Prior et al. (2025), blurred expectations between supporting wellbeing and enhancing performance can invoke inauthentic consulting practices incongruent to SPCs' values. The expectation to focus on performance outcomes over wellbeing outcomes may influence primary and secondary appraisals of SPCs. Performance outcome expectations may invoke a perceived threat that their employment status is at stake should they fail to meet the demands of their employer (i.e., goal relevance—appraising whether something is at stake, and goal congruence—appraising an encounter as threatening). Furthermore, SPCs faced with

performance outcome expectations may experience frustration when their professional goals and personal values are undermined (i.e., goal content—distinguishing emotions depending on the goal at stake and one's moral values; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Prior et al., 2025). Misaligned expectations between SPC and organization may also influence secondary appraisals by evoking a perceived a lack of control in helping their clients among SPCs, thus eliciting an external direction of blame, limiting SPCs' potential for coping, and expecting unfavourable consequences for their inability to effectively manage stressors perceived as uncontrollable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In professional and elite sport, performance-focused narratives can be particularly pervasive and participation in these settings, which often involve strict demands of high-performance, can undermine wellbeing (McDougall et al., 2015; Trainor & Bundon, 2023). In this study, participants alluded to the notion that normalized distress among staff working within an organization prompted engagement in avoidance coping (i.e., actively not managing a stressor) and/or disengagement coping (i.e., resigning from dealing with a stressor) which ultimately resulted in SPCs experiencing poor health. Like other coping strategies, avoidance and disengagement coping is not inherently effective or ineffective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); however, in this case, socially prescribed high-performance striving led to avoidance and/or disengagement coping which was associated with burnout, an insight similar to findings from existing research (e.g., Hill et al., 2010; Ebata & Moss, 1991). That said, achieving favourable performance outcomes in high-performance settings was perceived to be rewarding for SPCs, eliciting feelings of belonging and competence. Demands of high-performance can prompt task-oriented efforts (i.e., problem-focused coping) which, in turn, can facilitate demonstration of competence and evoke a sense of belonging in sport (Crocker et al., 2015; Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). For SPCs, assuming client wellbeing is not compromised, succeeding in achieving performance outcomes aligns with their professional values and goals, which may bolster SPCs' perceived ability to manage future stressors and elicit feelings of pride as an outcome of the stress process (i.e., secondary appraisal; Crocker et al., 2015, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, due to the unpredictable nature of achieving success in sport, reliance on performance outcomes or external validation to feel competence and relatedness in their roles may limit the potential for SPCs to effectively manage work-related stressors when performance outcomes are unfavourable. Thus, taking a progress-focused approach to helping clients and relying on internal validation rather than depending on externalized expectations of performance outcomes to experience work-related competence and relatedness in their roles may be more conducive for SPCs to effectively cope with work-related stressors.

In performance-focused settings, participants were exposed to a perceived hierarchy that exists within sporting organizations and were often compared to other members of the IST. Participants felt that these hierarchical structures positioned their role as less important compared to others within the IST (e.g., physiotherapists), thus potentiating constant threat appraisals of their job status and goals (i.e., primary appraisals; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This perceived hierarchy in sport may be due to the relative newness of SPC work along with the general stigma surrounding the effectiveness of psychological-related support that is highly prevalent in sport settings (Dean et al., 2022; Walton et al., 2023). Another common stigma among applied psychological-related work involves organizations and clients expecting a quick fix as a product of their work (Richardson, 2005). For example, if an athlete is experiencing decrements in performance during high-pressure situations in competition, coaches and other figures within an organization may expect improvements in their pressurized performance soon after the athlete

begins working with the hired SPC. However, much like physical strength building, mental skills training requires significant training, effort, commitment, and time to yield results (Behncke, 2004; Vealey, 2024). As such, clients expecting immediate results from their work was deemed unfair and incongruent to the progress-focused helping goals of a SPC. As helpers in sport, SPCs do not have ultimate control over the outcomes of their clients, much like those in other helping-related professionals (e.g., therapists; Brugnera et al., 2024). In this study, SPCs reiterated the importance of being cognizant of their limitations as practitioners and establishing boundaries which to not exceed these boundaries (emotion- and problem-focused coping) as pivotal to reducing unfavourable outcomes of stress in their work (e.g., burnout) (Reitano, 2021). Participants also alluded to the importance of engaging in problem-focused coping by working with clients in a proactive manner rather than only engaging with clients as a reaction to unfavourable situations (e.g., acute bout of mental health concerns or performance decrements) to diminish help-seeking stigma, limit a sense of urgency, and solidify their belonging within the IST.

Sport is a setting teeming with leaders who have the power to yield harmful authority within their organizations (Lundqvist et al., 2025). Participants highlighted the challenges of working under leadership and organizations that have incongruent goals and values to them (e.g., prioritizing performance without concern for wellbeing), which, as outlined by Prior et al. (2025), can be emotionally exhausting for SPCs. In this study, participants referred to a "strong model of the old guard" in sport where there exists a stagnancy among leaders who remain in positions of power not necessarily because they are effective leaders, but due to the dominant power dynamics perpetuated in sport (Knoppers et al., 2021, Simpkins et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a plethora of literature outlining the role that gendered expectations have in placing men

in positions of power in sport and the potentially deleterious outcomes of the highly prevalent gendered expectations in sport (e.g., Burton, 2015; Cann, 1991; Knoppers et al., 2021; Timperley & Phillips, 2025). SPCs whose positionality aligns with the dominant power dynamics in sport (i.e., white- and man-identifying professionals) was highlighted as a potential reason for which they may not feel unfavourable outcomes of stress when working within systems that perpetuate these dynamics (Simpkins et al., 2022). That said, in this study, women-identifying SPCs experienced unfavourable outcomes of stress (e.g., discomfort) related to working within such environments. For women-identifying SPCs in this study, gendered expectations rendered working within some men-dominated sport settings as intimidating and resulted in women-identifying SPCs engaging a variety of coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused coping by sharing previous athletic experiences to gain credibility, avoidant coping by dismissing gendered microaggressions). This aligns with insights from Rotimi et al. (2025) who also highlighted that women working in men-dominated settings (e.g., construction) use a variety of coping strategies such as avoidant coping to manage the unique challenges associated with working as a woman-identifying professional in these environments.

Stigma relating to engagement in help-seeking behaviour in sport has been a popular topic of study in sport psychology research (e.g., Bauman, 2016; Walton et al., 2023). In general, this stigma involves the perception that engaging in help-seeking behaviour is "weak", and that strong individuals do not need mental support to improve performance (Crawford et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2012; Walton et al., 2023). This stigma can evoke extrinsic perceptions among other participants in sport that the role of SPCs is valueless, thus potentiating threat and harm primary appraisals, and limiting perceived potential for SPCs to positively impact the person-environment relationship (i.e., potential for coping; Crawford et al., 2022; Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). In this study, participants alluded to the notion that SPCs experience less acceptance of their duties in sport from boys and men compared to girls and women. Research relating to the reluctance of mental health services among boys and men in sport signals that conformity to traditional masculine norms may underscore a disinclination for athletes to engage in services provided by SPCs, a narrative which could undermine SPCs' self-worth (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012; Walton et al., 2023). Working within sport settings that perpetuate traditional masculine norms may limit genuine client engagement with SPCs, thus potentiating a perceived inability for SPCs to effectively conduct their authentic duties. Experiencing a perceived lack of control over their work may limit SPCs' potential for coping and evoke unfavourable outcomes of stress (e.g., frustration; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A concluding insight concerning the shifting sociocultural landscape of sport included novel perspectives from non-athlete or coach perspectives relating to the emergence of safe sport. As SPCs hold help-related goals, participants were generally in favour of the shifting sociocultural landscape which promotes psychological safety (i.e., the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm while partaking in sport; Vella et al., 2022) and wellbeing in sport (MacIntosh et al., 2025). However, participants indicated that the emergence of safe sport also evoked experiences of distress by hampering their ability to engage effectively in their helping roles. This insight aligns with findings from research with coaches whereby emerging emphasis on safe sport evokes a fear of receiving maltreatment allegations (MacIntosh, 2023; Tam et al., 2021). The emergence of safe sport positioned SPCs in roles where they are expected to fix culture crises, ultimately working beyond their expected duties and perceived scope of practice. Similar to other analysis on the emergence of safe sport,

participants in this study referenced a swinging pendulum in sport in which the historic balance of power that once favoured coaches has shifted to more prominently favour the athletes (Coaching Association of Canada, 2021). This swinging pendulum can place SPCs as mediators between coaches and athletes, thereby exhausting significant resources to execute their role fairly and ethically, which can be emotionally cumbersome (Seo et al., 2020). Another stressor perpetuated by the emergence of safe sport was the fear of legal consequences for their (the SPCs') actions, a common chronic stressor for those in help-related professions who are exposed to confidential client information (e.g., Liang et al., 2022, Ryll, 2015). To manage unexpected legal stressors, participants outlined using problem-focused coping by constantly referencing their professional code of ethics to ensure that they are practicing ethically and within their scope of practice. In this case, using problem-focused coping allowed participants to cope with legal stressors by favorably appraising their potential to cope and adhere to their moral and ethical standards, resulting in participants feeling less fear of legal consequences in their work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

5.3 The Environment: Imposed Entrepreneurialism and Competition Among SPCs

The expected nature of stressors relating to financial and job insecurity prompted participants to engage in problem-focused coping by diversifying their workload across multiple settings. Sport has been flagged as a setting in which funding is fragile which, combined with rampant performance outcomes-based expectations, can result in high staff turnover, a common stressor for SPCs (Fletcher et al., 2011). The inevitability of these stressors encouraged participants to constantly and proactively seek various job opportunities, increasing their potential for personal control (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Participants found that managing financial- and job insecurity-related stressors through

diversifying workloads was both fulfilling and challenging. Indeed, working across settings allowed SPCs to foster competence, garner key relationships, and develop job-related coping skills. However, similar to findings from Fletcher et al. (2011), diversifying workload also lead to stressors relating to working additional emotionally-demanding hours whereby helping professionals exhaust significant resources across multiple settings, thus limiting potential for coping and increasing potential for burnout (McCormack et al., 2018).

Many participants in this study were self-employed, a commonality in this line of work due to the scarcity of full-time SPC jobs available (Martin, 2020). In their systematic review of burnout among psychologists, McCormack et al. (2018) outlined that autonomy over one's workload can increase feelings of professional competence and mitigate experiences of burnout. In this study, autonomy over participants' workload also allowed participants to engage in self-care practices (e.g., taking a day off to pursue non-work-related personal interests), a key to limiting burnout and promoting wellbeing among SPCs (Magdaleno & Meyer, 2023; Quartiroli et al., 2019, 2022). However, participants also perceived autonomy over one's self-employment as highly demanding, particularly due to participants' lack of business training or interest in the entrepreneurial component of SPC. Business-related stressors (e.g., invoicing clients) were often appraised as incongruent to their helping goals and values as a SPC. With their incessant incompetence and indifference to engaging in the business aspects of their jobs, participants referenced engaging in avoidant coping (e.g., not invoicing clients) to manage business-related stressors, which may relieve short-term outcomes of distress, but can result in unfavourable long-term outcomes (e.g., financial loss, burnout; Crocker et al., 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

Due to their financial independence, the salary of a self-employed worker is often dictated by individual business prowess, a responsibility requiring significant resources to manage (Otto et al., 2020). Unfortunately for SPCs, their training seldom involves development of business-related skills (Carlson & Pfenninger, 2014; Holmström et al., 2016). Thus, potential for coping with business-related stressors (e.g., control of one's salary) was ultimately undermined by SPCs' lack of business training. Furthermore, SPCs were forced to attribute significant time and resources towards managing business-related stressors which limited their ability to cope with the regular consulting-related demands of their jobs, a process which was appraised as incongruent to their fundamental professional goals. Participants suggested integrating business-related skills training into SPC training as a potential strategy to develop skills required to cope more effectively with business-related stressors. In a case study involving SPC students in Sweden, Holmström et al. (2016) found that implementing an entrepreneurial training course fostered business-related attitudes and skills among SPC students. However, this entrepreneurial training course also limited SPC students' desire to be self-employed, perhaps reiterating the incongruence of goal and values between SPC and entrepreneurialism (Holmström et al., 2016).

Parallel to insights from research relating to psychotherapists (e.g., Knapp & Vandecreek, 2008), participants in this study shared a general disdain for the entrepreneurial landscape of SPC work in Canada. Entrepreneurialism in their roles as SPCs was deemed a discrepant aspect of their professional goals and values. Specifically, engaging in entrepreneurial tasks such as directly billing clients evoked feelings of guilt due their primary appraisal process distinguishing a discordance with goal content (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)—similar experiences have been shown in other helping professions (e.g., psychotherapists; Parvin & Anderson, 2000). While working in discordance with their helping goals and values will likely result in unfavourable

outcomes (e.g., frustration), it was also deemed necessary in managing other work-related stressors (e.g., financial instability) Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As noted by participants, the entrepreneurial landscape of SPC work in Canada can render business-related competencies more valuable than consulting-related abilities. The concept that business-related skills contributes more significantly to financial security than consulting-related abilities is fundamentally counterintuitive to the helping-related goals of SPCs. However, with the general sparsity of jobs available, SPCs may be required to prioritize dedicating substantial time and resources to building business-related competencies, thus limiting their ability to work in congruence with their professional goals and values and undermining their potential for coping, potentiating more unfavourable outcomes to stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Another notable outcome of the sparsity of well-paying jobs available for SPCs in Canada was the prevalence of competition among professionals. Feeling imminent competition for their roles compelled participants to perceive that their job statuses were constantly at stake. The uncontrollable, chronic threat of being replaced can undermine workers' wellbeing and basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Shoss, 2017). In line with literature relating to job insecurity, participants engaged in problem-focused coping to manage stressors relating to of job competition which included engagement in professional development opportunities and focusing on delivering optimal service to prove their competence and value as a SPC to their employers (Richter et al., 2013; Shoss, 2017). In this study, job scarcity and insecurity also influenced participants' perceptions of inter-practitioner interactions and willingness to collaborate. Participants alluded to the notion that some SPCs cope with the stressors relating to entrepreneurialism and job insecurity through knowledge withholding in order preserve personal job security (Connelly et al., 2012). This insight echoes similar research

pertaining to job insecurity (e.g., Kmieciak, 2022; Serenko & Bontis, 2016) whereby workers whose jobs are perceived to be at stake may engage in problem-focused coping by withholding information as a means to maintain their employment status. Limited between-practitioner sharing of information was perceived as incongruent to their helping goals and duties, and elicited feelings of frustration among participants when other SPCs placed their own needs ahead their clients.

An individualistic inter-professional climate was not experienced by all participants; rather, several SPCs expressed that support among peers was an integral component of their experiences with stress in their profession. As outlined by Cropley et al. (2016), sharing experiences with supervisors and colleagues was an important aspect of developing coping skills required to manage work-related demands as SPCs. A novel insight from this study was that certain participants perceived that younger professionals were more willing to engage in peer support and information sharing compared to more experienced SPCs. It was argued that, due to their experience working in an era of extreme job scarcity (i.e., prior to the popularization of paying SPCs for their services), older SPCs were once required to engage in knowledge withholding in order to cope with stressors relating to job scarcity and financial instability. However, with the increased number of SPCs working in sport today, younger SPCs seemed to hold a more optimistic view of the potential for increased job availability that would only be bolstered by sharing information with other SPCs with the goal to advance the field of practice in which they work. In this sense, there seems to be growing hope that by authentically engaging in their helping duties through providing exemplary support to other SPCs and dispelling the nescience around the value of their roles, well-paying SPC work may become more popular and accessible. Expanding the presence of SPCs in sport could help foster greater prospect for individuals to

pursue their passions for helping in sport, an endeavour which may ultimately contribute to greater optimization of performance and wellbeing outcomes across all participants in sport.

5.4 Implications

Recent consensus statements have highlighted SPCs to be a potentially critical population in the pursuit of fostering wellbeing in sport (Breslin et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). However, there is little investigation into how SPCs perceive their work and professional experiences with stress (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). Thus, in this research, I aimed to construct qualitative data regarding the experiences of stress (e.g., stressors, coping strategies) among SPCs in order to shed light on the perceptions of these non-athlete or coach professionals practicing in sport. As noted from literature from applied psychologists, when practicing psychologists experience wellbeing, they can experience optimized performance (McCormack et al., 2015; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Therefore, shining a light on the experiences of stress and unique perspectives of SPC can help governing organizations (e.g., sporting institutions) learn how to support the wellbeing and performance of SPCs in their employment. In supporting SPCs, performance and wellbeing of participants in sport has the potential to be enhanced, thus responding to calls for progressing evidence-based knowledge on wellbeing among all individuals involved in this sporting context.

From a practical perspective, sharing the insights from this study may provide governing sporting entities with more context relating to the stress of SPCs working in Canada and how they can better support their staff in their pursuit towards enhancing performance and wellbeing within the sport setting. Based on perspectives from this study, SPCs in Canada experience unfavourable outcomes to stress (e.g., frustration) stemming from a severe lack of business training. Therefore, in disseminating these insights, entities responsible for SPC training (e.g.,

CSPA) could modify their training programs to better support development of business-related skills among SPCs, ultimately, providing them with the resources to better cope with business-related stressors in their profession. Sharing these perspectives with SPCs practicing in Canada will also provide SPCs with additional evidence-informed information pertaining to significant stressors unique to this context (i.e., the Canadian sport system) and profession that contributes to their experience and outcomes of stress. In providing this information to SPCs, they will have tangible information to reference which may help in their pursuit of obtaining professional support. I will continue to work with Dr. McEwan and my other thesis committee members who are all well-connected with key relevant stakeholders in sport (e.g., sport psychology academics, administrative members of the CSPA) to share these perspectives and suggest future avenues of knowledge sharing.

Another implication of this proposed study is the contribution to diversifying the current sport psychology literature which is permeated with single time point semi-structured interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Adopting both a two interview and reflexive abductive thematic analysis qualitative study design offers a unique contribution to the current sport psychology literature by providing in-depth knowledge on the subjective experience of the under-researched SPC population. By working under a constructivist paradigm, relativist ontology, and subjectivist and transactional epistemology, as well as using strategies to give agency to participants involved in the study (e.g., member reflections), significant co-participatory insights were constructed with SPCs to bring attention to and ameliorate the practice of a population seminal in fostering safer, more inclusive, and health-promoting sport (Purcell et al., 2022; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). As governing sport entities suggest directing significant resources towards the pursuit of optimizing wellbeing among participants in sport, this research positions itself within

an emergent area of study seeking potential solutions to promote enhanced wellbeing among all individuals involved in sport.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations

There are several noteworthy strengths of this study. Firstly, as previously alluded to, engaging in two interviews facilitated rapport to be developed between myself and participants, and allowed significant time for participants to reflect on their responses (Josselson, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2016). Rapport- and context-building in the first interview was particularly important in the context of this study due to my positionality as an outsider to the group of participants. Engaging in thoughtful rapport building in first interviews allowed development of trust and empathy between myself and participant while also providing the me with individualized context to help guide the second interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2016). The semi-structured nature of interviews allowed space for participants to recount their experiences with stress in their professional journeys while still being framed within a popular conceptual framework of stress—Lazarus' CMRT (1991, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In using this framework to guide semi-structured interviews, research in this novel setting can be contextualized more easily within adjacent stress-related research. Furthermore, rather than asking only about participants' most current experiences as a SPC, questions posed in the semi-structured interviews pertained to experiences across participants' personal and professional lives. Asking participants to retrospectively explore past experiences helped better contextualize their experiences with stress, a process which is iterative, context-specific, and shaped by previous experiences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Asking participants to share their perceptions of stress over time allowed greater contextual understanding of stress among this population,

thus contributing prominent foundational knowledge relating to the perspectives of SPCs working in Canada.

Another important strength of this study was the focus of SPCs working in the context of sport in Canada. While research relating to the perspectives of SPCs is generally scant, studies that do focus on insights from this population are typically from the UK (e.g., Cropley et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2011) with some exceptions such as insights from Sharp and Hodge (2011) who interviewed 13 SPCs in New Zealand, Magdaleno and Mayer (2023) who surveyed 140 CMPCs from the American Association of Sport Psychology, and Quartiroli et al. (2022) who interviewed 33 SPCs from 16 different countries across four continents. Context is an integral component to the transactional process of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). With the vast variations in SPC training, expectations, credentials, terminology, and cultures across countries, it is important to consider how the distinct Canadian sporting contexts intersect with SPCs' experiences with stress. In doing so, Canadian sport organizations can pull from more localized perspectives from their own national context which may be more conducive to improving operations within their organizations.

Finally, this research constructed foundational insights pertaining to stress and coping among SPCs which may be important to consider in future research on this topic. By avoiding focusing on more intricate components of the stress experience (e.g., prevalence of stressors, effectiveness of different coping strategies) which is common in relevant stress-related literature (e.g., Cropley et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2011), insights from this study offer a more widespread, multidimensional perspective relating to the experiences of under-researched SPCs working in Canada. In doing so, perspectives from this study highlight both individual (e.g.,

possessing a propensity for helping) and systemic (e.g., organizational nescience) matters which influence experiences of stress among SPCs.

While this study highlighted an array of novel insights which contribute to the sparsely research topic of stress among SPCs, particularly in Canada, limitations to this research must also be addressed. In relation to the last two strengths, semi-structured interviews also elicited a high volume of discussion not directly pertaining to experiences of stress. Although context is an important consideration of Lazarus' CMRT, it was challenging to discern which specific insights warranted discussion in relation to experiences of stress among SPCs (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) Also, using a guiding framework in the deductive component of the abductive component of the RTA may have limited creativity as I was being constrained by the guiding framework (Smith & McGannon, 2017). As I outlined in my reflexive journal (Appendix H): "Part 2 questions felt more structured compared to the free-flowing conversation of part 1." Although this study aimed to construct foundational insights relating to the perspectives of Canadian SPCs, using stress to frame introductory insights may have limited the opportunity to gain other, more foundational knowledge on this topic (e.g., wellbeing status of Canadian SPCs) which could better frame future, more specific studies pertaining to the perspectives of Canadian SPCs.

As is typical in relevant sport psychology literature, there were several limitations to representation within this study (Hyman et al., 2021; Quartiroli et al., 2021, 2022; Roper, 2002). Although all participants work in Canada, excluding discussion pertaining to perspectives relating to nationality, race, and ethnicity may limit important insights relating to how these demographic tenets intersect with experiences of stress as a SPC working in the Canadian sport system. This may be a particularly important consideration due to the systemic "whitestreaming"

in Canadian sport culture which perpetuate westernized cultural norms and marginalization of minority racial and ethnic groups (Denis, 1997; Paraschak & Tirone, 2015). Furthermore, as this study sought to highlight the perspectives of stress among SPCs working in Canada, generalizing these insights to SPCs working in other countries should be done with caution, particularly due to the important role that context (i.e., the environment) plays in the transactional process of stress. Another demographic consideration which was not discussed in this study was sexual orientation. This is also an important limitation due to the vast discrimination that non-heteronormative participants in sport have experienced which has influenced their experiences of stress (Lee et al., 2019; Moncal et al., 2024).

Finally, this study may have been subject to survivorship bias (Brown et al., 1992), meaning only SPCs who overcame SPC training and have maintained their positions as SPCs were recruited for this study (Smith & Keegan, 2022). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether those who disengaged from the pursuit towards SPC employment experienced similar stress experiences as SPCs who continued on their path to work as a SPC in Canada. Further, by only engaging with SPCs who had capacity (i.e., time and resources) to participate in this study, perspectives from SPCs who experience substantial job-related demands that impeded them from participating may have been excluded. This may have limited exploration of the perspectives of SPCs who could offer unique insight on their substantive experiences with stress.

5.6 Future Research and Concluding Remarks

Given the insights derived from this study are foundational in nature, there is vast potential for future research relating to the subject of stress and coping among SPCs working in Canada. Firstly, due to the salient role that context plays in the experiences of stress and coping, exploration of perspectives from SPCs working in specific sporting environments (e.g., team

sports, professional sport settings, youth sport, etc.) may highlight the intricate stress-related similarities and differences in working in these various settings (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In terms of the other relational concept of stress, exploring the how the individual characteristics and traits of SPCs interact with experiences with stress could allow a more in-depth understanding of the stress process among this population (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although, since stress process is process-/context-specific, future stress-related studies relating to the characteristics and traits of SPCs should be studied in conjunction with the context in which stress is experienced by SPCs (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In line with the limitation relating to representation among the sample of participants, investigating insights pertaining to how demographic tenets such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation intersect among SPCs working in Canada will help shape a richer understanding of the perspectives from this population. This is particularly relevant as research outlines how experiences of stress and coping may differ across cultures (Aldwin, 2007; Chun et al., 2006). Furthermore, due to the prevalence of enduring power imbalances in sport, exploring perspectives from historically marginalized communities in sport will contribute to filling the gap of perspectives from equity-deserving people in sport psychology literature and may contribute to the pursuit towards optimizing inclusion and equity in this settings (Government of Canada, 2025).

There is a wealth of research exploring experiences of stress and wellbeing among athletes and coaches in sport (McLoughlin et al., 2021; Simova et al., 2024; Trainor & Bundon, 2023). However, perspective of SPCs, the professionals often employed to help athletes and coaches cope with sport-related stressors, are overlooked in relevant literature. Insights from this study outline the how SPCs working in Canada experience stress in their interaction with the context in

which they work, a setting rife with organizational nescience, conflicting expectations, and job- and financial-insecurity. Results indicate that SPCs engage in a multitude of coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused coping, avoidant coping) to manage an array of stressors (e.g., expectations of a quick fix, financial insecurity). In line with Lazarus' contentions, based on previous experiences of stress, SPCs developed coping strategies to manage their stressors as their careers progressed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Governing sporting entities and organizations can use this research to help inform training and policies relating to SPC practices. In doing so, SPCs may have enhanced capacities to engage in their authentic professional duties, thus potentiating optimized performance and wellbeing among themselves and their clients.

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Appendix A

Email to SPCs from the CSPA

Dear [SPC],

My name is Kieran McBride, I am a Masters student at the University of British Columbia working under the supervision of Dr. Desmond McEwan in the School of Kinesiology. As part of my graduate research I am conducting a study focused on stress and coping experiences among sport psychology consultants in Canada.

Who
I am looking for professionals who have practical experience working as a sport psychology consultant.

What is involved
The study will involve two interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in virtually via Zoom at a time/location that is most convenient for the participant.

Why
This research will seek to generate novel insight concerning how sport psychology consultants experience stress and coping. Results of this study will be used to highlight our current understanding of the subjective experiences of sport psychology consultants and help us better support sport psychology consultants in their professional roles in sport.

I am writing to you to ask if you are willing to be involved in this study given your experience as a sport psychology consultant in Canada. If you have capacity to do so, I would greatly appreciate it if you could circulate this information!

Aiding in the recruitment of this study is not necessary. Any involvement in the study will be completely voluntary and confidential. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Best wishes,

Kieran McBride
MA Student
School of Kinesiology
The University of British Columbia | Vancouver Campus | Musqueam Traditional Territory

Appendix B

Experiences of Stress and Coping among Sport Psychology Consultants

Are you a Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC) through the Canadian Sport Psychology Association? We would love to chat with you! We're keen to understand CMPC's experiences throughout their time as a consultant, including how they work through stressors they face in their role. Please email Kieran if you want to hear more about this study which is set to launch in October.

Recruiting: Yes

Launch Date: October 2024 (pending ethics approval)

Principal Investigator & Contact: Kieran McBride

September 26, 2024

Appendix C

Letter of Introduction

WHO ARE WE?
The principal investigator for this study is Dr. Desmond McEwan, Assistant Professor in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. Kieran McBride is a graduate student working under the supervision of Dr. McEwan. Kieran will be the primary point of contact and will conduct all interviews. This study is part of Kieran's Masters of Arts thesis research.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?
We are interested in exploring the experiences of professional stress and coping among sport psychology consultants in Canada. Our aim is to gain a better understanding of how sport psychology consultants experience stress and how this influences their job performance and wellbeing (*thriving*). We will conduct interviews with applied sport psychology consultants who are professional members of the Canadian Sport Psychology Association (CSPA).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?
Should you agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in two, one-on-one interviews with Kieran for an expected duration of 45-60 minutes each. The interviews will be conducted online and audio-recorded with your permission before being transcribed for analysis. At any point prior to or during the interview process you may withdraw from the study without consequence. Further, no questions asked are required to be answered should you not feel comfortable to do so. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESPONSES I GIVE?
The responses provided in the interviews will remain anonymous and a pseudonyms (fake name) will be used in any future write-ups (e.g., master's thesis, publication in a scholarly journal). Only the researchers will have access to the information provided in the study and recordings and transcripts from both interviews will be securely stored on a protected computer.

WHY MIGHT THIS STUDY MATTER?
The information gained from this study will foster unique insights into how sport psychology consultants experience stress. This may allow for better understanding from sport psychology consultants and other participants in sport (e.g., sporting organizations) regarding how these professionals can be supported in their professional roles to promote thriving.

I AM INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING, WHAT NEXT?
If you are interested in participating in this study, please review and complete the attached documents before emailing them to Kieran McBride. Once I receive your completed documents, we can begin scheduling your interviews.

HOW CAN I GET IN TOUCH?
Do not hesitate to get in touch with Kieran by email if you have any comments, questions, or concerns about this study.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Experiences of Stress and Coping among Sport Psychology Consultants

Study Team

Principal Investigator: Dr. Desmond McEwan
Assistant Professor
School of Kinesiology

Student Investigator: Kieran McBride
(Primary Contact) Master's of Arts Student
School of Kinesiology

Sponsor

This research is being funded by a Canada Graduate Scholarships - Master's Program scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research of Council of Canada (SSHRC) awarded to the Student Investigator in September, 2024.

Invitation and Study Purpose

We are conducting this study to learn more about sport psychology consultants' experiences with stress and coping. You have been invited to participate in this study as you are a practicing member of the Canadian Sport Psychology Association.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in two interviews approximately one month apart. It is estimated that these interviews will each take about 45 minutes. During the first interview, the interviewer will ask you questions about yourself (e.g., years of experience as a sport psychology consultant) and your professional journey. In the second session one month from the first interview, the interviewer will ask questions pertaining to your experiences with stress and coping in your profession, as well as questions about thriving.

Study Results

The overall findings from this study will be used for Kieran McBride's master's thesis. The corresponding write-up may also be submitted to be published as an academic journal article and/or presented at an academic conference. Please note that your responses will remain anonymous and none of your information will be shared with anyone.

Potential Risks of the Study

Although we do not predict that there be any risk involved in your participation in this study, challenging topics may arise (e.g., maladaptive coping and anxiety) during the interviews about stress and coping. As such, there is no requirement to answer questions should you feel comfortable to do so. If you have any concerns about the study or require any adaptations in order for you to participate, please let the researcher know.

Potential Benefits of the Study

Gaining a better understanding of the experiences that sport psychology consultants have with stress and coping, and how this influences their thriving will encourage key stakeholders (e.g., governing sport organizations) in sport to provide professional support to this population. Please note that you will not be paid to take part in this study.

Confidentiality

The responses you give in this study will not be shared with your colleagues or anyone else. We will ask for your name at the start of each interview so that we can match up your responses. However, all interview recordings and transcripts will be kept in on a password-protected computer which only the researchers have access to. In addition, pseudonyms (fake names) will be used for all future write-ups of these findings so that participants will not be able to be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.

Contact Information

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Participant Consent

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate. If you decide to participate, you may pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason. If you would like to participate in this study, please indicate your consent by printing your name and signing below:

_____ _____

Printed Name of Participant Date

_____

Signature

Appendix E

Demographic Form

Responses to the following questionnaire will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared, published, or distributed. Accurate and current information is appreciated, however, you are not required to answer questions should you not feel comfortable to do so. All information will remain anonymous.

Name: _____

Pronouns: _____

Select a pseudonym (fake name for confidentiality purpose): _____

Age: _____

Gender identity: _____

Sexual orientation(s): _____

Ethnic background(s): _____

Place of birth: _____

Primary language(s): _____

Current location: _____

Level of education: _____

Years involved as a sport psychology consultant:_____

Current place(s)/organization(s) of employment: _____

Current position title(s): _____

Appendix F

Interview #1: Becoming and Being a SPC

Introduction

"Hello! It is a pleasure to you meet you, my name is Kieran and I am a Master's student in the school of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. Firstly, I just want to extend a huge thank you for taking the time to chat with me, and for your willingness to be part of this research study.

This study is an exploration of Sport Psychology Consultants' experiences with stress and coping. I will preface our conversation by telling you that I came into my graduate studies with this idea of making sport better by making it more psychologically safe, inclusive, and health promoting, however, I really had no idea where to start. My supervisor and I landed on this experiences because we thought that SPCs hold a really interesting space in sport and are among the many non-athlete or coach populations that have such a great impact on sport but there is such limited research on their experiences and perspectives. With all that being said, although this is an area of study that I am very interested in, I have limited experiences with both research in general and working with Sport Psychology Consultants. For that reason, I am so excited to learn from you and your experiences in this field and please feel free to stop me at any point in our conversation today to correct me or give me some feedback.

Finally, thank you for signing and returning the consent form. Do you have any questions about this consent form? Again, this interview is confidential and voluntary, meaning you may withdrawal at any time. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know and we can skip them, no problem. Also, are you okay with this conversation being recorded? With that being said, do you have any questions about the consent form or anything else? Do you still wish to participate? Okay great, without further ado I will turn on the recorder and we can jump right in."

1. Rapport Building Questions
    a. Could you start by telling me a little bit about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you grow up?
    b. As a SPC, I'm guessing you have done plenty of schooling! Where did you do your studies and what were these experiences like?
    c. Can you tell me a little bit about your current role as a SPC?
        i. Where do you work?
        ii. Who do you work with?
        iii. What is it like to work in your current position/role?

2. Life History and Background in Sport
    a. If you can remember, what were your first experiences with sport?
    b. What was sport like for you before becoming a SPC?
    c. How did sport influence your life before becoming a SPC?

d. What jobs did you have before working as a SPC, if any?
e. What is your experience in sport like for you now that you've moved from _____ (athlete, coach, manager, etc.) to an SPC?
f. What led you to want to pursue becoming a SPC?

3. SPC Training
    a. Can you describe how you came to be a SPC?
    b. What was your initial SPC training like?
        i. Where and when was it?
    c. Looking back, what are some SPC training experiences that stand out to you?
    d. How did you feel about this training? (probe for key learnings, training effectiveness, and challenges encountered in training)

4. First Professional Role in Sport
    a. Tell me about your first role as a SPC.
        i. When was this?
        ii. How long did you work in this role?
        iii. What were some of your goals or what purpose were you hoping to gain from being an SPC when starting in this position?
        iv. What were your expectations going into this role?
        v. What were the expectations of the organization in your first role as a SPC?
    b. How would you describe the general climate of sport when you first began your work as a SPC? What was prioritized in sport when you first started?
    c. Can you tell me about a time that you feel that your personal or organizational expectations were met in this first role?
    d. Flipping the script a bit here, but now can you tell me about a time that you feel that your personal or organizational expectations were not met in this first role?
    e. How were you supported in this role?
    f. How was your experience transitioning out of your first role? (If applicable*)

5. Professional Journey
    a. Tell me about how your career progressed after your first role as an SPC.
    b. Part of the reason I was interested in pursuing a degree in sport psychology was to be a part of what I am perceiving to be a shift in the climate or sport. What I mean by that is, from a bit of an outside perspective, it seems to me that sport is moving towards greater inclusivity and psychological safety and that there is more of an emphasis on wellbeing in sport. How did this, what I am labeling as a sociocultural shift in sport, influence your professional journey, if at all?

Appendix G

Interview #2: Stress and Coping throughout the Professional Journey

Introduction

"Hi again! Thank you so much for following up with be and meeting for this second interview.

1. Rapport Building Questions
    a. How have you been since we last chatted?
    b. Have there been any new developments in your professional life?
    c. Is there anything that has come to mind since our last conversation that you would like to expand on?
    d. Do you have any questions for me since we last met, or anything before we get going today?

2. Stress and Coping – Early Career & Past Experiences
    a. What did you anticipate would cause you stress in your profession before you started as a SPC? (e.g. obstacles, challenges)
        i. How was this anticipated stress experiences similar or different than the actual stress you face as a SPC?
    b. Can you tell me about a time in your career as a SPC when you experienced stress?
    c. Diving back into your first role as a SPC with _____ (organization), what were some of the regular inconveniences or headaches you faced at this beginning stage of your career?
        i. Tell me about how these changed throughout your career and in your various roles as a SPC. (probe for acute/chronic, expected/unexpected, competitive/noncompetitive)
    d. How did you tend to react to stressful situations early in your career? (probe for harm/loss, threat/challenge appraisals)
        i. How, if at all, did your reactions or interpretations of stress change as you moved through your professional journey?
    e. How did you tend to deal with stress early in your career? (probe for task - problem/emotion-focused, avoidance - distraction/disengagement)
        i. How, if at all, did you cope with stress differently throughout your professional journey?

3. Stress and Coping – Current Perspectives & Learning from Past Experiences
    a. Can you tell me about a time that you feel you dealt with work-related stress really well?
        i. How did you do this?
        ii. What resources or supports had to be in place for you to deal with this stress?

b. Have there been times when you felt like you did not manage work-related stress well or effectively?
    i. Why was this?
    ii. What resources or supports were lacking?
c. In general, how would you describe your 'relationship' (or experience) with stress as a SPC?
    i. What does this stress mean to you? (probe for appraisals)
    ii. What are the consequences and outcomes of this stress?
d. How do you tend to feel about and initially react when faced with stress in your current role as a SPC?
e. In what role as a SPC have you experienced the most stress? How and why do you think that is?
f. What are some of the most prominent stress inducers in your current role?
g. How have you been able to learn from your experiences reacting to a stressful situation, if at all?
h. How do you tend manage stress in your current role?
i. What kind of strategies have you found to be most effective for you to help manage your stressors, if any?
    i. Do different coping strategies impact your wellbeing differently?
    ii. How has this changed as your career has developed?
j. Are there strategies you have found to be unhelpful when dealing with stress at work? If so, can you elaborate?
k. How have you been supported during your time as a SPC, if at all? (e.g. probe for family, friends, colleagues, sporting organizations)
    i. How has this support changed throughout your career?
    ii. What other supports do you feel you might need as a SPC?

4. Future Role
    a. What are your future goals as a SPC and beyond?
    b. How have your goals changed over time?
        i. Has there been a change in what you prioritize in your work?
    c. What do you expect will cause you stress later in your career?
        i. How, if at all, will you try to manage this future work-related stress?

Appendix H

Pilot Interview - August 29, 2024

Great chat with Katie. Context building for MPC work (supervised hours, coursework, etc.). Qualifications just changed, bit of a DIY process. Nerd/jock paradox – interesting interaction between applied sport psychology practitioners and athletes. Anticipates discussion around coach/practitioner relationships. Spent most time chatting about CMPC training and landscape. Some interesting point about professional sports and the perceived lack of work available in these settings.

Some key points of discussion:

- Importance of presenting authentically
- Transparency is key (setting boundaries)
- People fighting for work
- Administrators making decisions based on pedigree
- If you're good, you don't want to stay with teams

Talk to Desi about next steps. Fine tune interview guide?

Part 1 Interview #1 - November 13, 2024

Desi connected me with this participant. Kept the interview guides as is. First interview completed. Participant is quite new to applied work, spent time understanding CMPC training, background in sport. Rapport was established pretty early, participant was briefed on the project prior to engaging in the interview.

Key points from first interview:

- Early sport experience shaped CMPC work (fringe high performance athlete)
- Had great mentorship
- Hasn't worked in many results-focused settings

Part 1 interview guide felt natural to adhere to while still remaining open to the direction in which the participant steered the conversation. I suspect since a main focus of this interview is to build rapport, I will have an easier time adlibbing questions as the conversations will feel more natural. That said, I will have to be careful to take a "guiding" approach rather than a "following" approach.

Part 2 Interview #1 – December 9, 2024

Before the interview, I reviewed notes from the part 1 interview. Participant suggested to restructure some of the wording around stress and coping because the questions were feeling a bit repetitive (e.g., using other words such as "pressure" instead of "stress" or "manage" instead of "cope"). I felt this too. It was also a challenge because the participant is quite green in the field so, the many of the questions that I posed seemed to keep coming back to the same story. I'm pleased that the participant felt comfortable enough to give some feedback!

Part 2 questions felt more structured compared to the free-flowing conversation of part 1. Note to chat with Desi about this. Participant is going to send me the contact information of a CSPA member who is organizing an upcoming social event for SPCs.

Key notes from this interview:

- Financial stress
- "fixing something" (last resort = CMPC)
- Pre-meeting jitters
- COVID perspectives, managing and adapting; switched from sport to person
- Setting boundaries

December 13, 2024

Connected with CSPA member who is organizing a local social event for SPCs tomorrow evening. They invited me to join and chat about the study. I was on the fence about attending but, Desi talked me into it.

December 15, 2024

Attended the Victoria CSPA social last night. Three local SPCs and I were the only attendees. We had some great chats about their professional journeys and current roles. They all agreed to participate in my thesis work… yay!

Part 1 Interviews #2-5 - January 13-23, 2025

4 interviews in 10 days! Very happy with how they are progressing. Mostly SPCs I connected with at the CSPA social, so there was some established rapport which helped with the flow of conversation. I am really enjoying the format of part one interviews and focusing on really getting to know participants and the context in which they work. I have also been quite transparent about this aim of getting to know participants for the first interview. I find this has put everyone at ease and leads to some great casual, yet insightful conversation. I have also tried to end the conversation with a note that the next interview will be more specifically about stress and coping in hopes to get them thinking about this topic before we meet next.

Some key notes from these interviews:

- Not a lot of paid jobs in Canada
- Strong model of the "old guard" remains in sport among decision makers
- Transitioning from high performance athlete to CMPC
- Strong expression of gratitude among SPCs working within an organization
- Diversification of roles – many people to many different things
- Comparing personal and organizational expectations
- Sucky experiences as athletes, wishing they had more support back then
- Challenges of "swinging pendulum" when talking about Safe Sport

Meeting with Desi – February 10, 2025

Updated Desi on interview progress (6th pt. 1 interview tomorrow, 7th next week). Desi suggested showing reflexivity through changes in the interview guide and reflexive journal in chronical timeline. Interview guide has not changed, reflexivity has mostly come from semi-structured nature of interviews (i.e., going where the conversation needs to go), make sure to elude to this in future write ups. Main topic of discussion that I brought up with Desi was participants' perception of the entrepreneurial nature of SPC work because of the limited funding and opportunities. We also discussed terminology, as I have had many discussions with participants about role titles. The term "sport psychology consultant" does not resonate with some folks as they are not "psychologists". I have tried to explain where I am coming from in terms of wanting to include CMPCs, registered psychologists, and clinical counselors working in sport, but I think this is a touchy subject because there has been a lot of recent discussion on this topic of titles. Generally, I think CMPCs don't identify with the "psychology" part of "sport psychology consultant" because it is too close to "psychologist" which is a legally protected term. I will continue to have these conversations around role titles with participants. Perhaps there is some definitional incoherence among SPCs. For now, ask participants up front about which titles they use and use that for the remainder of the interview instead of using SPC as a sweeping title for all participants.

<u>Meeting with Erica and Desi – February 27, 2025</u>

Notes before meeting:

- Where I'm at:
    - 7 pt. 1 interviews completed (2 booked for early March and 3 people who were busy and asked if I could touch base in March)
    - 2 pt. 2 interviews completed (1 this afternoon, the rest between now and the beginning of April)
- Pt. 1 Data so far
    - All participants from BC (so far)
    - Time of interviews have ranged from 58 minutes to 1 hour and 27 minutes
    - Most work currently with the [organization] and other National Sport Organizations (NSOs)
        - However, at the start of their careers, they were mostly contracted out so a lot of topics of conversation followed what its like to be your own business in the sports world and the entrepreneurial side of things
    - Lots of gratitude in conversations about where they are in their careers with a backdrop that its hard to get into these positions in sport because its so competitive and these really are limited salary jobs out there (a lot of SPCs, mostly CMPCs, rely on contract work)
    - A couple people operate their own business and are there own business, so that's been good to explore how they manage the work that comes along with that, but again, these people feel quite established in their niche and sporting entities or organizations reach out to them for work rather than the other way around
        - Potentially signaling there are growing opportunities, yet there is still that side of gratitude for being in that position of being 'sought out' because it is quite rare

    - All about the context (Lazarus)
    - Personally, it's been so helpful to engage in these first interviews to root myself in the context in which these professionals work because I am coming from that outside perspective not having worked in these roles before
    - I make notes in my physical notebook about topics that I was to flag and come back to in part 2 interviews when something related to the topic of stress and coping comes up
- Pt. 2 Interviews so far – pt. 2 has been harder!
    - First one I did felt a bit rough because I didn't have any other interviews in-between, so it was very much a trial run
    - Second one was great and I think we had some really great discussions around the notion of stress and coping; however, in the first interview, since it was all about understanding context, I feel I was able to really lean into the semi-part of the semi-structured interview. However, about half way through the second pt. 2 interview I was kind of feeling like, while we were talking about stress, I was having a difficult time really getting into the specific processes of stress and when I did, it felt a bit forced.
    - I was able to discuss some more specific stress-related topics towards the end of the interview (e.g., how stressors have changed throughout your career and how you tend to manage stress)
    - Erica reassured me that sitting in the discomfort is part of the process. Try to embrace the challenge!
- Pt. 2 Interviews in the future
    - So, for the interview I have today I think I'm going to start more specific and keep it there throughout the interview to see how that goes because I think if I start it more broad like last time, I might run into a similar issue
    - This next participant did a lot of work on the subject of stress and coping in sport, so I think being quite direct with my questions will be good.
    - These interviews might require more probing because participants might not be ready to dive into experiences of stress right away
    - Erica and Desi suggested that it could be neat to talk about some of the mundane to start part 2 interviews
        - This could help ease the more structured nature of part 2 interviews with a "world-building" question. Also, the mundane is often overlooked! Therefore, this could lead to interesting and novel discussion with SPCs.
        - Model this if they ask how I am, work stress into my experiences, get into some of the more day-to-day stressors
- Reflexivity
    - In terms of rigour, I have been (a bit incoherently but I can fix that) writing in this journal about what I am learning and how I'm adapting with the knowledge I gain from every interview because, as mentioned, I am an outsider to this group so I feel that with every interview, I gather a stronger understanding of the topic which has completely effected the following interviews.
    - So, would you suggest I polish up that journal and perhaps include it in a final write up, or how else do you think I could display this notion that "really, I'm

getting more and more comfortable and capable with every interview, which ultimately is probably affecting the conversations"
    - Critical friend? Committee, lab, Katie C.

First pt. 2 interview after meeting with Desi and Erica – February 27, 2025

Started with a chat about the day-to-day, more mundane stuff which was immediately helpful in engaging in meaningful conversations about what this participant's daily work life looks like. I noticed this participant was using my name more than the previous interview… I feel like we established great rapport over time points. Questions around stress flowed more naturally than the first pt. 2 interview. I think having those conversations with Desi and Erica right before the interview helped remind me to engage in conversation more authentically. Maybe could have asked more pointed questions about stress process, however, during conversation, it felt unnatural to bring up pointed questions (particularly around appraisal of stressors). I'll have to work on this balance between letting the conversation flow and asking pointed questions from the interview guide.

Pt. 1 Interview – March 10, 2025

An interesting moment today when a participant had to cut our interview short after 10 minutes. This participant later emailed me saying they had to attend to an athlete who was crying outside of their door. We rescheduled a meeting for tomorrow. I am wondering if there is a way to incorporate this moment into any future write ups because I think it paints an interesting picture about how SPCs are often "always on" and can be called upon at any point. Check with Desi about this.

First Attempt at Transcribing – March 14, 2025

Otter.ai did an okay job of transcribing the interviews. However, I still have to go through with a fine-toothed comb and rigorously edit each interview to ensure transcript coherence. I'm calling this my first round of familiarization with the data as I am thoroughly reading through the transcripts.

Some initial thoughts upon reading initial transcripts:

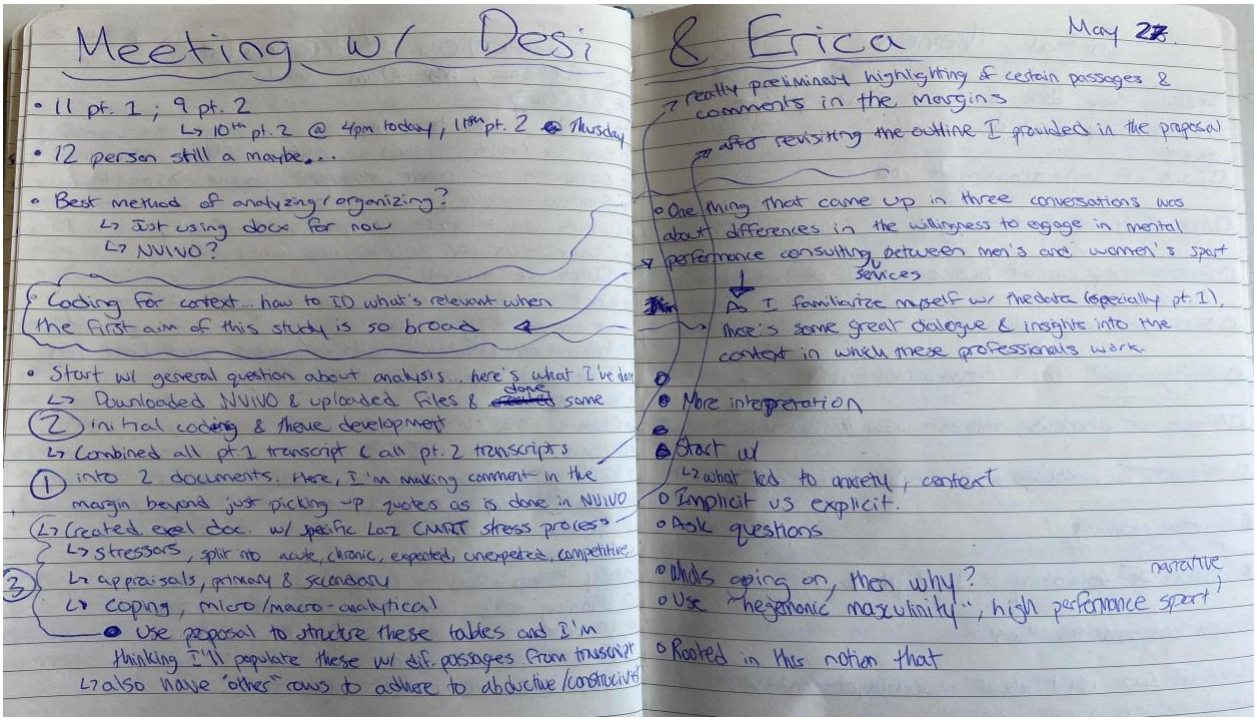
- Lots of conversation about the lack of entrepreneurial training
- Scarcity of jobs
- Gratitude for being in a position of employment as a SPC
- Working across settings is commonplace b/c of the scarcity of well-paying jobs available
    - Other settings (e.g., clinic) are much more stable (financial/job security)
- Organizations, coaches, clients often don't know exactly what SPCs do
- Most participants engaged in sport as athletes before becoming SPCs (and were often leaders in sport and/or had poor experiences as athletes)
    - Perhaps indicating a love/passion for sport and trying to rectify their past experiences by being a leader in these settings as a SPC
- Some SPCs have to travel a lot which can be a challenge

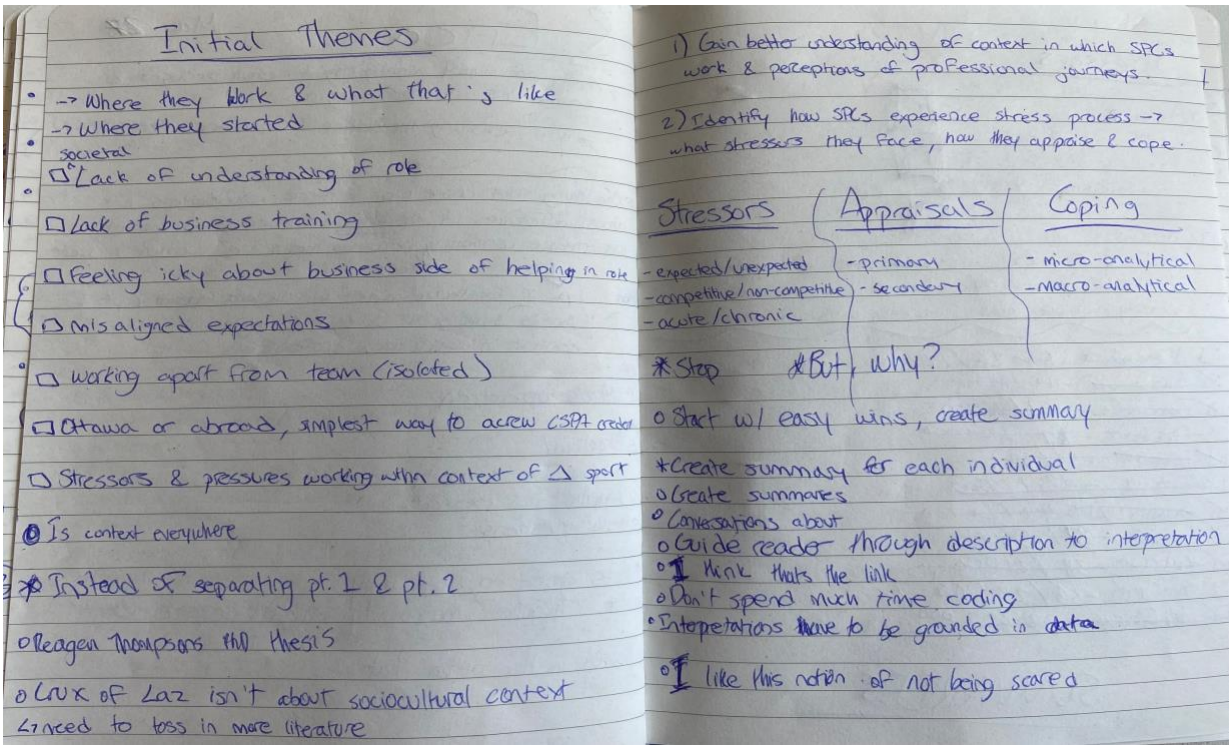
- Networking/support between SPCs is important because it is a smaller community of professionals
- Takes time to find yourself in this job landscape
    - Can be challenging to assert yourself within a team and practice authentically/in line with values

Some initial questions I have upon reading initial transcripts:

- Do previous experiences as athletes plant the seed of wanting to become a SPC (and how does this fit into experiences of stress)?
- Why is the system set up so that SPCs often must rely on business skills to generate income?
- Why is there a scarcity of jobs available for SPCs?
    - Per consensus statements that helped prompt this research, to improve wellbeing among sport participants, more resources should be allocated to engagement with SPC. How does this "shift" happen is there is no funding available for SPCs?
        - These are bigger questions about the sport system, try to bring it back to how SPCs perceive this job/financial insecurity and how this relates to their experiences with stress.
- The context can limit SPCs' ability to practice authentically, how does this influence their experiences with stress?

<u>Meeting with Desi and Erica – May 27</u>





- Initially thought to separate pt.1 transcripts and pt. 2 transcripts, however, Erica made me realize since we are hoping to get insights on the professionals' journey, it makes more sense to look at pt. 1 and 2 interviews together. That way, we can yield insights into how the journey has shaped experiences of stress (more aligned with Lazarus' contentions).
- Next step will be to create summaries of each participants' part 1 and 2 interviews. This will serve as another round of data familiarization. From these summaries, can start to think about and identify some initial themes.

<u>Meeting with Katy – June 11</u>

Second meeting with Katy. Katy reviewed and took notes on 2 interviews. It was helpful to talk through what she thought were some of the more important topics of conversation from interviews. Katy had some interesting insights pertaining to possibility of differences between CMPCs, RPs, and CCs. Will be important to distinguish participant credentials in future analyses and write ups.

<u>Completed Summaries – June 12</u>

Summaries from transcripts range between 8-15 pages. Sought to incorporate a mix of passages from the transcripts and my own interpretations of the conversation.

Sporadically added some overarching themes/topics of interest during summary writing process:

- *Experiences of participant journeys before and throughout SPC work*
    - *Previous history in sport*
        - High performance athlete
        - Shitty coaching experiences

        - Nervous athlete
        - Wish they knew more about sport psych as an athlete
        - Just loved sport
    - *MPC training*
        - Ottawa
        - Down south
- *A conversation about role titles and terminology*
    - MPC, RCC in sport, RP in sport
- *Leadership and helper role*
    - What does helping mean
- *Shifting landscape*
    - More women's sport
    - More opportunity to do MPC work
- *Working in sport*
    - High performance
    - Job landscape
    - NSO, organization, self-employed
- *Stressors and appraisals*
    - *Managing organizational expectations*
    - *Social nescience*
    - *MPC literacy among stakeholders in sport*
    - *Lack of business experience*
    - *Conflicting personal and business values*
    - *Scarcity of jobs*
    - *Financial*
    - *High performance sport*
    - *Expectation of quick fixes*
    - *Mental performance training versus strength training*
    - *Like anything, doing something for the first time*
    - *One-on-one randomness vs planning for workshops*
- *Coping processes and outcomes*
    - *Peer support*
    - *Diversification*
    - *Time and space management*
    - *Self-care*
    - *Stellar supervision*

Next steps, just keep writing and editing. Like Erica said, "don't be afraid to just start." It's an iterative process that will require lots of back and forth, writing and unwriting. Just go for it!

Data Analysis - June 15, 2025

Reading one of Erica's students' thesis. While the summaries are helpful for me to understand, I do not think it is appropriate to outline these summaries in any future write-ups due to the small SPC community. In essence, I feel like the providing any helpful insights in the summaries to the

readers risks to expose the identities of participants. Instead of presenting each participant's positionality, perhaps I can try weave them together under an overarching topic/theme.

Data Analysis & Findings Writing – June 17, 2025

Finding it challenging to refine general ideas and themes. Wondering if I should split journeys and experiences of stress into 2 sections or weave experiences of stress throughout. On one hand, splitting would follow a similar structure to the interview guides. However, does this dismiss the notion of stress being experienced non-linearly? If I sequester stress within its own section, it might be challenging not to repeat thoughts from journeys.

Themes if I integrated journeys and stress:

- An intuitive passion for sport: with great passion comes great stress
- High performers performing in high performance settings
- "I wish someone would have sat in the mud with me"
- Adopting a leadership role, harbouring the helper roll

Maybe we can keep it separate and bring it all together in the discussion? Ask Desi next week. For now, continuing on the 2 sections.

Question: Better to hop around timeline or hop around experiences of stress?

- For example, passion for sport theme.
    - Should I talk about how these early passions are in play as SPCs now, or should I reference back to the "great passion" theme directly when talking about stress. I think the latter makes more sense because I am trying to present findings in a chronological manner.

Data Analysis & Findings Writing – June 24, 2025

Upon further reflection, I am leaning towards combining discussions about stress processes with life story. I have created two preliminary tables which outline potential themes and subthemes. Below are the two different tables and the themes and subthemes that I have constructed as of today.

Table 1: Splitting the recounting of professional journeys and experiences of stress into 2 distinct sections

Sections	Themes	Subthemes
From Athlete and Admirer to Practitioner: Journeys of 'Helpers' Immersed in Sport	An intuitive passion for sport	n/a
	Participation in sport – an athlete's perspective	a. The challenge of competing in high performance sport b. Repelling coaching experiences?

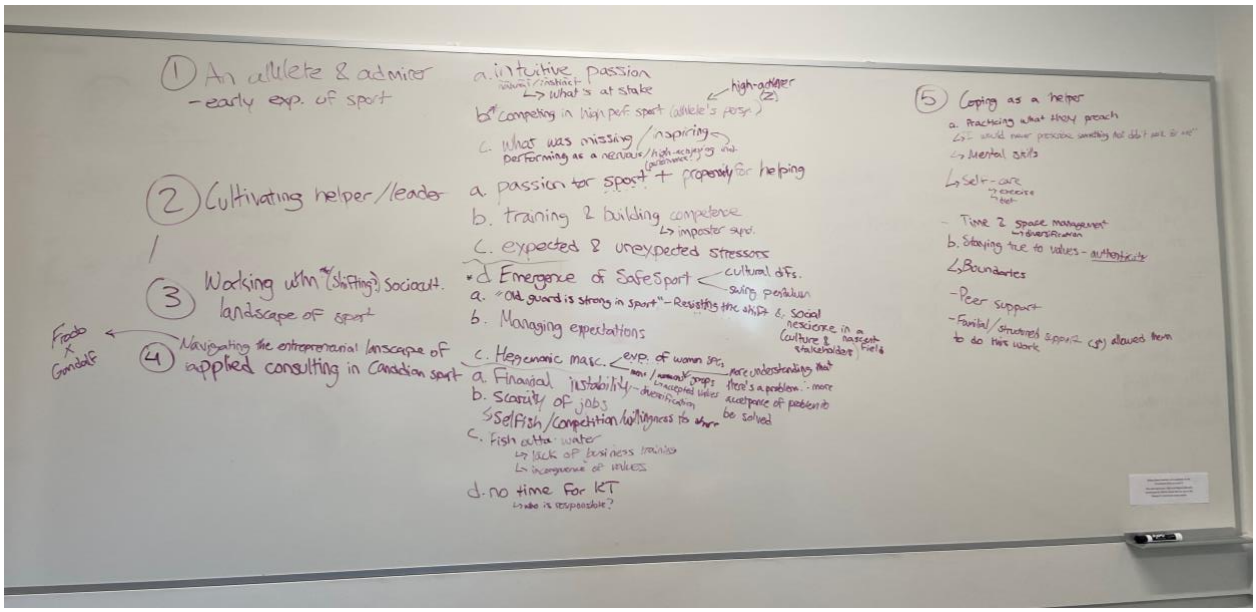
		c. Competing as a nervous or high acheiving individual d. "I wish someone would have sat in the mud with me"
	Cultivating the role of a helper in sport	a. Passion for sport meets passion for applied psychology b. Limited applied sport psychology training options
	Participation in sport – a practitioner's perspective	a. Role titles and terminology b. Social nescience and organizational expectations c. Leadership and helper role d. Shifting landscape e. More opportunity to do MPC work f. High performance g. Job landscape h. NSO, organization, self-employed i. Comparing MPC to other IST
Practicing Within a Shifting Sociocultural Space: Experiences of Stress as a SPC	With great passion comes great stress?	
	Building competency as a trainee	
	Managing personal and organizational expectations	a. Conflicting personal and orgizational values b. Expectation of quick fixes c. Working in high performance sport
	Social nescience and MPC literacy among stakeholders in sport	
	Scarcity of jobs and financial instability	
	Sociocultural shift towards safesport	
	Coping processes of SPCs	a. Peer support b. Diversification of work c. Time and space management d. Self-care e. Staying true to values

	Outcomes of the stress process	a. Burnout b. Outcomes of eustress

Table 2: Combining the recounting of professional journeys and experiences of stress

Themes	Subthemes
An athlete and admirer - early experiences in sport	a. An intuitive passion for sport b. With great passion comes great stress? c. Competing in high performance sport - an athlete's perspective d. "I wish someone sat in the mud with me."
Cultivating the role of a helper and leader in sport	a. Passion for sport meets passion for applied psychology b. SPC training and building competence c. Expected stressors d. Unexpected stressors
Working within the (shifting?) sociocultural landscape of sport	a. Balancing and managing organizational and personal expectations i. Expectations of quick fixes b. The emergence of Safesport c. Social nescience and SPC literacy among sport stakeholders d. Working with and without coaches
Appraising stress in a manufactured, stress-ridden environment	a. High performance sport b. Primary appraisals c. Secondary appraisals
Applied consulting in sport - a plethora of opportunity with limited opportunities	a. Comparing MPC to other IST b. Scarcity of jobs c. Financial instability
Managing personal and organizational expectations	a. Conflicting personal and organizational values b. Expectation of quick fixes
Practicing what they preach - Experiences of coping	a. Peer support b. Diversification of work c. Time and space management d. Self-care e. Staying true to values
Outcomes of the stress process	a. Burnout b. Outcomes of eustress

Meeting with Katy and Lab – June 27, 2025



Here is the progress of theme construction from a whiteboard session with Katy. Talking through the data with someone else proved to be very helpful. We were able to combine many ideas into 5 overarching themes. I will present these themes to Desi next week and continue this process of constructing and refining themes. Here is a table of the most up-to-date themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
An athlete and admirer - early experiences in sport	a. An intuitive passion for sport b. Competing as a high performer and high-performance sport - an athlete's perspective c. "I wish someone sat in the mud with me."
Cultivating the role of a helper and a leader	a. Passion for sport meets propensity for applied psychology b. SPC training and building competence c. Expected and unexpected stressors
Working within the (shifting?) sociocultural landscape of sport	a. "Old guard" - resisting the shift and social nescience in a nascent field b. Balancing personal and organizational expectations c. Hegemonic masculinity d. The emergence of Safesport
Navigating the entrepreneurial landscape of applied consulting in Canadian sport	a. Financial instability b. Scarcity of jobs c. "Fish out of water" - incongruence of values, lack of business training d. No time for KT
Coping as a SPC	a. Practicing what they preach b. Staying authentic and true to values c. Structured and unstructured support

Outcomes of the stress process	a. Burnout b. Outcomes of eustress

Meeting with Desi and Katy – July 5, 2025

Presented some preliminary themes to Desi and Katy. Discussed placing greater emphasis on the second interview relating everything to stress and coping rather than digging deep into the backstory of participants. Next steps will be to create a visual map of themes. For now, I will seek to create a number of "sections" that I find interesting and important.

Findings writing – July 8, 2025

In talking with Desi and members of the lab, it was decided that key processes of stress (i.e., stressors, appraisals, coping, outcomes) should not be sequestered and presented in a linear manner as Lazarus contends that stress is an iterative process. Though it will be messy, I will attempt to combine experiences of stress in full based on the various contexts in which they took place. That said, I will try to structure the results in a way that follows a chronological timeline of SPCs' journeys to provide clarity and flow.

In other words, instead of explicitly having themes relating to CMRT (e.g., coping, outcomes), components of CMRT will be integrated into themes and subthemes. This was decided as Lazarus contends that the CMRT is not a linear process, rather, processes can happen simultaneously and out of order. Further, participant reflections often referenced components of the CMRT differently across various settings. Thus, it would be more in line with both the theoretical framework and participant data if the focus was on which processes were used in which contexts rather than attempting to generalize CMRT processes according to each participant.

Email to Desi & response – August 1-4, 2025

Sent themes to supervisor who made several suggestions on how to rework themes and subthemes for clarity.

Theme X: A propensity for helping in sport

- Possessing an authentic passion for sport from an early age, participants reflected on some of their seminal experiences in sport settings, particularly as athletes
- Training to work in a helping capacity came with challenges, as does practicing as a helper

Subtheme 1: "I wish someone would've sat in the mud with me"

- Participants possessed an authentic passion from a young age. This, along with a strong desire to work in a helping role helped shape their pursuit towards working as SPCs
- Sucky coaching experiences and a lack of mental skills support also helped foster their desire for SPC work in a helping capacity

Subtheme 2: Building competence as a helper

- Lack of a clear path towards CSPA accreditation was perceived as stressful, so was practicing as a SPC for the first time
- Learning as a helper often meant leaning on supervisors and peer support
- Lack of competence often lead to over preparing and feeling like you're "performing" which was overwhelming and draining

Subtheme 3: Confidentiality and ethical considerations - the weight of helping as an SPC

- The scale at which participants dealt with morally distressing situations was considered an unexpected stressor
- CMPCs have to make sure that they are not practicing outside of their scope (even when they are asked to do so) because there are legal and ethical consequences to these actions
- Caroline calls herself "the vault", meaning she holds on to a lot of confidential information – it takes a lot out of SPCs holding onto sensitive information of others
    - Coping with this stress includes peer support intentionally switching off after work
- End this section with an explicit outline of coping techniques
    - Self-care
    - Peer support
    - Establishing boundaries
    - Time and space management

Theme X: Riding the wave of shifting sociocultural spaces in sport

- A recent focus on wellbeing in sport may influence the work of SPC, whose role may often be associated primarily with enhancing performance outcomes
- With the role of SPCs being to enhance performance AND wellbeing, SPCs are being placed in situations whereby they are expected to make a change within a system that wants to change, but doesn't fully understand them

Subtheme 1: Social and organizational nescience - feeling the need to prove their worth

- Explicit conversations regarding job titles were at the forefront of early discussions
    - Even I was screwing up! People were nice about it, but it seems like this conversation is important because there are real repercussions with using wrong titles and labels
- Perhaps due to its relative newness, SPC work is often met with confusion
- With the lack of knowledge from the public and, often, key stakeholders in sport about their role, SPCs often feel "impostor syndrome" or like they have to prove their value
    - Feeling like you have to prove yourself, along with performing the regular SPC duties, can be taxing and can lead to feeling out of place and dismissed
    - It can be exhausting having to continuously explain yourself
- When working with organizations that are "bought in", it's a breeze. When they're not "bought in", it can feel 'draining' and 'like pushing a ball uphill'

Subtheme 2: Managing the expectation of performance outcomes or a "quick fix"

- Sport is often associated with performance outcomes; however, this is not the only duty of SPC work
- The nature of SPC work is that progress takes time, and expecting "quick fixes" is unhelpful
    - But… because performance outcomes are so important in sport, organizations are often asking for a quick fix

    - This expectation was deemed as stressful because it is impractical, but not everyone sees it that way
- SPCs are often only put in positions when things aren't going well (bandaid approach), which sucks because then they experience a pressure to make things better
- Working in a win-at-all-costs culture can feel stressful and counterproductive to the goals of SPC work
- Important to set clear expectations to manage stress of unfair expectations

Subtheme 3: Resistance to the shift: Dignitaries and hegemonic masculinity in sport

- Some people just aren't getting it!
- It feels frustrating working within an environment that does not value the work
    - People in power foster cultures that do not always foster accepting environments
- Stigma of mental health supports in general and with athletes in boy's and men's sports impedes ability to conduct SPC work
- Working in men's sport as a woman can be intimidating and comes with using significant coping mechanisms to deal with the different stressors associated with this

Subtheme 4:Adapting to a swinging pendulum: the emergence of safe sport

- Safesport is changing the power dynamics among stakeholders in sport (e.g., coaches and athletes)
- Generally, there is a fear of acting in a manner that could be construed as violating the "Safesport way"
- Fear of legal action evokes experiences of stress and elicits preventative approaches
- Tension coming from duty to help and fear of getting in trouble
- SPCs are often brought in to manage settings that have experienced a culture crisis
    - Challenging to be placed into these tense situations

Theme X: Navigating the entrepreneurial landscape of applied consulting in Canada

- There's just not a lot of well-paying work available! There are great opportunities to do the work, but a limited opportunity to make good money doing the work
- Sparsity of jobs available with organizations that will pay for a full-time SPC

Subtheme 1: Diversifying work to ease the burden of financial instability

- To make enough money, having multiple different jobs on the go is commonplace, but comes with the challenge of spreading yourself thin, being pulled in a variety of directions

Subtheme 2: Competition and support between professionals

- Working within an organization be stressful because they work in a such a desirable role and they know they have to do a good job because there are people lined up to take over
- The sparsity of jobs also leads to competition between professionals
    - Some people are unwilling to share what they know which seems counterintuitive with the overarching helping role of an SPC
- On the other hand, some of the younger participants found support in their communities

Subtheme 3: Imposing incongruent values and running a business with a profuse lack of business training

- Self-employment can be a massive challenge when your training is in applied sport psych

    - Handling the business alongside the day-to-day stress can be overwhelming
    - But being able to manage your own time can be great for managing stress
- Asking clients for money can feel uncomfortable and counterintuitive to the helping role
- Working in conditions that undermine code of ethics and the helping role can be stressful and alienating

? Subtheme 4: Gratitude and grievances of working in professional sports or an NSO ? (don't have much here… wondering if it could be integrated elsewhere)

- Gratitude for working in a SPC role that pays helps reshape work stress ("well, I might be stressed out, but at least I'm lucky enough to have this job")
- SPCs are undervalued compared to other members of the IST
    - Last ones in, first ones out

Seems like there is a bit of an ocean/West Coast analogy being constructed. I don't have too much of an idea about where this came from (likely my positionality as a Vancouverite and someone who generally loves boats, the ocean, and exploring BC's coastline.

Meeting with Desi and Katy – August 7, 2025

Themes and subthemes prior to meetings with critical friends.

Theme 1: A propensity for helping in sport

- Subtheme 1: "I wish someone would've sat in the mud with me" - Reconciling past athletic experiences
- Subtheme 2: Building competence as a helper
- Subtheme 3: The weight of helping as an SPC –confidentiality and ethical considerations

Theme 2: Riding the wave of a shifting sociocultural spaces (emphasize changes)

- Subtheme 1: Social and organizational nescience - feeling the need to prove their worth
- Subtheme 2: Managing the expectation of performance outcomes or a "quick fix"
- Subtheme 3: Resistance to the shift: Dignitaries and hegemonic masculinity in sport (blame game)
- Subtheme 4: Adapting to a swinging pendulum: the emergence of safe sport

Theme 3: Finding stability in unstable terrain

- Subtheme 1: Diversifying work to ease the burden of financial instability
- Subtheme 2: Competition and support between professionals
- Subtheme 3: Navigating entrepreneurial spaces with a profuse lack of business training
- Subtheme 4: Gratitude and grievances of working in professional sports or an NSO ? (don't have much here… wondering if it could be integrated elsewhere)

Where it stands (summary of findings sent to Erica) – August 15, 2025

Finished writing findings draft. Moving on to editing thesis proposal prior to meeting with Erica about findings section.

Summary of Findings – Stress & Coping among SPCs

Theme 1: A passion for helping in sport

- Possessing an authentic passion for sport from an early age, participants reflected on some of their seminal experiences in sport settings, particularly as athletes and students.
- Training to work in a helping manner came with its own set of challenges, as does practicing in a helping role as an SPC.
- This theme relates to participant's experiences managing their own personal expectations, rather than the expectations imposed upon them (see theme 2).

Subtheme 1: "I wish someone would've sat in the mud with me" - Reconciling past athletic experiences

- Participants possessed an authentic passion for leadership and sport from a young age. This, along with a strong desire to work in a helping role helped shape their pursuit towards working as SPCs.
- Sucky coaching, adverse experiences in high-performance sport, and a lack of mental skills support also helped foster their desire for SPC work in a helping capacity.
- Feeling a responsibility to help in sport shapes appraisal of helping-related stressors.

Subtheme 2: Building competence as a helper

- Lack of a clear path towards CSPA accreditation was perceived as stressful, so was practicing as a SPC for the first time.
- Learning as a helper often meant leaning on supervisors and peer support.
- Lack of competence often lead to over preparing and feeling like you're "performing" which was overwhelming and resource-exhausting, limiting their capacity to cope.

Subtheme 3: Managing weight of helping as an SPC

- The scale at which participants dealt with morally and ethically distressing situations was considered an unexpected stressor.
- SPCs have to make sure that they are not practicing outside of their scope (even if they are asked to do so) because there are legal and ethical consequences to these actions. Highlighting importance of establishing clear boundaries.
- Managing with the demands of keeping confidentiality includes engaging in peer support, intentionally "unplugging" after work, and engaging in self-care (e.g., exercising, journaling, "practicing what they preach")

Theme 2: Navigating the currents of a (shifting) sociocultural landscape

- A recent focus on wellbeing in sport may influence the work of SPC, whose role is often primarily associated with enhancing performance outcomes.
- With the role of SPCs being to enhance performance and wellbeing, SPCs are being placed in situations whereby they are expected to make a change within a system that does not appreciate or understand their role.

Subtheme 1: Social and organizational nescience - feeling the need to prove their worth

- Explicit conversations regarding job titles were at the forefront of early discussions, emphasizing this is a typical and important boundary that SPCs are constantly required to outline.
- Perhaps due to its relative newness, SPC work is often met with confusion.
- With the lack of knowledge from the public and, often, key stakeholders in sport about their role, SPCs often feel "impostor syndrome" or like they have to prove their value.
- It can be exhausting and resource-intensive having to constantly explain yourself.
- When working with organizations that are "bought in", it's a breeze. When they're not, it can feel "draining" and "like pushing a ball uphill".

Subtheme 2: Managing the expectation of performance outcomes or a "quick fix"

- Sport is often associated with performance outcomes; however, this is not the only duty of SPC work.
- The nature of SPC work is that progress takes time, and expecting "quick fixes" is unhelpful. However, because performance outcomes are perceived as important in sport, particularly in professional sport settings, organizations are often asking for a quick fix
- SPCs are often only put in positions when things are not going well (bandaid approach).
- Working in a win-at-all-costs culture can feel stressful and counterproductive to the goals of SPC work.
- Important to set clear expectations to manage stress of unfair expectations.

Subtheme 3: Resistance to the shift: Dignitaries and hegemonic masculinity in sport

- It can be perceived as frustrating when working in an environment that does not value the work. Dignitaries in sport often do not foster mental skill development-accepting environments.
- Stigma of mental health supports in general and with athletes in boy's and men's sports impedes ability to conduct SPC work.
- Working in men's sport as a woman can be intimidating and results in using avoidant/disengagement coping mechanisms

Subtheme 4: Adapting to a swinging pendulum: the emergence of safe sport

- Safesport is changing the power dynamics among stakeholders in sport (e.g., coaches and athletes).
- Generally, there is a fear of acting in a manner that could be construed as violating the "Safesport way"
- Fear of legal action evokes experiences of stress and elicits preventative approaches to coping with these experiences of stress.
- Tension often stems from a tension between a duty to help and fear of getting in trouble.
- SPCs are often brought in to manage settings that have experienced a culture crisis.

Theme 3: Finding stability in unstable terrain

- There's just not a lot of well-paying work available! There are great opportunities to do the work, but a limited opportunity to make good money doing the work.
- Sparsity of jobs available with organizations that will pay for a full-time SPC. Thus, there is great competition between professionals in this field.
- Self-employment is the norm. However, SPCs have limited practice working in a business-related manner.

Subtheme 1: Diversifying work to ease the burden of financial instability

- To make enough money, having multiple different jobs on the go is commonplace. This comes with the challenge of spreading yourself thin, being pulled in a variety of directions.
- Expression of gratitude when finding a job as they are hard to come by.

Subtheme 2: Competition and support between professionals

- Working within an organization was perceived as stressful as they feel the pressure to do a good job because there are aware that people are lined up to take their place.
- The sparsity of jobs also leads to competition between professionals. Some people are unwilling to share what they know which seems counterintuitive with the overarching helping role of an SPC. On the other hand, some of the younger participants found support in their communities.

Subtheme 3: Navigating entrepreneurial spaces with a profuse lack of business training

- Self-employment can be a massive challenge when SPCs' only training is in applied sport psychology. Managing the business alongside the day-to-day stress can be overwhelming. However, being able to manage your own time can be great for managing stress.
- Incongruent values - Asking clients for money can feel uncomfortable and counterintuitive to the helping role.
- Most SPCs wish that their training included a business-related component.

Meeting with Erica re: Results – August 26, 2025

Shared my current themes and subthemes with Erica, who reassured that I am on a good path. Erica suggested I rename Theme 2 as "sociocultural landscape" is a bit too broad. Chatted about how to integrate the topic of helping into the context of stress (follow up with Desi about this). Erica also suggested I consider combining Subthemes 1 and 3 from Theme 3. I agree with this, as both subthemes fall under the same "Financial/job instability" umbrella.

Meeting with Desi re: Results – August 27, 2025

At this point, Results write-up is content heavy (too much writing for the scope if this thesis). Next steps will include paring down results and choosing which passages from transcripts best exemplify themes and subthemes. Desi and I agreed that the "story" of the Results needed some work to ensure cohesion between data and the aim of this research. In particular, I need to rethink how Theme 1 (A Passion for Helping) can be integrated in a discussion stress. From here, Desi and I started to consider how I could operationalize the person/environment component of Lazarus' CMRT to paint a more detailed picture of how a passion for helping is linked to experiences of stress among SPCs.

Meeting with Desi re: Results/Discussion – September 17, 2025

Desi and I feel that the Results are in good enough shape to move onto the Discussion. I will be sure to remember that data construction is an iterative process, so as I write the Discussion, I may consider things that I have not considered before, which will prompt me to go back and edit the Results.

Results/Discussion Writing – September 23, 2025

Not sure how to title the headings of the Discussion. On one hand, using the same heading as the Results may help with coherence and clarity, on the other hand, headings in the Discussion could be modified to highlight a specific take-away from the Results. Ask Desi about this.

Meeting with Desi re: Results/Discussion – October 6, 2025

Desi and I chatted through ideas to coherently iterate the boat analogy within the Discussion. We decided that it could be helpful to "set the stage" by giving a clear outline of the CMRT at the beginning of the discussion and how exactly the "individual/environmental interaction" was interpreted in this study. We also decided that it will be important to note that although the

individual and environmental components are being split up in the write up (in the Results and Discussion), stress is a dynamic and iterative process which includes and interaction between the individual and their environment. In essence, although themes separate the individual and the environment, within each theme lies a consideration of how these two components interact.

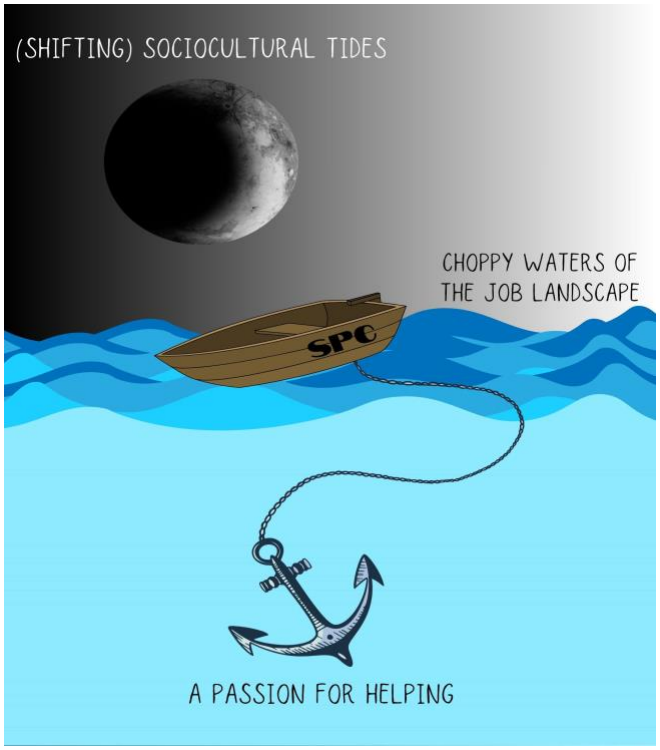
Idea for Boat Analogy (Data Construction/Write-up) – October 6, 2025

To paint a clearer picture of how SPCs experience stress in their professions, I came up with an analogy that SPCs are a boat anchored by a passion for helping. In this case, the boat and it's anchor which sits firmly at the bottom of the ocean signifies the individual component of the CMRT. The environmental component of the CMRT is signified by the moon, which shift the (sociocultural) tides in sport, and the choppy waters, which signify job/financial insecurity. Both environmental tenets (rising/falling tides and choppy waters) "rock the boat", which could further symbolize stress or being thrown off equilibrium. However, it is the anchor (passion for helping) which keeps the boat in place even through it is experiencing turbulence (i.e., stress).

Here is the email I sent to Desi explaining this analogy:

> *It's a bit too 'cartoony' to include in my thesis, but this graphic helped me visualize the West Coast/boat/ocean analogy a bit better.*
>
> *In essence, the boat is the SPC (the individual) which has an anchor (a passion for helping) that roots the individual in this career. The moon symbolizes the changing tides of a shifting sociocultural landscape, and the choppy waters indicate the pervasive instability of this job. The shifting sociocultural landscape and the job instability (i.e., the environment) interact with the boat (the individual/SPC) to shape how the water moves (i.e., the experiences of stress).*
>
> *I like the analogy of an anchor because* ***it's a part of the boat/the individual*** *(also anchors are strong, yet moveable, so the fact that they keep the boat in these waters indicates a willingness to work in a challenging role). Whereas the tides and waters are part of the context that shapes the movement of the boat. "Rocking the boat" could be interpreted as experiencing stress and too much rocking might put stress on the anchor.*
>
> *Apologies for the shoddy Canva work. Let me know if this makes any sense and if you have any ideas on how I could rework this graphic into something that is more thesis appropriate.*

Here is the analogy in the form of an image:



Results/Discussion Writing – October 8, 2025

Discussion headings:

- The Individual: A Journey Anchored by a Passion for Helping in Sport
- The Environment: (Shifting) Priorities in Sport
- The Environment: Imposed Entrepreneurialism and Competition Among SPCs

Stating "The Individual" and "The Environment" contextualizes the Discussion explicitly within Lazarus' CMRT. I believe this helps clarity for the reader.

Discussion Writing – October 12-20, 2025

Took time off for personal reasons.

Discussion Writing – October 24, 2025

Sent first "completed" version of the thesis to Desi.

Final Write-up – October/November, 2025

Editing process has been a challenge (a lot of back and forth between Result and Discussion sections), but I am happy with how the themes have come together. Remember that just because themes and heading are split, doesn't mean there isn't overlap between them.