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A cultural bridge: Performance profiling, dialogue, and athlete ownership in Fiji Rugby 7s pathway

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Abstract
This study investigated the cross-cultural applicability of performance profiling (PP) in Fiji Rugby 7s. A mixed-methods design collected quantitative data from 100 players via the Athlete Perceptions of Performance Profiling Questionnaire (APPQ) and qualitative data through interviews. Results indicated an overwhelmingly positive reception, with 97% rating PP as "Very useful." Quantitative scores for motivation, goal-setting, and improving coach understanding were exceptionally high. Qualitative themes revealed that PP was valued for fostering clarity, enhancing athlete ownership, and improving coach-athlete dialogue. Significant differences by playing level suggest the tool's perceived function evolves with experience. PP is a highly effective developmental intervention, demonstrating strong utility and value in a non-Western, high-performance sporting context.

Keywords: Performance profiling, sport psychology, athlete development, Fiji Rugby 7s, coach-athlete relationship

1. Introduction
In elite sport, psychological readiness interacts with physical, technical, and tactical demands to shape performance outcomes. Performance Profiling (PP) has emerged as a client-led framework that systematises the assessment and development of an athlete's performance by mapping tactical, technical, physical, and psychological attributes from the athlete's own perspective (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Doyle & Parfitt, 1997). The PP approach was first described by Butler (Butler, 1989) [2, 5, 9] and subsequently refined in Butler and Hardy's theoretical and applied exposition, which outlines the methodology, its rationale, and representative elite-sport examples. The sport-psychology literature also documents that PP can foster self-awareness, ownership over development, and targeted goal setting, thereby supporting ongoing performance improvement (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996) [7].

The PP process rests on two foundational psychological theories. First, Personal Construct Theory (PCT) posits that individuals construe their world through self-derived constructs that guide the interpretation and anticipation of future events (Kelly, 1955) [14]; in PP, athletes articulate the constructs they deem essential for success and then evaluate themselves against those personally meaningful standards, effectively shifting some locus of control toward the athlete and rendering the assessment intrinsically meaningful (Bessa *et al.*, 2021; Butler & Hardy, 1992; Christopher Tong, 2018; Doyle & Parfitt, 1997). Second, Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) by Deci and Ryan (1985) [1, 5, 6, 8, 9] concerns autonomy and competence as central drivers of intrinsic motivation; PP's athlete-led mechanism where constructs are defined and self-rated by the performer which aligns with these needs by promoting autonomy and ownership of development, thereby potentially enhancing motivation and engagement (Herbert & Burt, 2004; Jones, 1993) [11, 13]. The integration of PCT tenets with PP further emphasises the athlete's perspective and the interpretive, construct-based nature of profiling, as discussed by Gucciardi and Gordon (2009) [10], who outline extensions to the traditional PP framework grounded in Personal Construct Theory and related tenets. Empirical applications of PP across sports have demonstrated several benefits. PP supports the design of individualized training prescriptions, enables performance optimization through a structured gap-analysis between current and ideal profiles, and can bolster motivation and engagement

by making development more self-directed and relevant to the athlete (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009) [7, 10].

Literature also notes that PP has been illustrated through examples from elite athletes across a range of Olympic sports, underscoring its cross-sport utility and adaptability to diverse performance contexts (Butler, 1991, 2020; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009) [3, 4, 10]. Beyond broader performance profiling, related work on profile-based approaches to mood and psychological state, though distinct in focus, highlights the potential predictive value of profiling techniques for pre-performance readiness and intraindividual fluctuations in elite performers, further supporting the broader utility of profiling within high-performance sport (Terry, 1995) [18]. Analyses treating profiling as a construct-valid assessment of psychological attributes associated with performance have demonstrated evidence of convergence between profile-driven development and subsequent performance outcomes, reinforcing the validity and practical relevance of PP as a developmental tool (Doyle & Parfitt, 1997) [9].

Although PP has been documented in boxing, soccer, athletics, and other Olympic disciplines, there remains a need to understand its application within the unique cultural and sporting context of elite Fijian sport. The existing evidence base across sports and contexts supports the general utility of PP as a tool for athlete-led development and performance optimisation, but investigations into how athletes perceive PP's utility in Pacific Island sport settings, where cultural factors, team dynamics, and sport-specific demands may shape engagement with profiling which are limited in the published literature (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Li *et al.*, 2020) [7, 15].

Despite its widespread use, the evidence base for performance profiling is predominantly rooted in Western, individualistic sporting contexts. There is a notable scarcity of research examining its reception and effectiveness in non-Western settings, particularly within the unique Pacific Island sporting culture of Fiji, where collective values and distinct coach-athlete dynamics may influence its impact.

This study, therefore, moves beyond general validation to address a specific cross-cultural research gap. The present study aims to:

1. Investigate the perceived utility of performance profiling among elite Fiji Rugby Sevens players, and
2. Understand how and why this athlete-led intervention is valued within this specific, under-researched cultural context by exploring perceptual differences across demographic subgroups.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Design and Rationale

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to investigate the perceived utility of performance profiling (PP) among Fiji Rugby 7s players. In a convergent parallel design, quantitative data on participants' perceptions and qualitative feedback regarding the PP process are collected concurrently, allowing integrated interpretation and triangulation of the two data streams (Moran *et al.*, 2011; Sparkes, 2015) [16, 17]. This approach aligns with contemporary sport and exercise psychology research that emphasizes combining numerical indicators with experiential data to understand complex development processes (e.g., PP in team and individual sport settings). The design enables a corroborated picture of PP's perceived usefulness and its practical recognition in development planning.

2.2 Participants

The study population, as shown in Table 1, consisted of active male and female Fiji Rugby 7s players from elite national high-performance, club, and university levels. A census sampling approach was used within the accessible cohort to achieve a final sample size of 100 participants (n=100). Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, actively involved in training and competition, and have a minimum of one year of experience in their current level. Participants were excluded if they had a current injury or illness that would prevent them from engaging in sport-related self-assessment.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample (N=100)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age Group	17-22	23	23
	23-28	45	45
	29-34	24	24
	35+	8	8
Gender	Female	40	40
	Male	60	60
Playing Level	Elite	38	38
	Club	32	32
	University	30	30
Playing Position	Prop	22	22
	Hooker	16	16
	Center	14	14
	Utility Back	14	14
	Flyhalf	12	12
	Winger	12	12
	Halfback	10	10

Note. N represents the total number of participants. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

2.3 Procedure

Participants experienced a performance profiling session based on the original protocol developed by Butler and Hardy (1992) [5]. The procedure was conducted in four distinct parts:

1. **Introduction:** Athletes were first introduced to the concept of performance profiling, its rationale, and were shown exemplars to ensure they understood the process.
2. **Current Performance Profiling:** On the Performance Profiling grid, each player individually listed 16-20 personal qualities, skills, or characteristics they considered important for their current performance across four key domains: tactical, technical, physical, and psychological. They then rated their current ability for each item on a scale of 1 to 10.
3. **Ideal Performance Deliberation:** Athletes were organized into small, position-specific groups to discuss and deliberate on the ideal characteristics required for their roles.
4. **Ideal Performance Profiling:** Following the group discussion, on the Performance Profiling grid, each athlete individually identified 16-20 qualities for their ideal performance and rated their ideal ability for each on a scale of 1 to 10.

2.4 Instrument: Immediately following the performance profiling session, participants completed the Athlete Performance Profile Questionnaire (APPQ) (Weston *et al.*, 2011) [19]. The APPQ is a specialized instrument designed to assess the perceived utility and acceptability of the profiling intervention. It measures constructs such as the overall

usefulness of the session, its single-occasion impact on the athlete, and the athlete's intention to use the profile for future development. This instrument provided the quantitative data for evaluating the effectiveness of the performance profiling process from the athletes' perspective.

3. Results

The results from this study demonstrate that the performance profiling intervention was perceived by the vast majority of Fiji Rugby 7s players as a highly effective and valuable developmental tool. The quantitative data from the Athlete Perceptions of Performance Profiling Questionnaire (APPQ) showed exceptionally high ratings for the tool's utility, while qualitative feedback provided deep insights into why the process was so well-received, highlighting its role in fostering self-awareness, ownership, and communication.

3.1 Overall Perceptions of the Performance Profiling Process: The APPQ was administered to 100 Fiji Rugby 7s players, of whom 94% reported that this was their first formal exposure to performance profiling. Despite this novelty, perceptions were overwhelmingly positive. When asked about the usefulness of the performance profile, 97% of participants classified the session as "Very useful," with only 2% indicating "Partly useful" and 1% "Not useful.". This enthusiasm was mirrored in their desire for future engagement, with the 97 participants affirming they would benefit from a similar session in the future.

The thematic constructs from the APPQ exhibited exceptionally high mean scores, indicating a strong consensus on the tool's utility. The highest-rated construct was Motivation & Confidence (M = 2.96, SD = 0.15), followed closely by Application for Development & Goal Setting (M = 2.95, SD = 0.15).

Among the standalone items, "To improve the coach's understanding of me" achieved the highest mean score (M = 2.97, SD = 0.17), highlighting profiling's role as a communication bridge between athlete and coach. Other top endorsements included "To take more control of my development" (M = 2.95, SD = 0.22) and "To take more responsibility for my development" (M = 2.93, SD = 0.29), underscoring the autonomy-supportive character of the intervention. A summary of these descriptive statistics is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for APPQ Thematic Constructs and Standalone Items

Construct / Item	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Thematic Constructs			
Improving Coach-Athlete Process	100	2.94	0.20
Enhanced Self-Awareness & Role Clarity	100	2.93	0.18
Application for Development & Goal Setting	100	2.95	0.15
Motivation & Confidence	100	2.96	0.15
Key Standalone Items			
It helped to get something down on paper	100	2.83	0.43
To take more control of my development	100	2.95	0.22
To take more responsibility for my development	100	2.93	0.29
To improve the coach's understanding of me	100	2.97	0.17

Note. Scores were measured on a 3-point Likert scale where 3 indicates the highest level of agreement

3.2 Between-Group Differences in Perception

To investigate differences in perception among demographic subgroups, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted.

3.2.1 Gender and Playing Position

The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in perceptions based on either gender or playing position. For all eight measured variables, p-values were substantially greater than the .05 alpha level, and effect sizes (η^2) were negligible. This demonstrates that performance profiling's perceived utility is broadly applicable across diverse roles and identities within a single elite team environment.

3.2.2 Age Group: While perceptions were largely consistent across age groups, a statistically significant difference was found for the Motivation & Confidence construct, $F(3, 96) = 3.710$, $p = .014$, with age accounting for 10.4% of the variance ($\eta^2 = .104$). Post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD indicated that athletes in the 35+ age group reported significantly lower mean scores (M = 2.80) compared to the 17-22 (M = 2.97), 23-28 (M = 2.98), and 29-34 (M = 2.98) age groups.

3.2.3 Playing Level: The most pronounced differences emerged when comparing athletes by playing level (Elite, Club, University). While perceptions were consistent for several variables, statistically significant differences were found in three key areas, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Significant One-Way ANOVA Results for Perceptions by Playing Level

Construct / Item	F-statistic	df	p-value (Sig.)	Eta Squared (η^2)
Goal Setting	4.187	2,97	.018*	0.079
To take more control of my development	3.44	2,97	.036*	0.066
To improve the coach's understanding of me	3.412	2,97	.037*	0.066

*Note. p<.05**

Post-hoc comparisons revealed that Elite players reported significantly higher than Club-level players for the Goal Setting construct ($p = .018$) and significantly higher than University-level players for "To take more control of my development" ($p = .036$). For "To improve the coach's understanding of me" ($p = .037$), a trend was observed where Elite and University players rated this benefit higher than Club players. Collectively, these findings suggest that while the tool has broad appeal, its capacity to enhance goal-setting and autonomy is perceived most acutely by athletes competing at the elite level.

3.3 Qualitative Themes

The strong quantitative findings were echoed and elaborated upon in the qualitative feedback from players. Three central themes emerged regarding the utility of the performance profiling process.

Theme 1: Fostering Clarity and Tangibility

Players described externalizing their thoughts as a powerful, clarifying process that translated diffuse performance feelings into an explicit, visual representation 15. This resonates with the core premise of PP, where the athlete's constructs are rendered in a concrete profile that can guide action 15. As one elite player stated:

> *"It was the first time I actually put my thoughts on paper. It made everything clear and gave me something concrete to work on with the coach."*

Theme 2: Enhancing Ownership and Autonomy

A second recurring theme concerned the athlete-led nature of PP, which players highlighted as empowering and autonomy-supportive. By defining constructs and completing the self-assessment, players perceived greater control over their developmental path. A university player captured this sentiment:

> *"I feel like I have more control now. I understand my own game better instead of just being told what to do. This is my plan."*

Theme 3: Providing a Foundation for Productive Dialogue

Finally, the completed profile served as an objective, shared document that anchored coach-athlete conversations in the athlete's own perceptions, reducing ambiguity and enabling more precise discussion points. This aligns with literature describing profiling as a mechanism to facilitate open communication and collaborative goal-setting. A club player shared:

> *"Before, the coach might say 'work on your defence,' which is too big. Now, we can look at the profile and see it's about my '1-on-1 tackle accuracy' specifically. It makes our conversations much more productive."*

Both the quantitative and qualitative results converge to indicate that performance profiling was perceived not just as an assessment, but as a valuable developmental intervention that enhanced motivation, self-awareness, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

4. Discussion

4.1 Overview: A Strong Cross-Cultural Endorsement for Performance Profiling

The primary finding of this study is that performance profiling, a tool developed in a Western psychological tradition, is perceived as a highly positive and valuable intervention within the distinct cultural context of Fijian rugby. This provides strong converging evidence for the tool's cross-cultural applicability. The overwhelmingly positive reception, with 97% of athletes rating the session as "Very useful," aligns with foundational research by Butler and Hardy (1992) and subsequent work by Weston *et al.* (2011) [5, 19], but extends these findings by validating the tool's utility in an under-researched, non-Western, high-performance population (Sparkes, 2015) [17]. These findings corroborate the cross-cultural viability of PP's core mechanisms, an athlete-led construction of performance attributes, self-rating, and gap-analysis as a basis for personalized development and enhanced engagement with coaching processes (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009) [7, 10].

4.2 Interpreting the Overwhelmingly Positive Reception

The strong endorsement of performance profiling is explained by the powerful convergence of the quantitative and qualitative data. The near-ceiling scores on the APPQ constructs are brought to life by the three qualitative themes, which illuminate why the tool was so effective.

The highest-rated standalone item, "To improve the coach's understanding of me" (M = 2.97), directly reflects the qualitative theme of "Providing a Foundation for Productive Dialogue." Athletes did not see the profile as a one-way assessment, but as a shared artifact that could make their subjective experiences legible to coaches, thereby transforming ambiguous feedback into precise, actionable conversations (Doyle & Parfitt, 1997) [9]. The completed profile functioned as a shared, objective reference that anchored coach-athlete conversations in the athlete's perceptions, thereby reducing ambiguity and enabling more precise feedback. This supports the literature documenting profiling as a mechanism to facilitate open communication and collaborative goal setting within teams (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Sparkes, 2015) [7, 10, 17].

For the theme of "Enhancing Ownership and Autonomy", the athlete-led construction and self-rating process fostered perceived autonomy and control over development, consistent with Personal Construct Theory (PCT) and Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) that underpin PP's motivational impact. This is reflected in high mean endorsements for "To take more control of my development" and for the overall "Motivation & Confidence" construct (M ≈ 2.95-2.96) (Johnson & Bird, 2022) [12], with the qualitative testimonial illustrating empowerment and enhanced self-understanding as drivers of engagement.

Finally, the theme of "Fostering Clarity and Tangibility" underpins the entire process. The act of putting thoughts on paper, as one athlete described it, serves as the mechanism through which abstract feelings about performance are translated into a concrete plan, providing the foundation for goal-setting, ownership, and dialogue. Externalizing internal performance cues into a tangible profile helped athletes convert diffuse performance perceptions into explicit targets. This aligns with PP's central premise that presenting an athlete's self-constructed constructs as a profile creates a clear pathway to development and actionable planning with the coach (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Dale & Wrisberg, 1996) [5, 7].

Synthesis with theory and prior research suggests that PP's effectiveness in this context stems from the same foundational processes that have been demonstrated in prior literature: athlete ownership of a self-defined performance profile (PCT), autonomous engagement with development (CET), and structured, task-relevant dialogue with coaches (team-context profiling) (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Doyle & Parfitt, 1997; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Sparkes, 2015) [5, 9, 10, 17]. The cross-cultural replication in Fiji extends these mechanisms to a Pacific Island setting, reinforcing the generalizability of PP's core principles across cultural contexts, while highlighting context-specific pathways through which PP operates in team sport settings (Li *et al.*, 2020; Moran *et al.*, 2011) [15, 16].

4.3 Understanding Differences by Age and Playing Level

Athletes aged 35+ reported significantly lower Motivation & Confidence scores than younger cohorts. This pattern likely reflects differences in motivational dynamics linked to career stage and established athletic identity, rather than a diminished value of PP itself. The finding aligns with CET's emphasis on context and individual history shaping motivational outcomes, suggesting older athletes may rely less on external motivational boosts and more on continued developmental relevance or intrinsic meaning from profiling (Johnson & Bird, 2022) [12]. Differences by playing level were most evident for Goal Setting and self-directed development. Elite players reported higher perceived utility for Goal Setting and for taking control of development than their Club or University peers, consistent with the demands of high-performance environments where athlete-led strategic planning is central to success. This pattern echoes theory and prior work noting that the highest-performing athletes often derive the greatest practical benefit from profiling when integrated within structured development ecosystems that translate athlete-defined profiles into ongoing, sophisticated development actions (Butler, 1991; Sparkes, 2015) [3, 17].

Together, these patterns imply that PP's perceived utility is robust across groups but that its functional emphasis may shift with age, experience, and competition level. Practically, this suggests tailoring PP implementations to align with athletes' developmental stage and competitive context to maximize motivational and strategic benefits.

4.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings bolster the theoretical foundations of PP in terms of Personal Construct Theory (athlete-driven construction) and Cognitive Evaluation Theory (autonomy and competence fueling intrinsic motivation). The athlete-led profile creation and subsequent self-rating appear to satisfy fundamental psychological needs, thereby supporting sustained engagement with development processes and enhancing motivation to improve (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Johnson & Bird, 2021) [5, 12].

PP functions as a cultural and communicative bridge in diverse team environments. In hierarchical or multicultural settings, profiling can democratize the development conversation by providing a concrete, athlete-centered artifact that grounds feedback in the athlete's perspective, enabling clearer role clarity and more collaborative goal setting. This aligns with prior demonstrations that profiling enhances coach-athlete dialogue and development planning in team contexts (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Weston *et al.*, 2011), and extends these implications to cross-cultural elite sport contexts, including Pacific Island populations (Sparkes, 2015) [7, 10, 17, 19].

4.5 Limitations and Future Directions

Contextual scope: The study focuses on a single Pacific Island team, which, while providing rich cultural insights, may limit generalizability to other sports, regions, or cultural settings without adaptation. Replication with broader samples across cultures, genders, and competition levels is warranted to test generalizability and identify culture- or sport-specific tailoring needs (Li *et al.*, 2020; Moran *et al.*, 2011; Sparkes, 2015) [15, 16, 17].

Methodological considerations: Given the cross-sectional design, causal inferences about PP's impact on motivation, goal attainment, and performance should be approached with caution. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish sustained developmental and performance outcomes linked to profiling, as well as potential moderators (age, level, culture) that shape responsiveness to PP (Li *et al.*, 2020; Moran *et al.*, 2011) [15, 16].

Moderation and boundary conditions: Future work should explicitly test age- and level-based moderation effects and explore how profiling interacts with other motivational supports or coaching strategies to sustain engagement across career stages and cultural contexts (Sparkes, 2015) [17].

5. Conclusion

This study provides compelling mixed-methods evidence that performance profiling is a highly effective and well-received developmental intervention among Fiji Rugby Sevens players. It functions not merely as an assessment but as an integrated tool that enhances clarity, fosters ownership, and strengthens coach-athlete dialogue. By validating its utility in a non-Western context and identifying key differences in perception based on age and experience, this research confirms the cross-cultural applicability of performance profiling and offers actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to build athlete-centered, high-performance programs. Ultimately, the findings position performance profiling not merely as a psychological tool, but as a vital cultural instrument for fostering dialogue and shared ownership in diverse elite sporting environments.

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