On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between Coaches and Athletes

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1 **On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between**

2 **Coaches and Athletes**

3   Conflict is a part of coach-athlete relationships and should be carefully

4   considered as it can have effects on the quality of coaching and the level of

5   performance. Despite its practical relevance, there is a dearth of research

6   around coach-athlete conflict. Therefore, the current study aimed to

7   explore the characteristics and topics of conflict, as well as coaches and

8   athletes' emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences during conflict.

9   A total of 22 independent coaches and athletes participated in semi-

10   structured interviews evolving around the nature of interpersonal conflict.

11   After all interviews were transcribed, a deductive-inductive content

12   analysis was conducted. This was guided by the interview schedule as well

13   as the by the conceptual framework of conflict in sport relationships

14   (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017). Data were divided into five main

15   categories: Conflict characteristics and conflict topics, as well as conflict

16   cognitions, emotions, and behaviours. Findings highlighted the variety of

17   ways in which participants understood and interpreted interpersonal

18   conflict and how their impressions of conflict influenced its evolving

19   process. Considering the participants' cognitive, emotional and

20   behavioural expressions of conflict, it became apparent that conflict can be

21   described through uncertain, escalating and problem-orientated responses.

22   Practical applications concerning (mal-) adaptive responses to conflict are

23   discussed. (199/200)

24   Keywords: coach-athlete relationship, disagreement, communication

25 **Introduction**

26 The coach-athlete relationship is thought to be at the "heart of coaching" (Jowett

27 & Shanmugam, 2016). Previous research has mainly addressed the benefits of

28 positive, harmonious and stable coach-athlete partnerships that promote

29 performances in training and competition (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006;

30 Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002), and enhance athletes' confidence,

31 motivation, and well-being (e.g., Adie & Jowett, 2010; Davis & Jowett, 2014;

32 Jowett, 2008). While this research collectively suggests that high quality

33 relationships are associated with positive outcomes, limited research has explored

34 the consequences of less functional coach-athlete relationships marked with

35 conflict and dispute (e.g., Jowett, 2003).

36   While there is evidence to suggest that negative coaching, including

37 controlling, intimidating, and degrading behaviours, leads to low athlete

38 satisfaction, sport commitment, performance and mental health (e.g.,

39 Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thorgerson-Ntoumani, 2009; Gearity & Murray,

40 2011; Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Shanmugam, Jowett, & Meyer, 2014), there

41 is also evidence to suggest that conflict increases within coach-athlete

42 relationships that lack respect, trust, commitment and co-operation (Jowett, 2003,

43 2009). Previous findings suggest that conflict within coach-athlete dyads may be

44 promoted by relationship factors, such as insufficient communication, poor

45 leadership or unequal power distributions (e.g., Greenleaf, Gould, & Diefenbach,

46 2001; Jowett, 2003; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). Conflict experienced in coach-

47 athlete dyads often seems to reflect divergent expectations and a general

48 breakdown of exchanges, leading to negative responses such as decreased

49 satisfaction, motivation and relationship effectiveness (e.g., Jowett, 2003; Jowett

50 & Carpenter, 2015). Such findings are consistent with Mellalieu, Shearer, and

51 Shearer's (2013) research which assessed determinants, nature and outcomes of

52 interpersonal conflict during major sport competitions. Results indicated that

53 conflict occurred due to communication breakdowns or power struggles and led to

54 positive, neutral and negative consequences in terms of emotions, cognition, and

55 performance.

56   Although only few studies touch upon the construct of interpersonal

57 conflict in sport, a handful of studies have been carried out focusing on intra-

58 group conflict (e.g., Leo, Gonzalez-Ponce, Sanchez-Miguel, Ivarsson, & Garcia-

59 Calvo, 2015; Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Partridge & Knapp, 2016). In line

60 with Mellalieu et al. (2013) and the general conflict literature (e.g., Barki &

61 Hartwick, 2004), these studies describe intra-team conflict by negative emotions

62 (e.g., frustration, anger), thoughts (e.g., blame, disagreement) and behaviours

63 (e.g., screaming, ignoring). Intra-team conflict has, moreover, been divided into

64 task and social conflict (e.g., Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Paradis et al.,

65 2014a). While task conflict usually concerns aspects of the sport including

66 performance, social conflict refers to relational issues, such as mutual dislike or

67 clashing personalities, and was found to be particularly dysfunctional for

68 relationships (Jehn, 1997).

69   Following a review of the literature, Wachsmuth, Jowett, and Harwood

70 (2017) define interpersonal conflict in sport as "a situation in which relationship

71 partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or

72 objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural

73 reactions" (p. 88). This definition is accompanied by a conceptual framework of

74 interpersonal conflict in sport (see Figure 1). The framework displays conflict as a

75 dynamic process, whereby external, intra- and interpersonal determinants, as well

76 as conflict prevention strategies determine the onset and define the nature of

77 conflict. The nature of conflict, specifically, is described in terms of its content

78 (e.g., sport performance) and characteristics (e.g., intensity, duration), as well as

79 conflict parties' (e.g., coaches and athletes) emotional, cognitive and behavioural

80 experiences during conflict episodes. According to the framework, it is also

81   proposed that the nature of conflict and conflict management attempts directly

82   predict the conflict outcomes (e.g., performance, relationship, wellbeing). This

83   theoretically driven conceptualization of interpersonal conflict in sports was put

84   forward with the intent to provide the impetus necessary to stimulate research into

85   this unexplored area within sport (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). While there is limited

86   evidence on the determinants and outcomes of conflict (e.g., Mellalieu et al.,

87   2013), empirical information about the nature of interpersonal conflict in sport

88   barely exists. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the nature of

89   coach-athlete conflict by exploring the following research questions: 1) What are

90   the characteristics and topics of coach-athlete conflict?, and 2) What are the

91   cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes experienced during conflict?
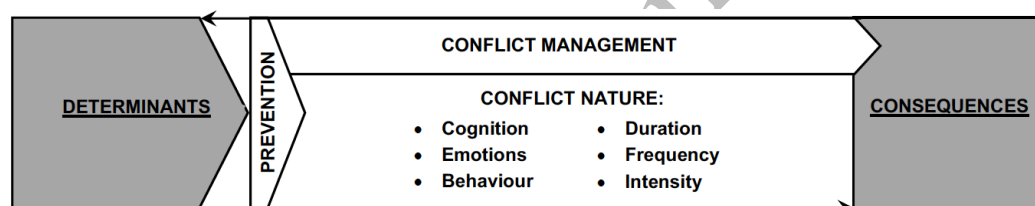
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93   *Figure 1*. Conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships,
94   adapted from Wachsmuth et al., 2017

95   **Method**

96   *Participants*

97   A total of 22 coaches and athletes participated in the study based on the following

98   criteria: a) participants had to be at least 18 years of age, b) they previously

99   experienced conflict in coach-athlete relationships, and c) they participated at a

100   national performance level or higher. Data saturation was reached after eleven

101   coaches (9 male, 2 female) and eleven athletes (4 male, 7 female) were

102   interviewed (see Table 1). All individuals lived in the UK and were fluent English

103   speakers; three participants originated from Canada, Romania, and Slovenia.

104   *Table 1*. Participants demographics

	Coaches		Athletes	
	National	*Internat.****	*National*	*Internat.*****
Individual*	0	3	4	4
Team**	3	5	1	2
M_{age}	45.80 years (±10.81)		24.45 years (±3.31)	
$M_{experience}$	22.91 years (±12.95)		13.09 years (±6.19)	

105   *Notes:*
106   ** Individual sports: gymnastics, swimming, athletics, trampoline, canoeing;*
107   *** Team sports: rugby, cricket, volleyball, curling, netball & field hockey;*
108   ****Breakdown coaches: 8 at World Cup level of which 5 coached Para-/Olympic level athletes;*
109   ***** Breakdown athletes: 6 competed in international competitions (e.g., Nation Cups and*
110   *Commonwealth Games) of which 3 participated also at World Cup level*

111   **Data collection procedure**

112   Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers'

113   institution. Potential interviewees were then approached via a standardized email

114   informing them about the purpose of the study, requirements of participation and

115   ethical considerations. Meetings took place at a mutually convenient time and

116   location; participants were asked to give informed consent and made aware that

117   the interview was audio-recorded. Demographic data (e.g., age, gender, sport) was

118   accessed with a brief questionnaire. As this research forms part of a larger project,

119   in this manuscript only data focused on the characteristics, nature and content of

120   conflict are presented. Overall, the semi-structured interview contained 26

121   questions covering five areas: sport experience, the personal meaning of conflict,

122   specific experiences of conflict, determining factors, and consequences; eight of

123   the 26 questions were relevant for this manuscript.

124   At the start of the interview, coaches and athletes were encouraged to

125   share insights about their personal development within sports and experiences in

126   different coach-athlete relationships in order to build rapport with the interviewee.

127   They were further asked what conflict meant for them personally to establish a

128   shared understanding about the concept between researchers and participant (e.g.,

129   "What does coach-athlete conflict mean to you?"). Next, various topics of conflict

130   were explored, thus, stimulating participants' recall of multiple situations in which

131   they experienced conflict (e.g., "What is conflict with your coach/athlete

132   generally about?"). This was important as the following section focused on a

133   specific conflict event which the interviewee identified as significant and

134   described in rich detail (e.g., "Please think back to a situation in which you

135   experienced conflict with your coach/athlete, can you find a specific event that

136   you recall vividly? Tell me about it."; "What was the topic?"; "How did you

137   experience the conflict?"). Afterwards, participants were asked more specific

138   questions, for example, about the nature of conflict (e.g., "What are typical

139   behaviours you show during conflict?", "In your experience, what types of

140   conflict are more/less severe?") in which they could draw on various conflict

141   experiences. Finally, coaches and athletes were invited to share any other thoughts

142   on the topic. Overall, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for a

143   degree of flexibility (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014) enabling the researcher to

144   prompt the given information appropriately without interrupting the flow of the

145   conversation. When it became evident that data saturation was reached and no

146   new information emerged from the interviews, data collection was terminated

147   (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours 15

148   minutes ($M_{coaches}$ = 80.0 min; $M_{athletes}$ = 73.00 min) and added up to 888 pages of

149   double-spaced transcript, approximately 25% of the data was relevant to the

150   current study.

151   *Data analysis*

152   A "directed content analysis" approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was utilized to

153   examine all interviews individually, followed by a cross-case analysis of all

154   participants. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) a directed approach to

155   content analyses aims to "extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory"

156   (p. 1281). Such an approach aligns with the present study as it aimed to

157   corroborate and further extend the conceptual framework of conflict in sport

158   relationships (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). This framework provided a rudimentary

159   coding scheme for data analyses. Subsequently, the coding scheme included the

160   main categories: conflict characteristics and topics, as well as emotional, cognitive

161   and behavioural responses. Sub-categories were added inductively throughout the

162   analytical process (cf., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krane, Andersen, & Strean,

163   1997). A combination of a deductive and inductive analyses allowed the authors

164   to make sense of the participants' accounts by drawing parallels to existing

165   findings (e.g., Mellalieu et al., 2013) as well as by adding further insights and

166   details around the phenomenon under study.

167   The data analyses followed guidelines established in research (e.g., Hsieh

168   & Shannon, 2005). First, the principal researcher listened to and read all

169   interviews carefully to become fully familiar with the data. Second, relevant

170   extracts were identified and grouped according to the categories of the coding

171   scheme; this process has been called "deductive category application" (Mayring,

172   2000, cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Third, general categories were then

173   further divided into sub-categories to provide a more meaningful analysis of the

174   data (e.g., topics of conflict; valence of emotions; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

175   Fourth, the identified categories were mapped out to facilitate a deeper

176   understanding of the data, its meaning and interconnectedness (Coffey &

177   Atkinson, 1996). This final stage of sense making allowed the authors to draw

178   conclusions upon the underlying processes of interpersonal conflict in coach-

179   athlete dyads.

180   Tracey's (2010) criteria for excellent qualitative research (e.g., worthy

181   topic, rigour, credibility, ethics) were followed to ensure high quality standards of

182   the current study. Though limited space prevents an in-depth discussion of all

183   criteria, essential points referring to rich rigour and credibility are addressed.

184   Accordingly, an established stream of research into a) coach-athlete relationships

185   (e.g., Jowett, 2003, 2008, 2009) as well as b) interpersonal conflict (e.g., Barki &

186   Hartwick, 2004; Wachsmuth et al., 2017) provided the theoretical foundations for

187   the design of the current study. Additionally, data was collected from diverse

188   participants (e.g., coaches/athletes; team/individual sport) with experience in the

189   area of inquiry (i.e., conflict). Thus, the gathered data offered rich accounts on the

190   phenomenon under study which is reflected within the quotes provided in this

191   manuscript. Credibility of the data analysis was further facilitated by the

192   involvement of the co-authors who acted as critical peers by offering different

193   perspectives and challenging the explanations and perceptions of the first author.

194   Dissensions resulting from this process were resolved by critical discussion as

195   well as by consulting conflict literature outside of sport (e.g., Fincham, Bradbury,

196   & Grych, 1990; Sanford, 2012). Overall, the current research provides a

197   meaningful contribution to the literature by forwarding a detailed understanding

198   of coach-athlete conflict with significant practical implications.

199   **Results**

200   Data were divided into the five main categories (Figure 2) describing the nature of

201   conflict by its *characteristics* and content (*topics*), as well as by *cognitive,*

202   *emotional* and *behavioural* aspects that were linked to the process of conflict.

203   Findings are illustrated using codes with examples as well as descriptive evidence

204   as it has been recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005).
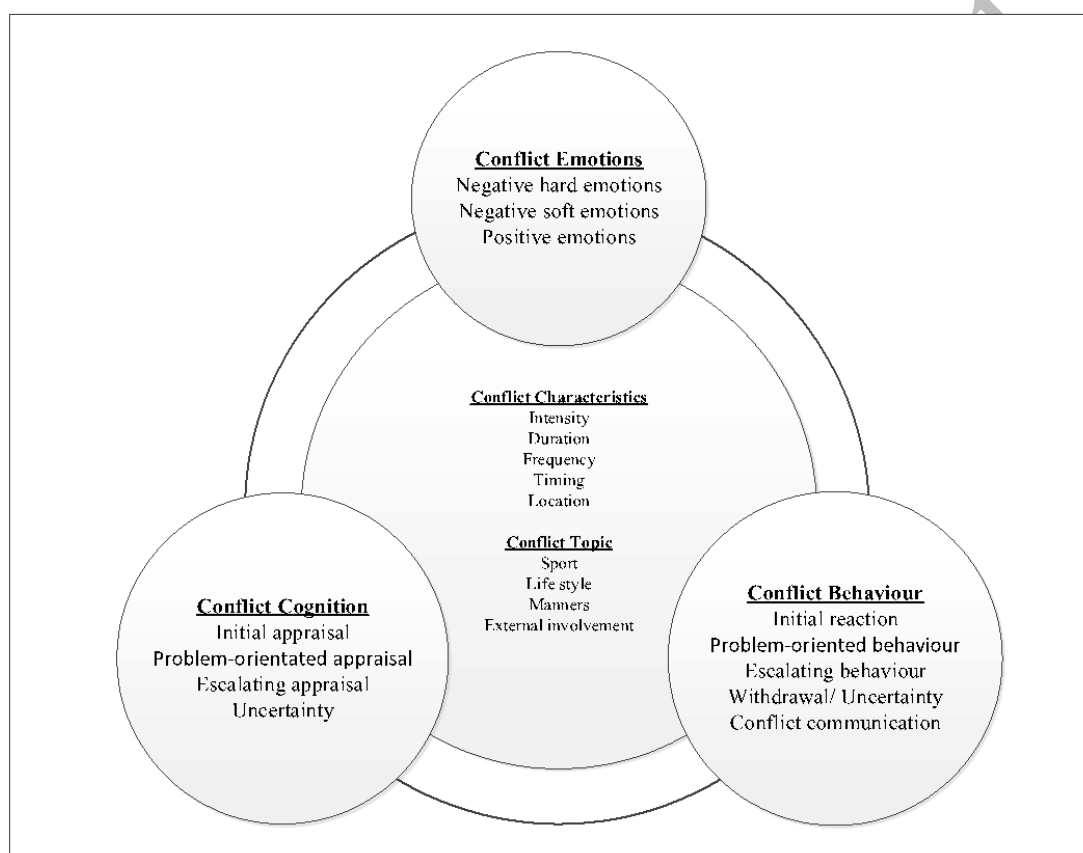
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207   *Figure 2*: The categories and sub-categories describing the nature of conflict in
208   coach-athlete relationships.

209   ***Conflict characteristics***

210   Participants described that interpersonal conflict ranged from mild to severe

211   (*intensity*), from lasting a short while (minutes) to long-term and ongoing

212   (months, years; *duration*), and from occurring barely ever to nearly every day

213 (*frequency;* all deductive). Athlete 1 noticed that "most of [conflict] comes in the

214 build-up, in practice, cause you spend 95% of your time training with your coach

215 and there is just that 5% in the competition." However, both coaches and athletes,

216 felt that conflict was likely to occur after competitions, especially when

217 expectations were not met. Further, conflicts occurred at all times of the season

218 (*timing*) and seemed to take place in various *locations* (both inductive), for

219 example, training grounds, the competition venue, in meetings, equipment rooms

220 and even in public (e.g., car park). Athlete 8 reported that conflict took place via

221 phone and email. Lastly, participants described the succession of events over time

222 leading to conflict onset, escalation and/or management:

223   It was alright to start with, then it got terrible, to the point where we barely
224   talked. I just decided to not work with that coach anymore, and we didn't
225   really formally say anything, I just started working on my own. (A9)

226 ***Conflict topics***

227 Participants perceived some conflicts as trivial (e.g., time management) and others

228 as crucial (e.g., injury) for the coach-athlete relationship, and as such directly

229 linked the conflict topic to its severity and process. Four different sub-categories

230 of conflict topics emerged inductively from the participants' reports: the majority

231 of conflicts concerned *sport-* and *lifestyle-related* topics, whereas some conflicts

232 related to individuals' *misconduct* and the *involvement of external parties*.

233   *Sport-related* conflict topics were perceived to be directly linked to either,

234 performance in practice or competition and included feedback, training schedules/

235 goals and load, injuries, individual ambitions, team selection and performance.

236 Also, role expectations and their fulfilment were a topic of concern:

237   Communication was a big one […] if I text the coach, I expect a reply and if

238   I don't get a reply, that's a massive problem. [...] if people were dropped

239   from a game if that's not communicated […] if people are not working hard

240   in training or in matches and it's not picked up on, there's no point. (A4)

241 Further, *lifestyle-related* topics were recognized as a significant area of conflict

242 between coaches and athletes. They concerned behaviours manifested outside the

243 sport environment, however, they were thought to impact performance. On one

244 hand, athlete behaviours included poor nutrition, alcohol consumption or public

245 misbehaviour, and on the other hand coach behaviours included over-involvement

246 with private decisions (e.g., university, work). For example. Athlete 2 reported:

247   [Coach] tries to take [private life] away from me, makes it part of our

248   relationship when it should be outside, work is something different to

249   [sport], family, friends, but then [coach] almost tries to incooperate it.

250 Additionally, conflict arose as a result of *misconduct*; behaviours that were

251 perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate included, for example, being late,

252 physical aggression and "if people were lying" (C2), or "clashed with [each

253 other's] core values" (C6), as well as behaviours that targeted the other conflict

254 party on a personal level. Sometimes these conflicts arose out of unresolved sport-

255 related disagreements, thus, Coach 7 explained a sport- and lifestyle-related

256 conflict which escalated over time due to an athlete's misconduct:

257   I said to him "You know, you blatantly lied to me, you told me you've done

258   it running and you haven't done it running" you know, "We talked about

259   your behaviours and your conduct and whether they were appropriate for

260   what you are trying to achieve and you then were still going out and getting

261   drunk and this resulted in you doing this [injury]. I gonna make a

262   recommendation that you are taken off the programme."

263

264 Lastly, some participants mentioned conflict could occur due to the involvement

265 of third parties, such as NGBs, other coaches or life partners as reported by Coach

266 10 who described a dispute being "about potential external influences from a life

267 partner." Additionally, coach 5 pointed towards conflicts arising due to other

268 clubs trying to poach players stating that:

269   The guys are aspiring to play premiership rugby, so they get like drawn on

270   by these clubs, and sudden like a drop form the heart, they are like "I can't

271   make training tonight, I'm training with [club]" and "How long have you

272   known? We wanna help you with this, but you just ditched us within a drop

273   of the heart" [...] external factors like that - it's like anything in the world, the

274   packing order, the above us they click their fingers and these guys go ...

275 ***Conflict cognition***

276 Conflict *cognition* represents thought processes that occur during conflict and are

277 linked to evaluations of the conflict situations. They may lead to conflict

278 escalation or facilitate an initiation of conflict management. It is conflict cognition

279 that captures thoughts that promote and hinder conflict management; all sub-

280 categories are a result of inductive data analyses.

281   Participants described how *initial appraisal* of the situation left them often

282 uncertain about the implications of a conflict event, doubting "What can I do?"

283 (A10), thinking negatively of the other, helpless, insecure or worried. For

284 instance, Coach 6 wondered "Did she use me to get here?"

285   During this evaluation process individuals ascribed the conflict experience

286 to a specific source (*attribution*). Thus, conflict was either attributed internally to

287 oneself (e.g., admitting a mistake), to the conflict partner (e.g., blaming) or both,

288 as well as to external circumstances (e.g., stress due to an upcoming competition

289 or travelling). The initial attribution often differed from an attribution made at a

290   later point of time during conflict. For example, Coach 6 described a specific

291   conflict with an athlete, she initially reasoned that the difficulties they had were

292   due to mental health issues, though subsequently she reasoned the lack of effort

293   was at the heart of the problems they had. The coach said "I thought it's because

294   of [athlete] learning behaviours and learning difficulties, and you really got to

295   help the best in that, but actually they're [expected characteristics] not there."

296   Following this first appraisal of the conflict, participants explained on how

297   this preliminary reflection influenced their behaviour. For example, a negative

298   evaluation of the situation often seemed to lead to further conflict escalating

299   behaviours and ineffective communication strategies. In turn, a conflict *escalating*

300   *appraisal* was linked to disbelief, a perception of unfair treatment, "personal

301   attack" (C6), or blaming the other conflict party for the conflict:

302   I felt like he'd been unfair cause we had no idea what was going on, but
303   he obviously, he did feel, like I can understand why he'd be annoyed if he
304   thought that other people had heard because he'd see that as undermining
305   him which is fair enough. (A6)

306   *Uncertainty*, on the other hand, was linked to withdrawal behaviours and was

307   experienced by most athletes as worry and doubt about oneself, the other and/or

308   the relationship; Athlete 5 described "I always felt not important enough, like

309   'you are not good enough for me to be seen with you." Similarly, few coaches

310   contemplated their influence upon the individual or even team, like Coach 4 who

311   said "I thought a few weeks ago that potentially I had lost the changing room and

312   when you lose the changing room it's not a pleasant environment." Lastly, a

313   constructive *problem-orientated appraisal*, emphasized especially by coaches,

314   was associated with an attempt to minimize conflict, and included thought

315   processes such as considering the importance of the topic, prioritizing goals as

316 well as taking the conflict partners' perspective or being concerned about the

317 other's feelings. For example, coach 5 expressed empathy for an athlete thinking

318 that "he is just angry and quite upset [...] because it's a big deal for this guy, he's

319 missing out and lashing out, it's the final."

320 *Conflict emotion*

321 Conflict emotion describes affective responses that individuals experience during

322 interpersonal conflict. Emotions were linked to conscious and subconscious

323 cognitive processes and served as a barometer to conflict escalation. Guided by

324 the data it was noticeable that these conflict-related emotions were distinguished

325 in three categories: *negative hard emotions*, *negative soft emotions* and *positive*

326 *emotions* (inductive; see Sanford, 2012). Participants referred to different

327 emotional experiences during conflict. Negative emotions seemed to range from

328 hard, associated with power and selfishness (e.g., "I was quite annoyed, I was a

329 bit boiling" - C2), to soft emotions, associated with pro-social orientations and

330 vulnerability (e.g., "I was just more gutted for him" – C4). Overall, the negative

331 emotions experienced during conflict varied from strong, acute feelings (e.g.,

332 anger, panic) to ongoing frustration, resentment and worry. Especially, athletes

333 mentioned how they became nervous or anxious in interpersonal exchanges with

334 the coach in practice session and/or in meetings. Moreover, participants frequently

335 reported feelings of regret as a consequence of conflict. Coach 7, for example,

336 described that the athlete "was very remorseful and recognized that [he] failed me

337 as well as failing themselves."

338 Some positive emotions were also experienced with conflict situations.

339 While some coaches felt calm and collected, like Coach 9 who stated "I was quiet,

340 I was in control, quite calm, quite okay.", athletes reported feeling relieved and

341 reassured. Athlete 3 said "I saw it coming for quite a while, so it was quite a

342 release for me.", and Athlete 6 perceived conflict as a chance to overcome

343 communication barriers stating that "it was kinda relief in a way that there is some

344 form of ice broken and we could then just discuss it."

345 *Conflict behaviour*

346 The experienced emotions and cognitions were often accompanied by conflict

347 behaviours displaying either *uncertainty*, *escalation*, or *problem-orientation*.

348 These were mainly expressed through active *communication* processes between

349 coaches and athletes during the time of conflict (all inductive). What seemed to

350 make a difference in the development of conflict was not the one person who

351 initiated it, but *how* the other person responded.

352 Thus, participants reported behaviours that prevented conflict from

353 escalating by actively approaching the problem (*problem-orientation*). For

354 example, Coach 1 reported "I asked her to explain what she meant with

355 inconsistencies, and I tried to explain to her that this was my thought process and

356 she was absolutely entitled to disagree." It was evident from the interviews that

357 coaches tended to react in a more controlled manner and either stepped away from

358 the problem or facilitated rational thinking in the early stages.

359 In contrast, athletes' reactions could be described as more negative and

360 less adaptive or skilful; behaviours included crying, refusing to talk, making

361 irrational excuses, shouting, answering back or not adhering to instructions.

362 Athlete 9 said "I would just say 'Okay' and do my own thing, avoid doing that

363 thing […] or I wouldn't do it to my full ability." However, there were also times in

364 which coaches employed less then desirable behaviours by shouting at their

365 athletes or using inappropriate language. Such *escalating behaviours* mentioned

366 by participants also included swearing, ignoring the other, involving third parties,

367 not taking responsibility or being unwilling during conflict management. Other

368 escalating behaviours related to the *communication* style between coaches and

369 athletes during conflict: rhetorical questions, a harsh tone, loud voice, and giving

370 an opinion in a firm or confident manner and standing up for one's point of view:

371 You're more heated so you're more likely to just say something that, when
372 you are thinking rationally, you'd be like "Bit risky to say that", whereas
373 when you're upset about something you'd say more because it's almost like
374 "Oh they said it because they're upset", so it's easier. (A6)

375 Other examples of less than optimal behaviours related to one's experience of

376 *uncertainty* included athletes deciding to neither engage in nor trying to solve the

377 problem, but instead withdrawing from the situation. Thus, a common strategy

378 among them was to not address the problem, especially if they could not envisage

379 a solution. For instance, Athlete 2 explained that their coach "is a very intelligent

380 man and whatever you said [coach] would have a comeback for it, so it's just not

381 worth it." These behaviours of uncertainty that contained an element of

382 resignation, insecurity or vulnerability seemed to worsen conflict, especially

383 during a long-lasting conflict. Coach 4 reported "I didn't answer questions well, I

384 felt like I was on the back foot, really the baddest of feelings […] I didn't have an

385 answer for him."

386 **Discussion**

387 Guided by the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships

388 (Wachsmuth et al., 2017) the current study aimed at understanding the nature of

389 coach-athlete conflict. In line with Wachsmuth et al. (2017), the qualitative data

390 revealed that when the *topic* of conflict was considered to be significant and the

391   relationship partner was identified as the source of interference or disagreement,

392   coaches and athletes were likely to manifest *cognitive* (e.g., blame), *emotional*

393   (e.g., anger) and *behavioural* (e.g., shouting) conflict responses which influenced

394   the *characteristics* of conflict. These findings are consistent with the multi-

395   dimensional nature of conflict reported in the literature (Barki & Hartwick, 2004;

396   Paradis et al., 2014a, 2014b; Wachsmuth et al., 2017).

397   *Conflict topic and characteristics*

398   Participants highlighted that the topic of conflict influenced the conflict processes

399   as reflected in the behavioural, emotional and cognitive responses which in turn

400   seemed to be linked to conflict characteristics such as intensity and/or duration. It

401   was reported that deeply rooted or external conflicts (e.g., influence of life

402   partner) intensified the situation and were harder to resolve than internal conflicts

403   (e.g., training load). Four main topics emerged from the participants' reports and

404   included sport- and lifestyle-related topics as well as one's misconduct or

405   manners, and involvement of third parties. Considering the dichotomy provided

406   by Barki and Hartwick (2004), sport- and lifestyle-related topics mainly reflected

407   task conflicts, whereas ones' misconduct and manners reflected social conflicts.

408   Consistent with research in both social and sport psychology (e.g., Amason, 1996;

409   de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jowett, 2003), the current findings indicate that it

410   was common for task and social conflicts to co-occur and/or merge. Overall,

411   coaches and athletes referred more often to task conflicts than to social conflicts,

412   which contradicts with the findings of Holt and colleagues' who reported a higher

413   number of social conflicts within female sport teams (Holt et al., 2012).

414   Considering that coach-athlete relationships are task purposeful (Jowett &

415   Shanmugam, 2016) and so coaches and athletes strive for performance

416   achievements often agreed and understood by both, this finding is not too

417   surprising. Besides, females operating in team sports emphasize the importance of

418   strong personal relationships and thus may create an environment in which social

419   conflicts are likely to erupt (Eys et al., 2015). Our study, however, did not

420   specifically examine gender differences.

421   Lastly, the setting and time in which conflict arises should be taken into

422   account. In contrast to Mellalieu et al. (2013) the current findings indicate that the

423   majority of conflict took place within training or individual meetings rather than

424   during competition or within social settings. Additionally, it seemed that the time

425   of the season influenced the occurrence of conflict. However, more research is

426   needed which investigates the determinants and outcomes linked to particular

427   conflict characteristics.

428   ***Coaches and athletes' responses to conflict***

429   The current study further extents the existing work on conflict within sport

430   relationships, which often presented a positive-negative dichotomy of conflict

431   responses (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), by highlighting multiple levels in which

432   coaches and athletes processed conflict resulting in diverse behavioural options

433   during conflict episodes. An *initial appraisal* to the onset of conflict occurred

434   spontaneously and was based on identifying the event as significant (or not) to

435   themselves (cf. Fincham et al., 1990). Secondly, a more in-depth evaluation

436   followed leading either *escalating*, *uncertain* or *problem-oriented* conflict

437   responses. Accordingly, it emerged that attributions of accountability were linked

438   to behaviours and emotions experienced. For example, blaming the conflict

439   partner was part of an *escalating response* linked to negative hard emotions (e.g.,

440   feeling angry) and aggressive behaviours (e.g., yelling), which in turn intensified

441   and prolonged conflict (Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a; Patridge & Knapp,

442   2016). In addition, a perceived lack of control and influence (e.g., self-doubt) was

443   linked to withdrawal behaviours and negative soft emotions (e.g., disappointment,

444   worry), forming *uncertain responses* to conflict. In contrast to previous research

445   (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), some participants also referred to the experience of

446   positive emotions (e.g., relief) and attempted to approach the problem at both a

447   cognitive and behavioural level. This set of experiences and others alike seem to

448   encompass *problem-orientated responses* to conflict.

449   Overall, the three identified response patterns are in contrast to what

450   Partridge and Knapp (2016) describes as the manifestation of conflict. In their

451   study on peer conflict in adolescent sport the authors approach conflict through a

452   behavioural perspective highlighting victimization at the centre of conflict, while

453   not considering related emotional and cognitive processes in either victim or

454   perpetrator. Moreover, the representation of conflict as victimization rather aligns

455   with bullying or emotional abuse, which indeed may cause or accompany conflict,

456   but embody distinct concepts (Stirling, 2009). The findings of the current study,

457   however, indicate that conflict responses of emotions, thoughts and behaviours

458   appeared to be inextricably interlinked and so one dyad member's responses

459   fuelled another member's responses, reflecting high interdependency of conflict

460   partners and as such support the self-reinforcing feedback loop described by

461   Roberts (2006). In contrast to Roberts, however, this reciprocity seemed to occur

462   for both, dysfunctional as well as functional responses to conflict. Considering

463   that problem-oriented responses were primarily shown by coaches; this difference

464   may be explained by the hierarchical relationship and role expectations (Potrac &

465   Jones, 2009). However, there is more scope for research in this area.

466   *Future directions and conclusion*

467   This study represents the first systematic approach to examining interpersonal

468   conflict in the context of coach-athlete relationships. Even though initial results

469   shed light on the complexity of this line of inquiry, there is substantial need for

470   further investigations. Future research should, for example, advance conflict

471   knowledge by collecting data from entire coach-athlete dyads as there is initial

472   evidence within the current data suggesting that perceptions of specific conflict

473   events differ between them. Additionally, the gender composition, culture and

474   type of relationship (e.g., typical vs atypical; see Jowett & Meek, 2000) requires

475   further investigation. In future, different sample characteristics, such as length of

476   relationship, performance level, sport type or training set-ups (e.g., training

477   camps, training group) may also be worth investigating. The development of a

478   psychometric tool to measure the nature of conflict in coach-athlete relationship

479   may help generate knowledge about its antecedents and consequences employing

480   cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental research. Further work that

481   warrants attention may also target specific questions such as: Are frequent

482   conflicts detrimental to the partnership between coaches and athletes even if

483   resolved? How does conflict influence athletes and coaches' wellbeing?

484   In summary, interpersonal conflict presents researchers in sport with a

485   relatively new theoretical and empirical as well as measurement challenge.

486   Clearly there is ample scope to explore and thus discover. The present study

487   contributes to this new field of investigation by exploring nature and topics of

488   conflict. Several recommendations can be concluded that enable practitioners to

489   approach conflict constructively and as such enhance the effectiveness of coach-

490   athlete dyads. Conflict is inevitable in any kind of relationships, and thus it is

491   important to increase coaches and athletes' awareness and highlight that while

492   conflict can be detrimental, it may also be beneficial if it is approached in a

493   manner that is functional. It has been highlighted how conflict-related cognitions,

494   emotions, and behaviours manifest both separately and together over time and as

495   such influence the course of conflict. Thus, responding to conflicts with self-

496   doubt, insecurity and withdrawal (*uncertain response*), or even angry,

497   aggressively and self-centred (*escalating response*) may lead to an escalation of

498   conflict, whereas a more problem-oriented, caring approach connected with a

499   sense of calmness and relief potentially facilitates coping and conflict

500   management. Overall, the current study provides a first attempt to closely

501   investigate conflict between coaches and athletes within the context of their

502   dyadic relationships and paves the way for enhancing the body of research within

503   this field.

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