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# An exploration of reciprocity between female athletes and their coach in elite junior swimming: a shared reality theory perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the proposition that the relationship between a coach and athlete is at its best when both parties contribute to enhancing its quality, the present study sought to investigate if Shared Reality Theory could provide new insights on the topic. Specifically, the purpose of the present study was to explore: (a) how a shared reality is established, or fails to be established, over the course of the sporting partnership between athletes and their coach; and (b) how the presence of a shared reality (or not) in the coach-athlete relationship is related to the experienced quality of the relationship between athletes and their coach, as recorded over time. Narrative inquiry, embedded within a longitudinal qualitative approach, was adopted. Six female elite junior swimmers and their head coach completing three interviews each over a 9-month period. Data were analysed using narrative thematic analysis, leading to the development of two narratives: A prevention-oriented narrative and a promotion-oriented narrative. Overall, the findings suggests that athletes who experience a shared reality with their coach are more motivated and report a higher sense of psychological well-being. To establish the experience of a shared reality, reciprocal and honest communication motivated by trust in the other is needed. Due to power imbalance, it is deemed important for coaches to be supportive and trustworthy to encourage athletes to communicate with them, so the coach and his/her athletes can work together in a synergistic manner.

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Coach-athlete relationship; longitudinal qualitative research; narrative thematic analysis; reciprocity; shared reality theory

## Introduction

### *The coach-athlete relationship*

The coach-athlete relationship is an ongoing process (Jowett 2017b), which has been defined as ‘a situation in which a coach’s and an athlete’s cognitions, feelings, and behaviours are mutually and causally interrelated’ (Jowett and Poczwadowski 2007, p. 4). Given the interrelated nature of the coach-athlete relationship, it is perhaps unsurprising that numerous studies have shown that how the coach-athlete relationship functions affects both the coach (e.g., Solstad et al. 2018; Solstad, Van Høye, and Ommundsen 2015; Stebbings, Taylor, and Spray 2016) and the athlete (e.g., Isoard-

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Gautheur et al. 2016; Jowett et al. 2017; Stenling et al. 2017). Particularly, it is well-established that coaches' perceptions of their athletes' behaviours affect coaches' behaviours and vice versa (Jowett 2017b; Lorimer and Jowett 2013; Mageau and Vallerand 2003).

A challenge, however, is that studies have shown that coaches and athletes tend to differ in their perceptions of interpersonal coach behaviours (e.g., Gjesdal et al. 2019; Rocchi and Pelletier 2018), thus hindering the extent to which the coach-athlete relationship can achieve its potential (Jowett 2017b; Lorimer and Jowett 2013; Smoll and Smith 2020). Jowett (2017a) argued that a well-functioning coach-athlete relationship focuses on establishing a shared vision in which both the coach's and the athlete's skills, experiences, and interests are synergistically utilised. To establish such a relationship, the coach and athlete need not only regular, high quality communication (Davis, Jowett, and Tafvelin 2019), but also trust, good intentions, and a mutual, shared understanding that they are in it together (Jowett 2017a, 2017b; Jowett and Poczwadowski 2007; Lorimer and Jowett 2013).

In the field of sport psychology, several conceptual models have been used to gain a deeper understanding of how members in coach-athlete partnerships interact effectively and successfully (Lorimer and Jowett 2013; Mageau and Vallerand 2003; Smoll and Smith 2020). For instance, Jowett and colleagues have used the 3 + 1 Cs conceptual model to capture the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Overall, this research has shown that coaches' and athletes' knowledge of each other, through the theoretical constructs of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation, allow them to more easily 'read' and appropriately act and react to each other (Felton et al. 2021; Jowett 2017b; Yang and Jowett 2013). Indeed, Lorimer and Jowett (2013) highlighted that co-orientation incorporates the different interpersonal perspectives coaches and athletes are likely to take in perceiving the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, as well as considers the interplay of these interpersonal perspectives. Previous research has shown that similar meta-perceptions or judgements about the coach-athlete relationship is related to increased empathic accuracy, which, in turn, has been linked to higher levels of satisfaction (Lorimer and Jowett 2009a, 2009b).

Building on the aforementioned assumption regarding the importance of a shared understanding and co-orientation in the coach-athlete relationship, the present study set out to investigate if *Shared Reality Theory* (SRT; Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019) may advance the field of coach-athlete relationship research by helping to analyse and discuss the conditions under which shared realities are established (or fails to be established) within the coach-athlete relationship.

### **Shared reality theory**

Shared reality theory stipulates that to establish what is true about the world, human beings seek to establish a shared reality with significant others (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019). A shared reality implies that one experiences a commonality with others' inner states about a target referent in the world (Echterhoff, Tory Higgins, and Levine 2009). Additionally, humans want their life to be meaningful and moving in the right direction (Cornwell, Franks, and Higgins 2017). What makes a goal pursuit worthwhile and affirms that your life is going in the right direction is argued to be social verification (Cornwell, Franks, and Higgins 2017; Hardin and Higgins 1996). According to SRT, when a single individual has an assumption about something (e.g., youth athletic development), it is regarded merely as a subjective opinion. Conversely, when this assumption becomes shared by several others, it becomes regarded as objective (Hardin and Higgins 1996; Higgins 2019). In the complex world of athletic development, predictors of future athletic success are uncertain (Baker, Schorer, and Wattie 2018; Johnston et al. 2018) and each athlete's developmental path is unique and dynamic (Bergeron et al. 2015). Therefore, having a coach and an athlete experience a shared reality about their performance goals and training regime may make their joint strivings more worthwhile (Cornwell, Franks, and Higgins 2017).

According to Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine (2009), four conditions must be met for a shared reality to be established. The first condition is that shared reality involves a subjectively perceived

commonality of individuals' inner states, and not just overt behaviours. The term 'inner states' refers to beliefs, judgements, feelings, attitudes, or evaluations about a target referent. The second condition is that shared reality is always about a target referent. The target referent can be concrete or abstract, as long as it is a phenomenon that is experienced as being part of the world. The third condition is that the commonality of inner states must be appropriately motivated. That is, either relationally motivated (e.g., to feel connected to and have relationship with others), or epistemically motivated (e.g., search for meaning, truth, and understanding). The fourth condition is that shared reality involves the experience of a successful connection to other people's inner states. It is not sufficient that there exists a commonality between two people observable by a third person. The commonality must be subjectively experienced by one of the former two persons as being established (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009).

Several challenges exist regarding experiencing a shared reality. One is that due to earlier experiences and different personal characteristics, humans' instinctive inner states towards target referents are likely to differ from one another (Higgins 2019). One such difference is whether, due to earlier experiences, humans have become either predominately *promotion-oriented* or *prevention-oriented*. According to Higgins (2019, p. 118), a person may be 'concerned with advancing from the current state towards a better state,' which is labelled promotion-oriented or be 'concerned with maintaining a current satisfactory state against a worse state,' which is a prevention orientation.

This does not mean, however, that only promotion-oriented people set goals and seek improvement, rather it affects how the striving towards a goal is experienced (Higgins 2019). For those who are predominately promotion-oriented, a future end-state is viewed as something one *ideally* wants to achieve. Conversely, for those who are predominately prevention-oriented, a future end-state is viewed as something one *ought* to achieve (Higgins 1997, 2019). Thus, the feelings associated with a potential failure or success will also differ between people who are promotion- and prevention-oriented. Promotion-success would elicit feelings, such as happiness, eagerness, and enthusiasm, while promotion-failure would elicit feelings, such as sadness and discouragement. Conversely, prevention-success would elicit feelings, such as relief, peacefulness, and decrease in vigilance, while prevention-failure would elicit nervousness, worry, and increase in vigilance (Higgins 2019).

Applying this theoretical knowledge to a coach-athlete relationship, if the coach is predominately promotion-oriented and the athlete is predominately prevention-oriented, they are likely to have quite different inner states towards training and competitions, and there will be no shared reality regarding their achievement strivings (Higgins 2019). In such a situation, the coach, athlete, or both would experience what is called a regulatory nonfit (Higgins 2000, 2019). A regulatory nonfit stands in opposition to a regulatory fit, which is when an individual who is prevention-oriented acts or strives towards a goal in a vigilant way, or when an individual who is promotion-oriented acts or strives towards a goal in an eager way. A regulatory fit is to be preferred, as when there is a regulatory fit, the value of an activity will be intensified (Förster, Higgins, and Idson 1998); (Higgins 2000), (Higgins 2019); (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, and Higgins (2004)).

To establish a shared reality and a regulatory fit when there is none, communication is key (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009). Within the coach-athlete relationship, if athletes honestly communicate their needs and interests, the coach may change his/her attitude (and interpersonal behaviour) regarding the optimal training regime for these athletes (i.e., the target referent). However, for honest communication to occur with the goal of establishing a shared reality, the communicator-to-be needs to be appropriately motivated. That is, as mentioned, to be epistemologically or relationally motivated (Echterhoff, Tory Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019). In this regard, Echterhoff et al. (2009) found, to some surprise, that high-status and domain-specific expertise were not sufficient to motivate persons to establish a shared reality. Referring to Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953), Echterhoff et al. (2009) stated that 'a person who has high expert power or expertise does not need to be perceived as trustworthy' (Echterhoff et al. 2009, p. 151), and further, that 'trust is assumed to combine both epistemic and relational aspects' (Echterhoff et al.

2009, p. 151). Consequently, evidence seems to imply that to want to establish a shared reality with a person, one must trust this person (Higgins 2019; Simpson 2007).

In what has been termed a *strain test*, which is a situation where a person is 'highly outcome dependent and specific actions or decisions that would promote his or her own best interests are at odds with those that would maximally benefit the partner' (Simpson 2007, p. 589), if the other acts so to help the first, deprioritising his or her own interest, trust would increase even more (Simpson 2007). After the trust situation, behaviours are attributed. If the partner's intentions are positively attributed, trust and perceived security are likely to increase. In subsequent trust situations, the new level of trust and perceived security is likely to then influence the behaviours and attributions of the persons, making this a circular process continually affected by personal dispositions and earlier experiences of the persons involved (Simpson 2007).

### **The present study**

The purpose of the present study was to explore: (a) how a shared reality is established, or fails to be established, over the course of the sporting partnership between athletes and their coach; and (b) how experiencing a shared reality (or not) in the coach-athlete relationship is related to the experienced quality of the relationship athletes and their coach develop and maintain over the course of a 9-month period.

## **Method**

### **Paradigmatic position**

This study is positioned within an interpretivist research paradigm (Papathomas 2016; Smith and Sparkes 2009b; Smith 1984). The interpretivist paradigm is characterised by ontological relativism (Casey et al. 2018; Guba 1990; Papathomas 2016) and epistemological social constructionism (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018; Papathomas 2016; Smith and McGannon 2018). This paradigmatic positioning means that the current study does not claim to present *the truth or reality as it really is*, nor that its propositions are infallible (Smith and McGannon 2018; Sparkes and Smith 2009). Rather this study presents interpretations of subjective experiences, which is hoped will encourage reflection by the reader regarding their own practices or understanding (Riessman 2008; Smith and Sparkes 2009a, 2009b).

### **Methodology and study design**

The present study was conducted using narrative inquiry (Casey et al. 2018; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Riessman 2008; Smith 2016). Specifically, narrative inquiry was used as a means through which to understand, interpret, and investigate the participants' experience of the coach-athlete relationship, through the examination of participants' stories (Casey et al. 2018). Such an approach was deemed appropriate for examining the concept of shared reality from both athletes' and a coach's perspective for a number of reasons. Firstly, shared reality is about experiencing a commonality with other's inner states about a target referent (Echterhoff et al. 2009) and through examining coach and athletes' shared stories pertaining to certain event, insights into the similarities and differences of their experiences could be identified. Secondly, people's inner states are influenced by earlier experiences (Higgins 1997, 2019) and thus adopting a methodology that explicitly seeks to consider temporal and contextual influences (i.e., narrative; Smith 2016) on experiences was pertinent. Finally, for a shared reality to be established, one of the conditions that must be fulfilled is that a person must experience a successful connection to another person's inner states (Echterhoff et al. 2009). We believed that insights into the presence (or absence) of such connections would be apparent through participant stories.

Furthermore, a longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) design was used (Hermanowicz 2016; Yates 2003). That is, we collected data through individual semi-structured interviews at three time points with each participant over an extended period of time (9 months) to gain an in-depth understanding of the coach-athlete relationship, as it developed and unfolded over time. Specifically, in adopting a longitudinal perspective, we focused on understanding not only the developmental change that occurred within the coach-athlete relationship but also how both the coach's and the athletes' experiences of events and social situations were influenced by contextual changes and time (Calman, Brunton, and Molassiotis 2013; Hermanowicz 2016). Given that the coach-athlete relationship is a dynamic temporal process influenced by both intra- and interpersonal processes (Jowett 2017b; Jowett and Poczwadowski 2007), and the emphasis in SRT on individuals' past and ongoing present experiences (Echterhoff, Tory Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019), a LQR design was deemed appropriate.

### **The research team**

Given the interpretive perspective adopted within the present study and subsequently the recognised influence of the researchers on the data collection, analysis, and subsequent narratives presented, understanding the teams' backgrounds and experiences is important. The data collection and analysis were led, with guidance, by a postgraduate student, a former soccer player. Although new to qualitative research and SRT prior to the start of this study, throughout the planning and execution of the study he engaged in regular (at least weekly) research group meetings with other postgraduate students and academics involved in this study as well as related studies (i.e., also using SRT or a narrative approach). Through these meetings, the research group extensively read and discussed literature deemed relevant for the purpose of the study (e.g., coach-athlete relationships, SRT, foundations of interpersonal trust, narrative inquiry/analysis, longitudinal approaches). Moreover, the research team practiced data collection processes (i.e., conducting interviews, developing rapport) with each other prior to engaging in formal pilot interviews and subsequent data collection. This enhanced the researcher's familiarity and confidence with interviewing before the start of the study.

The lead author, who designed and subsequently supervised the study and manuscript write up, is an experienced researcher in the field of relationships, specifically those between coaches and athletes. The third, fourth, and last author, are all experienced qualitative researchers who took on the roles of critical friends and mentors during the research process. Specifically, they encouraged further examination and consideration of methodological decisions and process, as well as the interpretation of data and subsequent production of narratives.

### **Participants and context**

Due to the lack of females included within previous talent development/coach-athlete research (Clancy et al. 2016; Johnston et al. 2018), purposeful, criterion sampling (Patton 2015) was used to select six *female* elite junior swimmers ( $M$  age = 15.5) and their head coach from a high-performing swimming club in the southern part of Norway. All the athletes were ranked among the 20 best performing swimmers in Norway in their age group. On average, they had been engaged in organised swimming for 7,5 years ( $SD = 2.17$ ), trained about 20,67 hours a week ( $SD = 2.66$ ), and had the interviewed coach as their head coach for 1,71 years ( $SD = .75$ ). The male coach interviewed was the head coach for all the athletes and had been working as a swimming coach for 29 years. Between T1 and T2 one of the selected athletes changed swimming club, and another athlete decided to quit organised swimming. However, they were asked if they wanted to continue to partake in the study. Both said yes and were interviewed at T2 and T3.

In Norway, swimming is one of the most popular sports among children and adolescents. However, statistics in the annual report for 2019 on the status in the Norwegian Olympic and

Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports showed that 83% quit organised swimming in the transition between children (ages 6–12 years) and youth (13–19 years) sports. Hence, female athletes who are still practicing and competing in organised swimming when they are late-adolescent swimmers (15–16 years of age) are considered to be talented young swimmers. Indeed, the participating swimming club in this study is regarded as one of the best clubs in Norway in developing young talent in swimming, involving increased training load, more ambitious coaches, and increased competitiveness among athletes.

In the swimming club, there was three training groups, which were relevant for the interviewed swimmers. In the following, these groups are referred to as group A, group B, and group C. To stay in group A, there was four requirements: (a) being 13–16 years of age, (b) complete 7–8 workouts per week, (c) have less than 10% absence over time, and (d) qualify for national championships. After being in this group, the athletes are either moved to group B or group C. Group B is the elite group in the club, while in group C, the training is more individualised, and the overall goal is to provide athletes an opportunity to keep training to keep developing their swimming skills.

### Procedure

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and The Ethical Committee at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences and university]. Subsequently, the swimming club was contacted by a consultant in the Norwegian swimming federation on behalf of the research team, asking the swimming club if they were willing to participate in the study. After consenting to participate in the study, the managing director provided the research team with the coach's and athletes' email addresses. A request was first sent by email to the coach and his female swimmers and subsequently followed by a telephone call to the coach. After consenting to participate, the postgraduate student used a telephone call to agree upon the first interview with each participant. Participants were provided a written consent and were informed about their right to anonymity before the data collection at T1 took place. Participants also reiterated their continuing consent at the start of each subsequent interview.

### Data collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with each of the seven participants at three time points over a 9-month period. Each interview was conducted at the swimming club's training facilities (i.e., club house), except two interviews, which were conducted at the second author's university. A coach-specific and swimmer-specific interview guide was developed for each of the time points, structured around key ideas and concepts pertaining to SRT (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019), but with slightly different wording to suit the specific role (e.g., *'What are your thoughts on developing young athletes?'* (coach version) versus *'What are your thoughts on developing yourself as an athlete?'* (athlete version)) (see Appendix A for the example interview guide). After each data collection, the interviews were analysed so the next interview guide could build on prior findings and guide subsequent questioning (e.g., Calman, Brunton, and Molassiotis 2013; Hermanowicz 2016). Although the interview guides were developed in light of certain themes aligned with SRT, the participants were frequently asked if they could tell stories, which exemplified how the themes manifested themselves in their everyday life as competitive swimmers (Casey et al. 2018; Riessman 2008). This was emphasised across all data collections and interviews.

Interviews were audio-recorded and the recorded time was between 14–51 minutes (T1), 24–81 minutes (T2), and 35–71 minutes (T3). As the interested reader will note, the length of some of the interviews, particularly at T1 was relatively short. However, additional time, approximately 30 minutes had been spent with each participant prior to starting the interview to develop rapport, and as such the interviews focused solely upon the particular topics of interest for the study. Unfortunately,

despite best attempts by the interviewer to seek expansions on certain responses, a couple of the participants provided relatively short and concise (although very pertinent and insightful) responses to some questions, resulting in these short interviews. Despite the length of these interviews, the decision was made to include these participants and their data because the information they did provide was extremely interesting and relevant to the study aims. Fortunately, aligning with the developing rapport between the interviewer and the participants over the nine months, the length and depth of responses from all participants increased over the course of the three interviews.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, yielding 87 pages of single-spaced data at T1, 127 pages of single-spaced data at T2, and 149 pages of single-spaced data at T3. The data were then analysed using a narrative thematic approach, guided by the suggestions of Riessman (2008) and Smith (2016). Specifically, using this approach, we sought to gain insights into the range and variation in the experiences of the participants, as shared through their stories. Rather than breaking the stories down into fragmented units, we focused upon the whole accounts of the participants and treated these as the analytical units (Riessman 2008), with the aim of using the participants stories to show their experiences (Smith and Sparkes 2009b).

To do this, we first engaged in a preliminary analysis of the data that was collected at each time point. That is, we read and re-read the transcripts, noting down initial thoughts and comments, and starting to *indwell with* the data (Smith 2016). Next, we progressed into the process of narrative thematic analysis, through which we sought to interpret the data through specific thematics which we developed, while also paying close attention to the participants' narrative themes (the patterns in the participants' stories that provided an impression of how they construct and give meaning to their personal experiences; Smith 2016).

The thematics were developed among the broader research group through ongoing discussion debate and reading of literature. Five themes guided the final analysis and interpretation: (a) earlier experiences leading to prevention or promotion orientation; (b) trust perceptions and experiences; (c) regulatory fit (nonfit); (d) communication and collaboration; and (e) degree of shared reality (Echterhoff et al. 2009; Higgins 2019; Jowett and Poczwardowski 2007; Simpson 2007). Although these thematics were important, the primary interest was not on these themselves. Rather, the current study aimed to highlight the participants' experiences and the lived manifestations of these thematics (Riessman 2008). Thus, we explicitly sought to identify the variation within themes across the participants. This presentation of interpersonal variation is of great importance to the present study, as it facilitated wider understanding of how shared reality both succeeds and fails to be established.

The analysis of the athletes' interviews revealed two overarching types of narratives – a narrative of prevention-orientation (which comprised two distinct stories) and a narrative of promotion-orientation. Three athletes were chosen to serve as exemplars to demonstrate these narratives – a strategy typically used in narrative studies (e.g., Phoenix and Smith 2011; Sparkes and Smith 2003). Moreover, given the focus of the present study was on reciprocity in the coach-athlete relationship, the inclusion of the coach's narrative was also deemed important. Interestingly, the coach's narrative was consistent across all the athletes, although experienced differently by the athletes (indicating a successful or unsuccessful connection to athletes' inner states). Having identified the narratives and exemplars, the process of writing the interim texts began. When engaging in the writing process, the decisions regarding which stories from the interviews to include were guided by two criteria: (a) they had to be related to the aforementioned thematics, and (b) they had to be true to the overall impression of the participants (Riessman 2008; Smith 2016).



## Methodological rigour

Judgements of quality and rigour in interpretive research is no simple task. Within the interpretivist research paradigm, a key assumption is that we cannot grasp (psychosocial) reality as it really is, as such grasping is a matter of interpretation (Riessman 2008; Smith 1984; Sparkes 2009). Thus, the question arises: If one cannot grasp reality as it really is, can one then grasp what a criteria of research quality is? Smith (1984) argued that assumptions of the existence of such criteria is an epistemological foundational assumption, something which is incompatible with the non-foundational positioning of interpretive research (Smith 1984; Sparkes 2009). This does not mean that 'anything goes' (Smith and Sparkes 2009a, 286) or that we should give up the quest for research quality. Instead, Sparkes and Smith (2009), while arguing that no technique is a definite sign of research quality (as research quality too is a matter of interpretation), encourage researchers to be open about their research process and characterising traits. As such, adding to what has been shared above, two specific strategies of *wakefulness* (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) and *critical friends* (Smith and McGannon 2018) were also used in this study.

Wakefulness, as described and encouraged by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is ongoing, critical reflections where narrative researchers are aware of, for instance, inauthenticity, narcissism, simplistic plots, and unidimensional characters throughout the research progress. A number of steps were taken in the current study to facilitate this. Firstly, following each interview, the research team engaged in conversations regarding the interview process, the feelings the interviewer had regarding the participant's engagement, elaboration, and the depth of stories shared. Secondly, any stories lacking in depth were explicitly explored in subsequent interviews to gain greater insights. Thirdly, throughout the writing process, the research team questioned the depth of data and ideas presented and continually returned to the stories shared to seek additional insights and thoughts. Finally, the inclusion of a coach and athletes in the study provided an opportunity to identify contrasting thoughts and experiences regarding different stories, providing an opportunity to highlight any potential situations when participants might have been being inauthentic or narcissistic in the story telling.

Second, the strategy of *critical friends*, described as 'a process of critical dialogue between people, with researchers giving voice to their interpretations in relation to other people who listen and offer critical feedback' (Smith and McGannon 2018, p. 113), was frequently utilised throughout the research process. The first, second, and fourth author were, respectively, main supervisor, thesis-writing graduate student, and co-supervisor, and thus frequently met discussing theory, study design, data collection, data analysis, findings, and writing of research texts. The third and last author have, along the way, read and commented writings, while offering critical feedback to encourage greater depth in the narratives and clarity around the stories being shared. Moreover, this study was conducted alongside a number of other studies relating to a similar topic (shared reality in other performance domains) and thus a research group of postgraduate students and academics met regularly to discuss ideas and thoughts, to critique and reflect on the stories being shared, and encourage greater analysis and interpretation of the data.

## Findings

Aligned with our aim to examine SRT in the coach-athlete relationship, and more specifically, to consider reciprocity in this relationship throughout the analysis, we considered both the shared and separate stories of the coach and the athletes. Through examining the data, it was apparent that the coach had one narrative, which was applied to all the athletes, but the athletes presented different narratives regarding their relationship with the coach. Consequently, what follows is a presentation of the coach narrative and two athlete narratives. Specifically, the coach narrative that *better people make better athletes* demonstrates Gary's (the coach) philosophy regarding holistic athlete

development and how, through his own positivity and eagerness, he attempts to create an environment in which he facilitates athletes' self-guided growth and development as swimmers and people.

The analysis of the athlete data resulted in the identification of two overarching narratives: (a) a narrative of being prevention-oriented and (b) a narrative of being promotion-oriented. The promotion-oriented narrative was underpinned by *experiences of unconditional love, support, and acceptance* resulting in athletes who were open, honest, and sought feedback. Meanwhile, there were two distinct experiences of being prevention-oriented: one arising directly from *perceptions of pressure, expectations, and a lack of support* resulting in an athlete whose hesitation and anxiety prevents optimal communication in the coach-athlete relationships and the other illustrating the impact of *pressures to perform while struggling with illness* and the subsequent impact this has on athletes' interpretation of coaching behaviours and support. Below are stories from three athletes to represent these narratives.

### **Better people make better athletes: coach narrative**

When Gary talked about important early experiences that shaped him to be the coach he is today, the first thing that came to his mind were conversations with his dad (who also coached swimming). These conversations have played a major role in developing his coaching philosophy. Gary summarised: 'I think it is very much about respecting everyone, (...) contributing to making everyone feel well, (...) and typical value-decisions, like it is more important to educate people to cope with the world than to educate world champions' (T3). Beyond his conversations with his dad, Gary also highlighted the influence of two of his former coaching colleagues. From one he was inspired by 'His ability to believe in his possibilities and look for solutions instead of challenges' (T3), while the other impressed Gary with: 'His enormous dedication to seek development (...) so good at engaging with the athlete who desires to reach the top' (T3).

Through his earlier experiences and interactions with significant others, Gary has learnt to value a mastery and promotion-orientation, something which now affects how he provides feedback to his athletes: 'When I point out mistakes, it is primarily by pointing out (...) that there is something they can get even better at. That there is an unresolved potential that is conveyed from me, not what they failed to do' (T1). He talked about an athlete who asked for a different approach: 'I have heard sometimes: "You have to be tougher with me, (...) you have to punish me for me to succeed." And I thought "Then you might unfortunately have the wrong coach because I will never punish you to perform better"' (T3).

Gary is fond of his athletes, and sincerely wants his coaching to adhere to their interests. However, a challenge for him, as he coaches several young swimmers, is that he struggles to know what may be of interest to the swimmers unless they explicitly tell him. Gary unfortunately does not have as much time for in-depth conversations with his athletes, as he would like. Hence, a substantial part of his coaching philosophy is to teach the athletes how they can behave and communicate to make him the best coach for each of them. As he said: 'It is important to get to know what each one wants. (...) What I usually say to them (...) is that my job is to try to help you realise your wishes, and then I have to know what they are' (T1). Athletes who do this are more likely to receive better and more frequent feedback:

There are some who are better (...) to ask questions and receive feedback and communicate actively. They will often receive more and better feedback. In that way I can be a better coach for the athletes who show some initiative in the communication themselves than for the ones who are a bit more passive. Especially when there are larger groups (T1).

And indeed, one of the athletes said that she once had talked with Gary for an hour and a half after a practice, confirming that Gary does provide time when asked to do so.

However, as Gary is aware of the power he holds as a coach, he is conscious of the importance of building trust between himself and his athletes. For Gary, trust means having positive expectations of one another. For him:

Trusting someone, it depends on how you have been treated in previous situations. And you build this trust by repeatedly showing that you want the best for someone else, that you are present and do what you say you would do (T2).

Congruent with this statement, Gary recognises that his longest working relationships are with athletes with whom he experienced the highest levels of trust. However, when trust is lacking, Gary can have difficulties with coaching:

I still have athletes that I have coached many months, which I still do not feel like I have reached the point where they can let loose and talk about their own weaknesses. They are more concerned with performing than receiving help (T2).

### *Pressure, expectations, and a lack of support: ann's prevention-oriented narrative*

Ann is a talented young swimmer, one of the best in the country at her age. Still, when starting to talk to her, it was impossible to avoid feeling that something in her life was not ideal. When we came to the question: 'If you should encounter any challenges, do you have anyone who cares about you and with whom you can talk to?', a question which all of the other athletes typically answered with parents, siblings, and/or friends, Ann answered quite differently. She said: 'No, not really. But ... it usually ends well. It is all right. (...) I do not want to talk to mum and dad, they do not understand' (T1).

Ann had started swimming around the age of 11, following a couple of years playing team handball. She had not enjoyed her time playing team handball because: 'Those players on the team were not any nice.' Particularly: 'The coach's daughter was just mean, (...) and I had like nobody to be with. (...) So, then I thought: "Okay, then I will just quit"' (T3). Unfortunately, swimming has not been all positive either. Ann has experienced coaches that have been very negative in their feedback to her. Ann explained:

It was worst during training camps. (...) They did not realise I was trying my best, so when I was not swimming at the times they expected, they just got mad and said like, 'Why did we bring you at all?' (T2).

Moreover, when Ann did perform at the expected level, she did not receive any positive feedback: 'They [her coaches] never said that (...) we were swimming well. (...) It was just like when we swam well, they just said like, 'Yeah, okay'. Like, it was like (...) they just waited for us to swim poorly' (T2).

Conversely, Ann really liked Gary, who started coaching her about 18 months ago. She explained that she looked forward to seeing him at practice, perceived him to care about her, and often asked him for feedback. Nevertheless, Ann experienced their relationship as ambivalent. While Gary seems to be promotion-oriented, Ann's earlier experiences seem to have made her prevention-oriented, creating a regulatory nonfit between them. For instance, Ann shared:

Sometimes I feel he is like: 'So, in three months you can post this time.' And then I think like: 'It is very fast I cannot do it.' (...) It is often the case that I cannot swim as fast as he thinks (T1).

Ann perceived that Gary had a major influence on her swimming career. Given this feeling, she was afraid of being thought of as the swimmer who did not put in the required effort, and thus being transferred to another training group. It was something Ann would like to prevent. Accordingly, when Gary came with a suggestion for her training programme, she was afraid to reject it:

He says like: "Yes, but you have to do this and this and this." Also, it is a bit my fault, because I kind of pretend and I am saying like, "Yeah, but I think I can do that." But then, next time I will not be able to, and I know that I will not make it either when I talk to him. But I pretend, so that is stupid of me. (...) But you know, I want to seem better too, and he becomes, when I say like, "Oh, but then I do that and that and that" then he becomes happy. I just say it. But then he will get disappointed again afterwards when I cannot do it (T3).

Ann accepted development suggestions from Gary despite believing she would fail to fulfill them in fear of being perceived as lacking dedication and the right mentality to produce better performance. She also admitted lying to Gary:

He asks: 'Are you ready to go hard?' and hits me on the shoulder. Then I get stressed and lie and respond: 'I feel great!' And then I become happy. However, after the swimming session, he becomes disappointed, which, in turn, makes me disappointed (T3).

In competitive settings, Ann admitted she faked her behaviour to please Gary:

I wanted to show him that I was disappointed if I performed poorly so that he would think: "Oh, but then she will do better next time." And stressed because, (...) before a tournament, if you become to stressed or nervous, sometimes I perform poorly because (...) I cannot concentrate. So sometimes I put a little extra in it so, if it went bad, I had an excuse, like "Ah, but I was so stressed out before I swam!" I did that sometimes. And if I swam well, well, then I swam well. But you know, just to be sure. (...) If I before the race had thoughts like: "I will not make it," Like thought negatively, I would not say it. Instead, I would say: "Oh, I did my best, but it did not work out and now I am so sorry." (...) And then he would think like: "Well then she will do it better next time." Then he became happy, and I had to do the same thing next time (T3).

Ann thought quite differently to Gary. A final story she told, which underscored this, was a story from a training camp that took place after a running session where she was very tired and broke down:

He was like: "How are you doing Ann?" And I just started crying and said: "I hate swimming!" (...) And then he said: "Ok, let us talk about this." We sat down, but then he managed to turn the conversation around, and it ended up with me having an extra training session per week. And afterwards I was like: "Wait, what? How?" (...) Because that was not my plan (T3).

Between T1 and T2, Ann changed swimming club. Despite the ambivalence and their differences, Ann firmly claimed it had nothing to do with Gary. On the contrary, she said 'If only I could have continued having Gary as a coach, I would have stayed' (T2). The reason, she reported, was that as she was getting too old for her current training group and had to move up to the next squad. Unfortunately, the head coaches for that group were coaches with whom Ann had previous negative experiences. In her new club, Ann enjoyed going to practice more. Although there are possibly many reasons for this, the type of failure-feedback provided might play a role, as Ann said: 'In [new club] it is like they say we shall swim something, and if we fail, (...) they are just like: "Well, it is you who will not get any better." But in [old club] it was like: "okay, penalty"' (T3). In other words, when she failed in the new club, there was an absence of positive feedback rather than a presence of negative comments.

### *Pressures to perform while struggling with illness: cathy's prevention-oriented narrative*

Before starting to talk about Cathy, a little background information is necessary: As mentioned earlier, there was three training groups in the club, which were relevant for the interviewed swimmers. To stay in group A, there was four requirements: (a) being 13–16 years of age, (b) complete 7–8 workouts per week, (c) have less than 10% absence over time, and (d) qualify for national championships. After being in this group, the athletes are either moved to group B or group C. Group B is the elite group in the club. When an athlete went from group A to group B, Gary called it the 'fast-track' (T1). However, Gary said that the fast track is not necessarily beneficial for all athletes. Some athletes need more time to become ready to take the final step. Therefore, they have group C, for athletes to 'buy themselves some time' (T1). In group C, the training is more individualised, and the goal is to: 'Provide athletes an opportunity to keep training to keep developing' (T1).

During the last year, Cathy had struggled with illness. As such, she did not meet requirements b and c, and she would soon also be too old, for group A. Therefore, she was moved from group A to group C. From Gary's perspective, this occurred with nothing but good intentions. In group C, Cathy could train in a manner that would suit her health situation better. However, Cathy did not perceive it this way: 'We have been moved down. Even though they do not call it moved down, we were moved down. Because we got less training' (T1). Additionally, she said: 'I feel that (...) if I had continued with the training I had, I could have had more development than now when I have two workouts less than before and less hours in the water' (T1).

After the first interview, Cathy chose to quit swimming but not because of Gary. In fact, she said she did trust him, and that she perceived him to care for her as a person. Rather, she stressed her reasons for quitting swimming were:

I have struggled with my motivation and did not get the results that I wanted. (...) I went to the physician and found I had some deficiencies and fixed it, but things did not get any better. I just felt tired (T2).

Perhaps explaining her recent struggles, is Cathy's elaboration regarding how she experiences her general life as a young Norwegian girl. She said: 'We are youths in today's society, and it is not easy because we have, or at least I have set, very high standards for myself. Both school, training, like everything' (T1). Further, she admitted that: 'I have given the impression that things are better than they really are' (T2), adding:

I am the kind of person who is like: 'it is all right.' I can move on even though I am not feeling well. It is like: 'I will not get up from the water. I shall complete the training session' (T2).

When asking her if she talked about these kinds of stress with somebody, she said: 'No, not really. I am not that kind of talk-about-stuff-person, I am not so good at it' (T2).

### ***Unconditional love, support, and acceptance: bethany's promotion-oriented narrative***

Bethany's parents have been very supportive throughout her life. Before swimming competitions, Bethany's mother regularly told her: "I love you no matter how you perform!" (T3). With regards to school, Bethany has always been concerned about getting good grades. However, her parents: 'Have been supportive and said that "you do not have to get top grades in every class. You can do worse and still get places in life despite of that"' (T3). Bethany has experienced failing to do what significant others expect from her, but support from her parents has blunted the impact of such experiences:

Oh, yes, I have felt inadequate if I have not been able to meet the expected performance demands. But again, my mom has been there and said: 'Do not let it upset you, it will be okay.' And then I have managed to leave it behind, do not let it upset me (T3).

Bethany's teammates have also been supportive: 'If I did not do so well on the national championship for instance, the group has supported me. (...) And that makes me (...) feel that I can perform poorly too. And do not put so much pressure on myself' (T3).

Looking back at the start of her relationship with Gary, Bethany emphasised: 'In the beginning, I had no problems and just swam. I never really talked to him. Asked about swimming technique sometimes' (T2). Since then, their relationship has grown:

Now we have been through several championships and he has seen me both at my worst and at my best, so he has been able to understand more of my thoughts. Afterwards, we have been able to communicate much better (T2).

Bethany and Gary seem to collaborate and communicate well. For instance, if Bethany has swum poorly during a training session, she said: 'Then he has asked: 'Is something going on?' and then I have explained it and he has come with a solution to the problem at hand' (T2). If there have been any challenges, they try to solve it together:

He is like: 'What do you think of this?' Then I ask some questions, say something, and then I say like: 'Well, what do you think?' And then he answers,(...) then we try to come up with a solution together (T1).

Similarly, Bethany is proactive in her collaboration with Gary: 'I often grab him and ask for technical feedback' (T1). When asked how she makes herself understood, she simply stated: 'I just say it like it is' (T1). An example of how honest communication influences Bethany's motivation and well-being, is the following story:

There was this junior tournament. (...) There it was some specific events. And I am not good at them. (...) I did not want to swim those events. (...) So, we talked together, and I said that I did not want to swim those events. (...) That I would rather specialise in crawl than medley. (...) And then we came up with alternatives during training so I could avoid those exercises I did not like. (...) We had another coach, (...) and he made me swim

these exercises. (...) So, one day after training I started crying. (...) I could not do it anymore. And Gary saw it, he came up to me and asked what was going on. And I explained it to him, and it was then he realised how much I did not want to go to that tournament. And then we came up with other solutions (T2).

After the first interview, Bethany became ill. But as with everything else, she spoke honestly about it to Gary: 'I have spoken a lot with Gary because of [the disease]. (...) I have talked to Gary about the pauses in between the different workouts, that I must be careful to relax properly' (T2). At the last interview, Bethany highlighted that once Gary had suggested that she should leave the practice due to her illness. At the same time, she also recounted another coach who had asked her to leave when she swam poorly due to illness. Bethany explained that the latter one; however, expressed the need to leave in a much more negative manner. Hence, she attributed their intentions very differently. She emphasised: 'I think Gary cares about me, while the other coach seemed to care more about my performance. He did not care about me as me' (T3).

When she is competing at meets, Bethany wants to ensure against errors of omission: 'If I am going to swim a 200-meter race, I go out hard, and would rather blow it (...) than end up thinking "I did not give it my all"' (T3). She believes that this mindset is similar to what the coaches want them to have: 'They regularly say that they do not want us to have anything left in the end. Because if you do, you probably could have gone even harder' (T3).

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore: (a) how a shared reality is established, or fails to be established, over the course of the sporting partnership between athletes and their coach; and (b) how experiencing a shared reality (or not) in the coach-athlete relationship is related to the experienced quality of the relationship athletes and their coach develop and maintain over the course of a 9-month period. The analysis of the data revealed a coach narrative (Gary), which was applied to all the athletes, but the athletes presented different narratives regarding their relationship with the coach. Whereas the promotion-oriented narrative (Bethany) was underpinned by experiences of *unconditional love, support, and acceptance*, there were two distinct experiences of being prevention-oriented. Specifically, one narrative (Ann) arising directly from perceptions of *pressure, expectations, and a lack of support* and the other narrative (Cathy) illustrating the impact of *pressures to perform while struggling with illness* and the subsequent impact this has on athletes' interpretations of the coach's behaviour and support.

What seemed to be the main issue for Ann, was the regulatory nonfit with the coach. Due to a predominately prevention-orientation, she has different inner states than Gary concerning her goals and performance strivings (Higgins 2019). Even more, she fails to communicate her inner states, which makes Gary believe there is a shared reality when there actually is none (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009). The motives look apparently to be in order; however, it might be that due to earlier negative experiences (e.g., prior coaches) and a lack of perceived social support from significant others, that Ann is afraid to reveal her inner states, and argue against Gary, as she is worried about him rejecting her or getting angry. Consequently, she accepts everything Gary says even though she disagrees; meaning, Ann experiences a low degree of shared reality with Gary.

Cathy, on the other hand, is not alone being an adolescent girl experiencing pressures to perform and be successful in Norway. A recent national survey found that 24% of adolescent girls experience pressure to perform well at sport, while 45% experience pressure to perform well at school (Bakken 2019). High training loads and a stressful lifestyle are risk factors potentially leading to illness and a decreased sense of motivation and well-being (Moesch et al. 2018; Reardon et al. 2019; Schinke et al. 2017). Hence, when Gary decided to move Cathy to another training group (i.e., group C), in which she would receive a more suitable training load, it probably was for Cathy's best. However, considering Cathy's high standards for herself, she did not like what she perceived as being moved down. As with Ann, Cathy did not talk about her thoughts and concerns with Gary. As such, Gary,

unknowingly left in the dark, subjectively experienced a shared reality with Cathy that training with group C was unproblematic, while it challenged Cathy's motivation and continued engagement in swimming.

In case of Bethany, it seemed that she experienced a high degree of shared reality with Gary. They communicated actively and honestly with each other, which makes it easy for them to know each other's inner states towards target referents (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009). Their communication indicates that they are appropriately motivated to create a shared reality: Bethany is epistemically motivated to create a shared reality with Gary, as he is an experienced swimming coach, while Gary is epistemically motivated to create a shared reality with Bethany, as she is the expert regarding her interests, preferences, and needs (Saw, Main, and Gastin 2016). Gary has proved to Bethany that he is to be trusted during various strain tests (e.g., competitions where she was at her worst), thus increasing his perceived trustworthiness, and Bethany attributes his behaviour towards her as a result of him sincerely caring (a relational motive) about her as a person (Higgins 2019; Simpson 2007). There seems to be a regulatory fit, as both Gary and Bethany seem to be predominantly promotion-oriented and responsive to each other (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009).

A comment must also be made about the coach's role regarding whether the athletes experienced a regulatory fit or not in the coach-athlete relationship, as it seems to have played a significant role regarding how the two narratives turned out so differently (Higgins 2019). From Gary's perspective, it may be that he believed there was a shared reality until proven otherwise (as may have been the case with both Ann and Cathy). His emphasis on encouraging athletes to communicate their wishes showed that he was motivated to create a shared reality regarding swim practice based on their contributions and opinions (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009). However, verbal encouragement alone does not seem to be sufficient for athletes to open up honestly (Higgins 2019). This may be due to the power imbalance between coaches and athletes (Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2017; Simpson et al. 2015). Deutsch (1973) argued that those who perceive their partner to have greater power, are either more trusting or more suspicious. Power has an amplification effect on trust-perceptions, which could imply that athletes who perceive a low level of trust towards their coach (i.e., is suspicious) withstand even more from behaviours that would make them vulnerable; for instance, honest communication (Korsgaard, Brower, and Lester 2015). However, Simpson (2007) argued that if, over time, the high-power partner consistently acts in a way that benefits the low-power partner, it could create a relationship very high in trust (i.e., a positive amplification effect). This is critical during strain tests (Simpson 2007; Simpson et al. 2015). Neither Ann nor Cathy discussed any strain tests with Gary. Perhaps the lack of increased trust and perceived security following a successful strain test are what made them withhold information or being dishonest when communicating with Gary during swim practices.

From a SRT perspective (Higgins 2019, p. 270), the dynamics of social relationships, which have the potential to create a '*We-ness*' from shared realities, can be understood by distinguishing between sentiment relations (i.e., like or dislike) and unit relations (i.e., associated or disassociated). For example, the relations between Ann and Gary, as well as between Cathy and Gary, are positive with respect to sentiment (i.e., they both like Gary) but more neutral with respect to unit (i.e., they both have a formal coaching relationship with Gary). However, their underlying reasons are reported to be different. Whereas Ann was unable to be honest about her thoughts and concerns, and in the end changed swimming club, Cathy's quiet struggle with illness and pressures to perform and be successful resulted in her quitting organised swimming. What is missing in these relationships, however, is social verification of positive feelings. Indeed, SRT stipulates that sharing good news with others, and particularly being responsive to the good news, is likely to intensify the positivity of good news (Higgins 2019). Thus, given the dishonesty and hurt feelings in these relationships, it is less likely that these athletes will express positive feelings that can be verified by their coach, subsequently creating shared realities and a connectedness between coach and athletes. A key aspect in the formation and further development of coach-athlete relationships is therefore to create multiple opportunities for interpersonal exchange of positive feelings (Higgins 2019).

Further, recent studies have addressed the diversity and complexities associated with female-specific sport and exercise science data (Elliott-Sale et al. 2021), as well as the lack of studies focusing on female samples in the youth athlete talent development literature (Johnston et al. 2018). Unquestionably, the general emphasis on early identification of young talents with the potential to succeed in high-performing sport environments involves a more critical view on the social processes involved (Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2017; Persson et al. 2020; Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2020), particularly the relational and ethical implications of developing young athletes on a daily basis (Baker, Schorer, and Wattie 2018; Simpson et al. 2015; Waldron et al. 2020). Indeed, Dewey (1938/2015) argued,

‘(..) The two principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from each other. They intercept and unite. They are, so to speak, the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience. Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones’ (p. 44).

As such, these principles should be better integrated in the iterative sports coaching process, involving talented young athletes and their coaches, respectively. This is because all athletes are unique individuals; meaning, they have their own frame of reference and thus the present experiences are not likely to create agreeableness and expectations of having desirable future experiences among all of them. Consequently, a coaching philosophy that expects a certain level of awareness can be accused of being disconnected from other experiences, and thereby generating dispersive, disintegrated, and centrifugal habits (Dewey 1938/2015). Specifically, our findings showed that two athletes (i.e., the narrative of being prevention-oriented) had a poorer ability to control their future experiences partly because of the inability of the objective conditions (the total social set-up of the situations in which the athletes are engaged) to create interactions that were conducive to their personal development as healthy, young, aspiring athletes (Dewey 1938/2015; Elliott-Sale et al. 2021; Higgins 2019).

The aforementioned narratives show the importance of coaches thinking outside their predominate ‘coaching-box’ (Cushion 2018; Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2017). Gary may have experienced his promotion-orientation style serving past athletes well. However, if unable to behave differently, there will occasionally be athletes like Ann and Cathy who experience a regulatory nonfit. If coaches can reflect on their coaching behaviour, regardless of their predominant motivational orientation, they are likely to see how different types of interaction and responsiveness suit different types of athletes.

## Practical implications

The two different narratives in this study remind us that the promotion and prevention motivational systems produce different positive and different negative experiences. For instance, whereas the promotion system represents a presence of a positive psychological situation (i.e., coaches providing positive feedback to their athletes), the prevention system represents an absence of a negative psychological situation (i.e., coaches who are not criticising their athletes; Higgins 2019). This knowledge, in turn, has implications for the interpretations of success messages (potential gains vs. potential nonlosses) and failure messages (possible nongains vs. possible losses). Consequently, our call to all coaches, especially those coaching young, aspiring athletes, is to be mindful of their coaching behaviour and motivational orientation, as it will likely have a major influence on how the athlete is experiencing later coach-athlete relationships and performance strivings, and thus sport engagement itself (Higgins 2019; Smoll and Smith 2020).

On the behalf of the coach, findings from the present study remind us of the importance of coach-reflection and to think outside the box (Cushion 2018; Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2017). Especially the relationship between Ann and Gary, as well as Cathy and Gary, could benefit from Gary thinking and behaving outside of his ‘promotion-orientation-box’ so that both Ann and Cathy could have experienced a regulatory fit with their coach. The present study cannot say whether a promotion-orientation or a prevention-orientation is most beneficial for talent development in organised sports; however, it



does seem to confirm prior research that a regulatory fit is advantageous (Fulmer et al. 2011; (Förster, Higgins, and Idson 1998); (Higgins 2019); (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, and Higgins (2004).

## Limitations and future directions

This study only included female athletes, and only one type of sex-constellation regarding the coach-athlete relationship (male-female, respectively). As such, it could be that if future research explores experiences of male athletes or partners in a same-sex-relationship that it could provide different perspectives regarding establishing a shared reality (Higgins 2019). Another suggestion for future research is to delve deeper into how trust evolves in the coach-athlete relationship. For instance, exploring consequences of different levels of severeness in trust situations, or the attribution and intentions of the coach(s) and athlete(s) could expand our knowledge regarding the motivation behind communication and establishing a shared reality in the coach-athlete relationship (Higgins 2019; Jowett 2017a, 2017b; Simpson 2007; Simpson et al. 2015).

## Conclusion

Interpretations of participants' stories indicate that experiencing a shared reality strengthens the relationship between coach and athlete, keeps both parties motivated, and make them feel their strivings as worthwhile. Athletes who did not experience a shared reality seemed to be more dissatisfied with the coach-athlete relationship and their engagement in organised swimming. For a shared reality to be experienced, honest and responsive communication, motivated by trust in the other, must be frequently utilised by both parties. Due to the power imbalance and the need of interpersonal exchange of positive feelings, it is especially important for coaches to behave supportive, trustworthy, and responsive to advance the relationship quality and satisfaction (Higgins 2019; Simpson et al. 2015). Finally, SRT is a conceptual framework, which can prove to be a new, advancing avenue regarding research on the coach-athlete relationship (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins 2019). It is our opinion that SRT seems to encapsulate central elements for a profound coach-athlete relationship.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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