1   Running Head: ORGANISATIONAL STRESSORS IN DISABILITY FOOTBALL

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3   **An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international**

4   **disability footballers**

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31   **Abstract**

32   Presently, disability athletes remain under-represented in organisational

33   stressor research. Our study sought to bring novel insights to this area by

34   determining the organisational stressors experienced by international disability

35   footballers. Twelve current international disability footballers (10 male, 2 female)

36   from a range of UK impairment squads took part in the study. Semi-structured

37   interviews were completed with each participant, and data were analysed by content

38   analysis procedures. Organisational stressors data were abstracted into Arnold,

39   Wagstaff, Steadman, and Pratt's (2017) concepts, and Arnold and Fletcher's (2012)

40   four general dimensions: leadership and personnel issues, cultural and team issues,

41   logistical and environmental issues, and performance and personal issues, revealing a

42   series of football specific nuances. Our study is the first exploration of the

43   prevalence of organisational stressors within international disability football. Our

44   study also provides practitioners with an understanding of the common and unique

45   organisational stressors faced by international disability footballers. Finally, we

46   suggest a series of practical recommendations for policy development within

47   disability football organisations to aid athletes to effective manage organisational

48   stressors.

49   *Keywords*: elite, para-athletes, Paralympic, performance, soccer, stress

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56 **An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international**

57 **disability footballers**

58 In elite sport, athletes are typically exposed to a number of stressors at a personal-

59 level (e.g., an athletes' own performance expectations) and at an organisational-level

60 (e.g., environmental factors) that can subsequently affect their health (e.g., Tabei,

61 Fletcher, & Goodger, 2012) and performance (e.g., Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels,

62 2017). An important avenue of stress research relates to organisational stressors,

63 which are defined as being the environmental demands associated with an

64 organisation in which an individual operates (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006).

65 Evidence indicates the importance of these stressors in that elite athletes have been

66 found to experience and recall more demands associated directly with their sport

67 organisation than with their competitive performances (e.g., Hanton, Fletcher, &

68 Coughlan, 2005).

69 Extant literature into organisational stressors has sought to provide insight

70 into the range of positive (Fletcher et al., 2006; Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012)

71 and negative outcomes associated with organisational stressors across a range of

72 facets including emotions, behaviours (e.g., overtraining), psychological well-being,

73 and underperformance (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2012). To explain these effects, Fletcher

74 et al.'s (2006) meta-model of stress, emotions and performance suggests: "stressors

75 arise from the environment the performer operates in, are mediated by the processes

76 of perception, appraisal and coping, and, as a consequence, result in positive or

77 negative responses, feeling states, and outcomes" (p. 333). Using this current meta-

78 model of stress as a backdrop, our study intentionally does not examine the effects or

79 coping mechanisms used by players to deal with the stressors encountered. But

80 instead, and given the paucity of research within disability football, we offer an

81   insight into the peformance environment the athletes operate in and their perceptions

82   of organisational stressors encountered (Fletcher et al., 2006). We anticipated that

83   taking this particular lens will provide a springboard for future researchers to explore

84   other key aspects of the meta-model of stress within disability football (e.g.,

85   appraisal and coping mechanisms).

86   Non-disabled athlete populations have been, and continue to be, investigated

87   extensively within organizational stress work in sport. Specifically, more recent

88   findings have demonstrated the links between appraisal of, and influence of,

89   organisational stressors upon performance (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017b), the

90   range of emotional consequences if stressors persist (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, &

91   Daniels, 2018) and how dealing with stressors may impact upon future playing time

92   (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2020). Despite this emerging literature, studies

93   with disabled athletes remain comparatively limited. With an ever-increasing

94   number of disabled athletes at major sport competitions such as the Paralympic

95   Games, researchers have outlined the importance of understanding this population

96   group, and the potentially unique organisational stressors that they encounter, to aid

97   with supporting athletes, coaches and practitioners in achieving a more optimal stress

98   experience (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017; Rumbold et al., 2018).

99   To date, the most comprehensive study exploring the prevelance of

100   organisational stressors within disability sport was conducted by Arnold, Wagstaff,

101   et al. (2017). In contrast to previous literature (e.g., Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012),

102   this study reported a number of salient similarities (e.g., selection processes) and

103   differences (e.g., classification, lack of crowds, coaches being unaware of tailoring

104   exercises, lack of knowledge) between the experiences of British disabled athletes

105   compared to non-disabled athletes. In addition, findings from studies conducted

106   with Canadian (i.e., Allan, Smith, Côte, Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2018) and

107   Kenyan para-athletes (Crawford & Stodolska, 2008) have identified comparable

108   considerations including a lack of financial resources, coaching, and negative

109   attitudes towards disability. Overall, this research provides an important foundation

110   to develop from and adds to previous evidence that has explored other forms of

111   stressors experienced by disabled athletes, such as social and policial issues (e.g.,

112   Bush, Silk, Porter, & Howe, 2013).

113   While Arnold and colleagues' (2017) findings develop the breadth of our

114   understanding by focusing on eight sports and a range of disabilities, there is a need

115   to gain a more detailed understanding within a specific sport to begin the

116   development of evidence-based interventions tailored to the nuances of specific

117   sports. By studying a range of disabiltities within a single sport we are better able to

118   understand the contextual naunces (including intra-group differences and

119   similarities) and the unique culture at play. Although some studies have examined

120   disabled athletes within the same sport (e.g., Campbell & Jones, 2002), such studies

121   have not specifically focused upon exploring the organisational stressors that the

122   athlete encounters.

123   One sport absent from previous research is that of disability football.

124   Football is one of the most popular global sports and although previous

125   investigations have explored organisational stressors within football across a range

126   of contexts at the highest levels of the game (e.g., Kristiansen, Ivarsson, Solstad, &

127   Roberts, 2019), none have specifically focussed upon disability football at any level

128   of participation.

129   Disability sport is governed according to the International Sport Federation

130   (ISF) criteria relevant to each impairment group. One example of a unique stressor

131 disabled athletes are subject to is the ongoing and evolving eligibility checks

132 according to the impairment specific ISF, a criterion not encountered within non-

133 disability football. Disability football is the seventh highest participated team sport

134 in England (Sport England, 2015), placing it above more established non-disability

135 sports (e.g., rugby league) although below male and female football. Despite

136 significant investment into disability football over the previous 20 years via a

137 number of stakeholders, the amount of funding available remains comparatively very

138 low to the non-disabled game which is able to attract significant sponsorship

139 investment. Consequently, although both male and female football involvement has

140 seen significant developments in their playing structures in recent years (for instance,

141 through the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan in the boy's academy

142 system in 2012 and the professionalisation of women's pyramid system resulting in

143 full-time contracts for those in the Women's Super League in 2011), disabled

144 footballers have to juggle the demands of working full-time outside of football as

145 they seek to progress to the pinacle of their sport. The experiences that disability

146 footballers encounter therefore are likely to be unique within the wider sport context

147 and potentially create novel demands for performers particulary as the public

148 awareness of disability football, and sport, increases.

149   Evidently, organisational stressors are experienced by elite disabled athletes

150 (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), but presently there is limited understanding of the

151 organisational stressors prevalent within the novel context of UK international

152 disability football. Using Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) framework as an

153 underpinning, the purpose of our current study was to understand the organisational

154 stressors experienced by international disability footballers. While not a central aim

155 of our study, we also sought to provide data which may enable national govening

156   bodies (NGBs) and key stakeholders (e.g., coaches and sport science practitioners)

157   working within disability football (and in other sports) to create effective

158   organisational structures including an optimal stress environment.

Method

Approach

161   Underpinning our investigation are philosophical assumptions of ontological

162   relativism (i.e., reality is mind dependent and multiple) and epistemological post-

163   positivism (i.e., knowledge is multiple rather than singular; see Creswell, 2013).

164   Given our focus upon organisational stressors and the population under study, it is

165   pertinent to consider any analysis from the perspective of the participant given that

166   previous researchers have indicated the importance of understanding experience

167   from the perspective of the disabled athlete as each athlete will 'experience' their

168   disability uniquely (e.g., Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). A qualitiative methodology

169   was deemed best suited for this investigation in view of the limited literature

170   examining organisational stressors in disability sport (Silverman, 2006).

171   Specifically, interviews were chosen to encourage participants to provide in-

172   depth information based on their first-hand experiences and thereby allow

173   participants to express their individual identities as a part of their personal story

174   which is developed according to the cultural parameters they operate within (Smith

175   & Sparkes, 2008).

Participants

177   Participants were selected via purposive sampling techniques to ensure

178   representation from across the NGB international disability squads and impairment

179   spectrum. Participants were required to have a classified disability (confirmed by

180   their NGB and ISF) and be a current member of an international disability football

181 squad. As part of their preparations for a yearly major competition, the participants

182 were training two days each month within the environment of their international

183 squad While they were also expected to follow both a strength and conditioning

184 programme provided centrally from the NGB as well as partaking in regular football

185 activities within club football. All participants were interviewed prior to their next

186 major competition with the sample comprising 12 footballers (10 male, 2 female),

187 ranging in age from 19 to 33 ($M_{age} = 25.50 \pm 3.58$), who had been international

188 athletes for an average of 5.92 (± 3.20) years. Two starting footballers were

189 included from each of the following squads: blind, cerebral palsy, deaf male, deaf

190 female, partially sighted, and wheelchair football teams. All participants within the

191 sample were part-time athletes and not paid for their involvement within their squad

192 or to compete within their global competition cycle.

193 **Procedure**

194   Following institutional ethics approval, players eligible for the study were

195 contacted to take part in the research and were informed about the study, what their

196 involvement would entail and their participatory rights (covering aspects such as

197 confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw) before arranging a

198 convenient time and location for the interview. An interview guide was developed to

199 explore the topics pertinent for disability footballers with a copy of the guide

200 provided to the players one week prior to the interview to allow them to consider

201 their responses more fully for the interview. Pilot interviews were conducted prior to

202 the main study with two recently retired (less than two years) players to check the

203 appropriatess of the interview guide, and allow the interviewer to refine questioning

204 techniques. Based upon the pilot interviews, several further probes (e.g., "What

205 effect do you think that had?") were devised to support with clarifying and

206   elaborating on the player's perspectives (cf. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne,

207   Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). Each player provided informed consent prior to

208   the start of data collection. Interviews ($M_{minutes} = 88.56 \pm 16.68$) were conducted

209   face-to-face or via FaceTime to account for the preference of the interviewee (i.e.,

210   offering access to an interpreter for deaf participants), were digitially recorded, and

211   transcribed verbatim.

Interview Guide

213   A five section interview guide was developed. The first section outlined to

214   the participants the study focus and their participatory rights. The second section

215   encompassed a series of questions to develop rapport with the player, for instance,

216   "Tell me what you consider to be one of your major achievements so far in football"

217   and "Tell me how your first call up to the [country] squad came about". The third

218   section defined organisational stressors to check the players' understanding

219   regarding the focus of the study. The fourth section included questions exploring the

220   players' experiences of organisational stressors in their squad, for instance, "Tell me

221   about your training schedule during your last tournament", "Talk to me about the

222   different personnel working with the squad", "What can you tell me about the

223   support players receive" and "Tell me about the team's goals and how they were

224   determined". The final section allowed players to discuss additional issues they

225   wished to raise which had not been already covered.

Data Analysis

227   In analysing the data, we used Fletcher et al.'s (2006) definition of

228   organisational stressors to provide the basis for that which should be coded as a

229   'stressor'. The interview transcripts were manually analysed using inductive and

230   deductive content analysis procedures (Weber, 1985). Specifically, environmental

231   demands associated primarily and directly with the NGB within which the disability

232   footballer was operating were firstly identified (e.g., organisational stressors). The

233   analysis process involved the interviewer reading, re-reading, and listening to the

234   transcripts and coding the raw-data threads deductively into the concept groupings,

235   themes, and general dimensions as presented within Arnold and Fletcher (2012) and

236   Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017). These were: (1) leadership and personal issues; (2)

237   cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and environmental issues; and (4)

238   performance and personal issues. Constant comparative methods were used

239   throughout the analysis process to compare stressors and anecdotes for any

240   similarities, variations, or differences, as well as comparing across the analysis levels

241   (e.g., stressors to concepts, concepts to concepts; Holt & Tamminen, 2010). At each

242   stage of the deductive analysis, discussions with critical friends were completed

243   before continuing the analysis to the next stage. Where new concepts emerged, these

244   were inductively labelled before being deductively placed into the appropriate theme

245   and general dimension grouping in accordance with Arnold and colleagues' (2012;

246   2017) findings.

247   **Reflexivity and Methodological Rigour**

248   In view of the nature of the study, our approach centred upon a relativist

249   position (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) in that views are

250   relative to differences in perception from the participants' own experiences of

251   disability. Further, consideration also has to be given to the potential for the

252   experiences and background of the primary researcher that had the potential to

253   influence the data collection, analysis, and subsequent presentation of findings.

254   Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, an

255   audit trail was maintained and shared with the second and third authors throughout

256 the analysis process to consider the thematic ideas interpreted. Second, a critical

257 friend was engaged with in order to challenge the decisions being made and

258 encourage reflection of alternative interpretations (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

259 Third, within the Results and Discussion, content codes are accompanied by

260 contextually rich, direct quotations to enable readers to make their own meaningful

261 interpretations of the data (cf. Biddle et al., 2001; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results and Discussion

263   In total, 428 organisational stressors were interpreted from the data that were

264 then abstracted into the concepts detailed by Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017) and

265 reviewed in-line with Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) four general dimensions: (1)

266 leadership and personnel issues; (2) cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and

267 environmental issues; and (4) performance and personal issues. Leadership and

268 personnel issues encapsulate organisational stressors associated with management

269 and support of a sports team (see Figure 1). Cultural and team issues encapsulate the

270 organisational stressors associated with attitudes and behaviours within the sports

271 team. Logistical and environmental issues encapsulate organisational stressors

272 associated with the organisation of operations for training and/or competition.

273 Finally, performance and personal issues encapsulate the organisational stressors

274 associated with a performer's athletic career and physical self (Arnold & Fletcher,

275 2012). Within each general dimension, we have identified nuances specific to the

276 relativist experiences of international disability footballers, and football as a sport,

277 that extends the insights provided in previous research (i.e., Arnold et al., 2017). Full

278 analysis of the data is available on request from the first author.

279 **Leadership and Personnel Issues**

280   Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to coaching

281   delivery and interactions, disability awareness of key staff, team expectations and

282   pressures, playing experience within the squad, the governing body, media profile,

283   and game officials. We found that athletes had concerns regarding the availability of

284   specialist team staff which specifically related to how the functional efficiency of the

285   team was impacted when key medical personnel were unavailable. Further to this,

286   we also found the players' perceptions of favouritism within the NGB towards non-

287   disability over elite disability squads was a key stressor identified. Previous research

288   on performance environments has noted how athlete performance can be negatively

289   impacted through both team management factors in non-disability (e.g., Arnold,

290   Collington, Manley, Rees, Soanes, & Williams, 2019) as well as disability settings

291   (e.g., Crawford & Stodolska, 2008), and the salience of coach leadership skills on

292   and off the pitch (e.g., Allan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the favouritism towards

293   non-disability football teams relative to the disability teams within the same NGB is

294   a novel finding in this context. An additional finding related to the players'

295   perceptions of the coach's interactions with them and, in particular, challenges

296   resulting from coaches communicating with players in their preferred language. This

297   was a consideration highlighted specifically in regards the deaf squads as one player

298   noted:

299   Without the interpreter, we wouldn't be able to even get any information

300   across but it's just that I think a lot of times, like even the coaches and the

301   manager, I'm not sure they're aware that sometimes it is second-rate

302   information that's been passed on…So it's a little bit whether the coach is

303   really getting his point across so sometimes that, like sort of, gets a bit

304   muddled. (Participant 10)

305   Indeed, previous researchers have not recruited deaf athletes (e.g., Arnold et

306   al., 2017) and thus our finding regarding the importance of the interpreter and the

307   apparent strain on coach-athlete relations as a result of such communications

308   advances our understanding of disability footballers' experiences of organisational

309   stressors.

310   The international disability footballers in our current study also identified the

311   potential impact and influence of parents upon the squad players and staff as a

312   distraction to team operations. This was particularly apparent in relation to decisions

313   made on squad selection for competitions and the tactics and/or strategies utilised

314   where parents had direct access to the group throughout the duration of competition.

315   For instance, one player expressed:

316   So like the younger lads, their parents will come to games which is really

317   interesting because they've probably been there now three or four years to all

318   tournaments. So we've actually got genuine support when we go away and the

319   other side of it is, you know, they have opinions as everyone does in

320   football...but they have opinions that sometimes it's not that they're not right,

321   but when everyone starts to have an opinion and you just think "That's not

322   ideal saying that. That's gonna put something in someone's head". But they've

323   gone out their way to come support their kid. So, you know, we have to manage

324   parents…We're an elite squad yet the manager's managing parents so that's

325   another bit where we, certainly senior players, try and manage it…Sometimes

326   it could all be positive, and it's probably too positive, and you think "Humm,

327   he didn't do that well. I wouldn't go over the top"…so it's managing

328   them…that's a massive [impact on the staff and players], but if it [parental

329   input] got out of hand, it'd be an absolute nightmare. (Participant 4)

330   Considering this stressor, researchers have identified comparable

331   observations relating to 'detrimental parental behaviours' such as over-inflating

332   player egos (e.g., Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012). Researchers within non-

333   disability football academies have highlighted that parents experience organisational

334   stressors too (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010). Studies have also shown that

335   parents naturally feel empathy for their children in competitive settings (Harwood,

336   Clarke, & Cushion, 2016) and go through several experiences associated with

337   watching their child compete (e.g., Harwood et al., 2010). Additionally, several

338   studies have indicated the increased presence and involvement of parents in sporting

339   activities where their child has a disability (e.g., Shapiro & Malone, 2016) and the

340   impact this has upon their participation. In our study, participants are on average 25

341   years old (adults) and are still talking about their parents in relation to their football

342   performance. This data could imply that disability footballers are perhaps still, or at

343   least more, reliant on their parents for a range of football-related issues. Indeed, the

344   parental involvement and associated organisational stressors for footballers (non-

345   disabled) would stop at approximately 18 years, but our novel findings indicate that

346   for disability footballers, organisational stressors surrounding parents still prevail

347   into adulthood, and therefore have important implications for coaches and sport

348   psychologists working in international disability football.

349   In support of these findings, Ferrari (2019) has indicated that parents of

350   children with disabilities tend to be more critical than other parents. Potential

351   reasons for this parental dynamic may be that parents have differing experiences and

352   knowledge of the sport (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008) and that

353   parents may find it difficult to manage their child's emotional-motivational levels in

354   dealing with failure (Ferrari, 2019). In our study, it is possible that players perceived

355   that their parents are still developing their understanding regarding international

356   disability football, and their parents' psychological approach may hold more in

357   common with that of amateur youth sport than international adult environments (e.g.,

358   Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). Through adopting dual empathetic and

359   educational approaches with parents, therefore, NGBs and elite disability squad staff

360   can support parents to maintain their parent-child relationships and identify how to

361   prevent such over-protectionist tendencies occurring (i.e., Antle, Mills, Steele,

362   Kalnins, & Rossen, 2007) through heightening their sense of being close to the

363   overall setup (i.e., Ferrari, 2019).

364   **Cultural and Team Issues**

365   Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to teammates'

366   personality and attitudes, cultural norms, and team atmosphere and support. One

367   prominent observation related to the perceived sacrifices that players felt they made

368   in relation to diet and fitness comparative to their teammates given that the squad

369   spend very little time together. For instance, one player suggested:

370   I mean it is hard to be motivated for some people if you're not being around the

371   environment all the time. I can see, I can see why it would, like, some of the lads

372   would find it hard to be motivated. I mean like, as I said, some of the lads are still

373   quite young and young in the mind as well so like they, they so still like going out

374   for a drink here and there and they do still like, like, they don't have the best

375   diets…Like for me, personally I'm the sort of person that just loves the training,

376   loves to eat well anyway so it's not really difficult for me that when a tournament

377   comes around…Like I said, I remember coming away from [country] thinking like

378   "We didn't do well there" because the lads, like, some of the lads have putting

379   things on Snapchat like a week before we go and it, like annoying me, and I always

380   felt like we come away and, even though you feel like yourself you could have

381   done a little bit better, or could have worked a little bit harder leading up to it cause

382   when you don't achieve your goals, you always, like that's the first thing you look

383   at, thinking "What could I have done more of or better?" but then I was always

384   sort of coming away and thinking like "The lads haven't trained as hard as", like I

385   trained morning, noon and night for some day and you just feel like if they'd done

386   the same, like, was it being in the same situation…we might not get the contact

387   time together as much as we'd like but what you do away is as important, if not

388   more. I think that kind of penny finally dropped with a few lads that they needed

389   to go and sort themselves out a little bit…I think that's always one of the main

390   barriers because you're not meeting up as much as you can, you need to do as

391   much as possible away, and I know it's hard. Like everyone, we're not

392   professional people, we've got jobs and whatever…it is hard to stay in, I know that

393   cause I've been there. I remember going out with my mates and having to then

394   get up at 7, 8 o'clock in the morning to go strength and conditioning. And it is

395   hard, but like for me, you're an England player and you just go and do it. Don't

396   moan about it, you go and do it and once you're back and its out the way, it's out

397   the way isn't it? But I mean not everyone can have that mentality. (Participant 2)

398   The players' perceptions on this stressor tallies with research that has noted

399 how antisocial teammate behaviours (e.g., being unwilling to partake in prescribed

400 physical conditioning training) can negatively impact upon an athlete's sport

401 experience in contrast to prosocial behaviours (e.g., partaking in team bonding

402 exercises) which are positively associated with effort, performance, and enjoyment

403 (Bruner et al., 2017). As noted by Allan et al. (2018), an athlete's sense of belonging

404 is wrapped up within their performance and relational narratives, with possible

405   interpretations based around social acceptance as well as a sense of community

406   within the group potentially influencing performance output.

407   Off-field relationships can play a significant role in social support and team

408   effectiveness (e.g., Gershgoren et al., 2015) with player relationships shown to be

409   related to self-confidence (e.g., Freeman & Rees, 2009) and performance in football

410   (e.g., Gioldasis, Stavrou, Mitrotasios, & Psychountaki, 2016). Extending Arnold,

411   Wagstaff et al.'s (2017) observations relating to team atmosphere and support

412   further, for one elite disability football impairment group, social cohesion (i.e.,

413   Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002) within the playing group was particularly prominent

414   (e.g., Roberts, Arnold, Gillison, Bilzon, & Colclough, 2020). This is illustrated by

415   one participant who stated: "…when I first started it was very much the signers and

416   the oralists. Which wasn't great (be)cause you don't want that in a team"

417   (Participant 3), and another who noted, "…as bad as it might sound, I can hear, and

418   like previously it was more of a deaf-based squad…so I sort of got on a bit better

419   with the staff" (Participant 11).

420   Research within deaf sport and with deaf athletes signifies a key

421   consideration relating to Deaf culture, and by association, the upbringing an

422   individual player has had (e.g., Ammons & Eickman, 2011). In some cases, there

423   may be no association with Deaf culture at all; for instance, recent statistics from the

424   National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) show that 90% of deaf children are born

425   to hearing parents, with the majority of deaf children educated within mainstream

426   education and not accessing British Sign Language during their childhood (NDCS,

427   2017). These findings are significant to understand communication preferences

428   between those who sign and those who communicate orally (i.e., Atherton, 2009),

429   and the challenges of developing social cohesion within sport teams. The literature

430 is limited in this regard; however, one study that examines the role of football within

431 the deaf community highlights the isolation that deaf players can feel off the pitch

432 and how unfulfilling their experiences of playing can be (Atherton, Russell, &

433 Turner, 2001). The insights from the deaf footballers in the current study highlight a

434 stressor associated with encouraging deaf and hearing-impaired players volition to

435 work together (social and task-related).

436 **Logistical and Environmental Issues**

437   Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to facilities and

438 equipment, rules and regulations, travel, weather conditions, structure of training,

439 competition format and selection. Selection was a prominent concept across all

440 squads and specifically, two strands emerged relating to the identification of new

441 players as well as selection into squads. Participants highlighted the lack of

442 prospective players being identified to suitably challenge players within the current

443 squad, as highlighted by one player who said: "It's not competitive at all to be

444 honest. You kind of, without sounding big headed, you kind of know you're pretty

445 much in the squad" (Participant 3). The apparent lack of a deeper player pool led to

446 further stressors regarding the perceived disparity in team selection policy as

447 illustrated here:

448   I've seen like other players turn up late to, half a day late, leave half a day early

449   since then they maybe are a bit more of a valuable player on the pitch and

450   nothing happens with that…There are untouchable players in the squad.

451   Definite, definite untouchable players in the squad. (Participant 6)

452   Similarly, stressors associated with classification were also raised with

453 participants in the current study viewing the process as stressful from several

454 perspectives. For instance, one stressor related to a new classification process which

455   was due to be implemented within cerebral palsy football, While another stressor

456   related to being reclassified ahead of a competition in partially sighted football:

457   I've been classified three times…you're just thinking "Oh my god, I just

458   want to get this out the way" because it's very hard to focus on the

459   tournament when you've got that in mind. (Participant 2)

460   A further stressor related to the perceived limited availability and use of the

461   current NGB training kit. A particular part of this stressor was how the kit was

462   comparatively available to and used by the non-disability squads despite all

463   international squads being grouped within the same NGB operational matrix to

464   receive centralised support:

465   …when we've turned up and we've got the old, you know, last season's kits

466   and stuff like that...You wouldn't give any other [NGB] squad these…that's

467   more the stress side for me, because I think we're [country]…we're going to

468   represent the country, we're representing the [NGB] so why not put us out in

469   the newest of gear…instead of having us wearing last seasons and, it's more

470   of a morale thing as well for the lads. (Participant 9)

471   This stressor, which centred on access to kit and how it may feed into squad

472   morale, has not been identified in previous studies of disability athletes (Arnold,

473   Wagstaff, et al., 2017). One potential rationale for this being perceived as a stressor

474   may be contextualised from the perspective of the social identity approach (Tajfel &

475   Turner, 1979). To elaborate, previous researchers have shown that elite disability

476   athletes desire to be recognised first and foremost as an athlete (Purdue & Howe,

477   2012). However, international disability football players in the current study felt that

478   being unable to use the same training kit as the elite non-disability squads results in

479   the players perceiving themselves to be part of an out-group rather than an in-group

480   within the NGB setup.

481   Further, investigations of Team GB at the London 2012 Olympic Games

482   identified team kit to be a salient factor in the development of team identity,

483   particularly in highlighting in-group characteristics comparative to other groups

484   (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). The authors note that the use of a single

485   team kit resulted in the development of a single organisational entity spanning across

486   teams under Team GB. One comparable element which can be drawn between Team

487   GB and the NGB elite squads in the current study are that both organisations operate

488   within high performance environments. Further, Allan et al. (2018) identified within

489   their review the notion of belongingness as one of several experiential elements of

490   participation, and noted the inconsistencies perceived by individual athletes in the

491   way each of these elements is experienced and can impact upon their sporting

492   involvement. However, in contrast with this study and Slater et al.'s (2015) findings,

493   the perceptions of the disability footballers in the current study indicate that they do

494   not recognise themselves as being a part of the same organisational entity as the elite

495   non-disability squads, and therefore the potential psychological benefits to enhance

496   performance may not be present (cf. Høigaard et al., 2013).

497   **Performance and Personal Issues**

498   Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to finances,

499   injuries, and diet and hydration. Players highlighted several concerns relating to

500   financial considerations, such as apprehension at a loss of earnings While with their

501   squad as a result of having to take time off from their job. For example, one player

502   noted:

503   … that was a big stress I had, just the financial side because it was just not

504   worth . . . it wasn't financially viable for me to turn up to training camps and

505   then miss work and not get paid for it. (Participant 9)

506   Equally, a prominent stressor for players centred around injury support away

507   from elite squad settings. Researchers have reported that injury rates are comparable

508   to those in non-disability sport and that injury is a significant stressor for disabled

509   athletes (Fagher et al., 2016). One reason for this relates to the potential for an

510   injury to pose additional limitations on a disabled athlete and their everyday

511   activities (Weiler, van Mechelen, Fuller, & Verhagen, 2016). Although international

512   disability sport is now viewed comparably to international non-disability setups (e.g.,

513   Fagher et al., 2016), the majority of the elite disability footballers do not have full-

514   time contracts and undertake their preparations away from formal training camps.

515   Consequently, players are potentially more likely to incur an injury in their home-

516   setting. Previous researchers have shown that being unable to access a trusted

517   medical professional may lead to increased stress and anxiety levels (e.g., Podlog,

518   Dimmock, & Miller, 2011) however identifying appropriate medical support can be

519   challenging for disabled athletes (Ahmed et al., 2015), as one player observed:

520   I've had a few injuries in the past where it's really hard to get support if you

521   can't prove you did [it] While at [nation]…anything we get injured by doing

522   is stuff we're doing away in preparation for [nation]. You know, you're an

523   [nation] player 12 months of the year. (Participant 4)

524   A further stressor related to the availability of lifestyle development support,

525   particularly given the majority of elite disability footballers are not full-time athletes.

526   The players' concerns related to the appropriateness of aspects such as following

527   ascribed fitness programmes to fit in alongside their full-time employment

528   obligations: "Sometimes [staff member's] programme's a bit unrealistic with [their]

529   morning and afternoon sessions. That's probably based more around a pro-football

530   player or a player that doesn't work" (Participant 6). It may be that support staff with

531   a background in football are not perceived to tailor their programme optimally for

532   disability footballers in terms of time management.

533   Our findings identify novel and key stressors which have not been previously

534   reported in the literature (e.g., communication barriers between hearing coaches and

535   deaf players; parental influence on and around the squad; players' perceptions of

536   their teammates lifestyle in preparing for squad activities; and a perceived lack of

537   identity with and to the other NGB squads). This study, therefore, not only

538   contributes to knowledge in this area, but also can inform applied practice in

539   international disability football. While some stressors encountered were similar to

540   those previously reported with non-disabled athletes (e.g., injury support), other

541   stressors were similar to disability specific ones identified previously (e.g.,

542   classification); thus, providing further evidence to the prevalence of organisational

543   stressors within sporting environments.

544   **Applied Implications**

545   Although it can be challenging to identify and introduce stressor reduction

546   interventions within sport organizations (i.e., Moore, Freeman, Hase, Solomon-

547   Moore, & Arnold, 2019), our study provides a number of applied implications which

548   may aid this venture. First, the findings illuminate a need to educate parents in

549   regards to their involvement and support of disability footballers (Gould, Lauer,

550   Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). This is a novel finding, and is particularly pertinent

551   to parents who may feel unfamiliar with an international disability environment, and

552   this could be achieved through educational workshops through the NGB (e.g.,

553   Knight et al., 2017). Second, national team identity-specific stressors could be

554   reduced through embracing a shared team identity between elite disability and non-

555   disability teams, initiated by and through the NGB (i.e., Slater et al., 2015). This

556   could include access to National Training Centres for entire squad training and

557   competition camps and using the same national kit for preparations and

558   competitions. Third, to alleviate stressors relating to coach-player communication in

559   football, clear short- (e.g., professional development opportunities), and long-term

560   (e.g., mentoring schemes) solutions need to be presented. Fourth, the findings from

561   this study provide supporting evidence for key NGB staff to use in seeking to

562   influence internal policy. It may be prudent for football governing bodies to garner

563   additional support within their organisation for elite disability teams centred upon

564   organisational stressors that players are prone to, as found in our study, and which

565   may negatively impact upon performance (i.e., Rumbold et al., 2018).

566   **Limitations and Future Researcher Directions**

567   Regarding shortcomings of this study, first it is important to emphasise that

568   the findings may only be specific to the organisation sampled or to disability football

569   provision at the international level. However, it is possible that other athletes and

570   NGBs may have encountered similar issues to those discussed, and thus may benefit

571   from the findings and their implications. Second, the study focused on international

572   disability footballers, and female athletes were under-represented as a result of the

573   NGB elite squad structures. The data presented supports the notion that certain

574   stressors are unique to certain groups and contexts (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012).

575   Specifically within elite disability football, investigations may be directed towards

576   developing deeper understanding of the potential variance of stressors reported by

577   different impairment groups and genders (e.g., Atherton et al., 2001), and to the

578   effects of coping mechanisms utilised by players (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012).

579   Further, investigations of organisational stressors within elite disability football from

580   other countries may offer an opportunity to explore the stressors within different

581   cultures (i.e., Arnold, Ponnusamy, Zhang, & Gucciardi, 2017). Finally, we provide

582   our interpretation of the organisational stressors experienced by international

583   disability footballers. Other researchers, particularly with different philosophies

584   (e.g., an interpretivist position), may have interpreted these disability footballer

585   experiences differently.

586   **Conclusion**

587   Our study is the first to explore the organisational stressors experienced by

588   international disability footballers across all impairment squads within a single NGB.

589   The study enhances awareness and understanding of the first stage of Fletcher et al.'s

590   (2006) meta model, that is the stressors component within the P-E fit stage.

591   Specifically, it helps to understand from a theoretical standpoint, which stressors

592   might arise for international disability footballers, which is a fundamental first step

593   before the rest of the meta model can then be applied (e.g., appraisal, coping etc).

594   While the findings illustrate similarities with previous researchers sampling disability

595   athletes (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), they also advance understanding by

596   highlighting novel organisational stressors experienced by disabled international

597   footballers, including: (1) the overreliance on parental support into adulthood; (2) a

598   lack of continuity in kit across all football squads and potential for a shared social

599   identity to be developed across the NGB and; (3) ineffective communication

600   strategies.

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602

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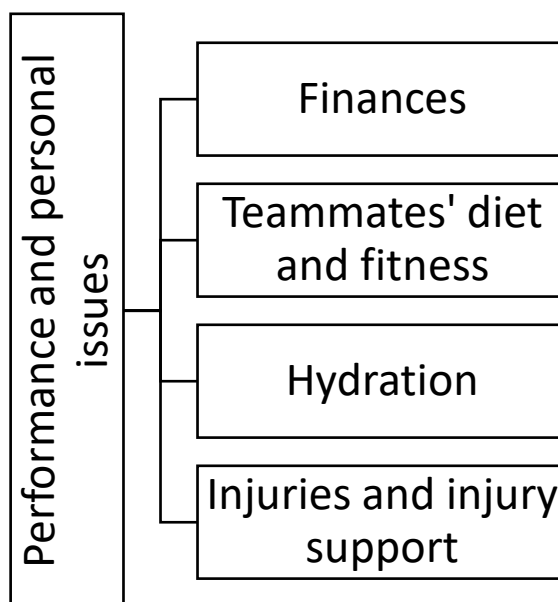795 **Figure 1: Hierarchical sub-themes**
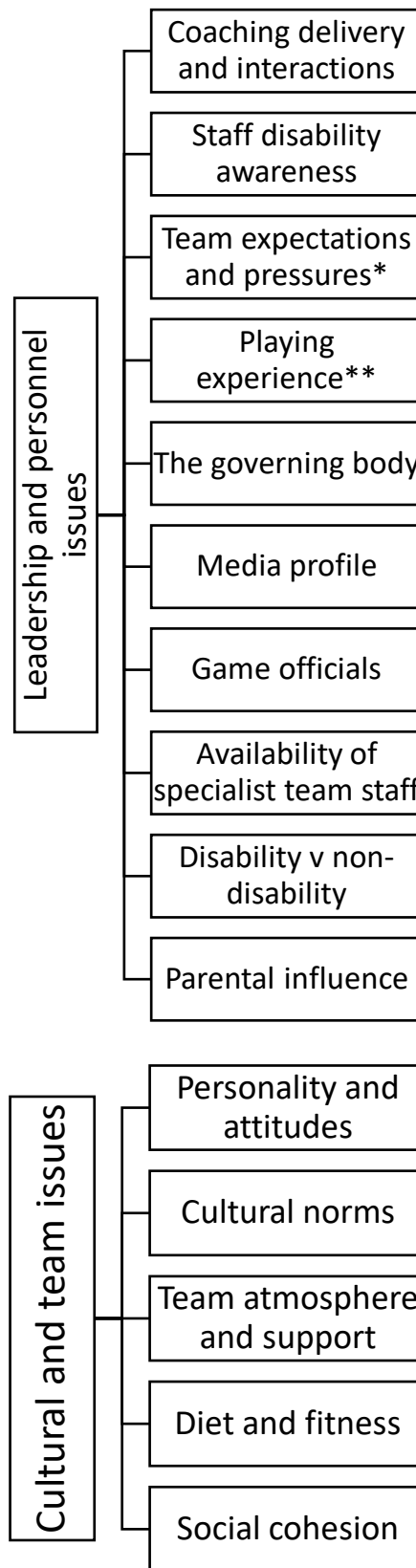
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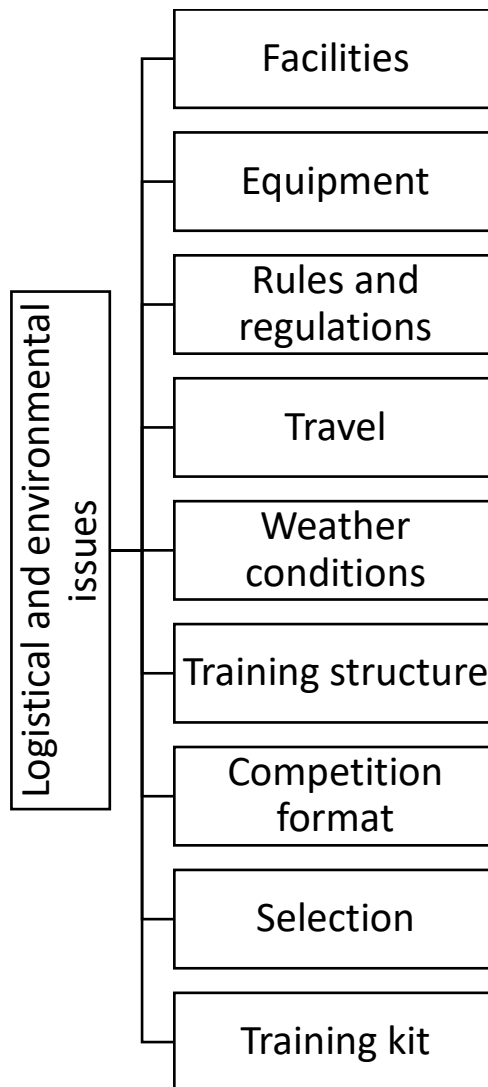
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800 |* Relates to managing expectations of the NGB to what 'success looks like' for the

801   team comparative to what other nations are able to draw upon pre- and during

802   competition.

803   ** Relates to the experience of playing for the relevant international squad under the

804   management of Head Coach pre- and during competition