On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between Coaches and Athletes

Svenja Wachsmuth*a, Sophia Jowetta and Chris G. Harwooda

a School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

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Key words: coach-athlete relationship, disagreement, communication

Svenja Wachsmuth, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Science, Ashby Road, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU; Sophia Jowett, S.Jowett@lboro.ac.uk, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Science, Ashby Road, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU; Chris G. Harwood, C.G.Harwood@lboro.ac.uk, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Science, Ashby Road, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Svenja Wachsmuth, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Science, Ashby Road, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom. Email: S.Wachsmuth@lboro.ac.uk
On Understanding the Nature of Interpersonal Conflict between Coaches and Athletes

Conflict is a part of coach-athlete relationships and should be carefully considered as it can have effects on the quality of coaching and the level of performance. Despite its practical relevance, there is a dearth of research around coach-athlete conflict. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the characteristics and topics of conflict, as well as coaches and athletes’ emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences during conflict. A total of 22 independent coaches and athletes participated in semi-structured interviews evolving around the nature of interpersonal conflict. After all interviews were transcribed, a deductive-inductive content analysis was conducted. This was guided by the interview schedule as well as the by the conceptual framework of conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017). Data were divided into five main categories: Conflict characteristics and conflict topics, as well as conflict cognitions, emotions, and behaviours. Findings highlighted the variety of ways in which participants understood and interpreted interpersonal conflict and how their impressions of conflict influenced its evolving process. Considering the participants’ cognitive, emotional and behavioural expressions of conflict, it became apparent that conflict can be described through uncertain, escalating and problem-orientated responses. Practical applications concerning (mal-) adaptive responses to conflict are discussed. (199/200)

Keywords: coach-athlete relationship, disagreement, communication

Introduction

The coach-athlete relationship is thought to be at the “heart of coaching” (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). Previous research has mainly addressed the benefits of positive, harmonious and stable coach-athlete partnerships that promote performances in training and competition (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002), and enhance athletes’ confidence,
motivation, and well-being (e.g., Adie & Jowett, 2010; Davis & Jowett, 2014; Jowett, 2008). While this research collectively suggests that high quality relationships are associated with positive outcomes, limited research has explored the consequences of less functional coach-athlete relationships marked with conflict and dispute (e.g., Jowett, 2003).

While there is evidence to suggest that negative coaching, including controlling, intimidating, and degrading behaviours, leads to low athlete satisfaction, sport commitment, performance and mental health (e.g., Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thorgerson-Ntoumani, 2009; Garrow & Murray, 2011; Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Shanmugam, Jowett, & Meyer, 2014), there is also evidence to suggest that conflict increases within coach-athlete relationships that lack respect, trust, commitment and co-operation (Jowett, 2003, 2009). Previous findings suggest that conflict within coach-athlete dyads may be promoted by relationship factors, such as insufficient communication, poor leadership or unequal power distributions (e.g., Greenleaf, Gould, & Diefenbach, 2001; Jowett, 2003; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). Conflict experienced in coach-athlete dyads often seems to reflect divergent expectations and a general breakdown of exchanges, leading to negative responses such as decreased satisfaction, motivation and relationship effectiveness (e.g., Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Carpenter, 2015). Such findings are consistent with Mellalieu, Shearer, and Shearer’s (2013) research which assessed determinants, nature and outcomes of interpersonal conflict during major sport competitions. Results indicated that conflict occurred due to communication breakdowns or power struggles and led to positive, neutral and negative consequences in terms of emotions, cognition, and performance.
Although only few studies touch upon the construct of interpersonal conflict in sport, a handful of studies have been carried out focusing on intra-group conflict (e.g., Leo, Gonzalez-Ponce, Sanchez-Miguel, Ivarsson, & Garcia-Calvo, 2015; Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Partridge & Knapp, 2016). In line with Mellalieu et al. (2013) and the general conflict literature (e.g., Barki & Hartwick, 2004), these studies describe intra-team conflict by negative emotions (e.g., frustration, anger), thoughts (e.g., blame, disagreement) and behaviours (e.g., screaming, ignoring). Intra-team conflict has, moreover, been divided into task and social conflict (e.g., Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a). While task conflict usually concerns aspects of the sport including performance, social conflict refers to relational issues, such as mutual dislike or clashing personalities, and was found to be particularly dysfunctional for relationships (Jehn, 1997).

Following a review of the literature, Wachsmuth, Jowett, and Harwood (2017) define interpersonal conflict in sport as “a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions” (p. 88). This definition is accompanied by a conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport (see Figure 1). The framework displays conflict as a dynamic process, whereby external, intra- and interpersonal determinants, as well as conflict prevention strategies determine the onset and define the nature of conflict. The nature of conflict, specifically, is described in terms of its content (e.g., sport performance) and characteristics (e.g., intensity, duration), as well as conflict parties’ (e.g., coaches and athletes) emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences during conflict episodes. According to the framework, it is also
proposed that the nature of conflict and conflict management attempts directly predict the conflict outcomes (e.g., performance, relationship, wellbeing). This theoretically driven conceptualization of interpersonal conflict in sports was put forward with the intent to provide the impetus necessary to stimulate research into this unexplored area within sport (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). While there is limited evidence on the determinants and outcomes of conflict (e.g., Mellalieu et al., 2013), empirical information about the nature of interpersonal conflict in sport barely exists. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the nature of coach-athlete conflict by exploring the following research questions: 1) What are the characteristics and topics of coach-athlete conflict?, and 2) What are the cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes experienced during conflict?

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships, adapted from Wachsmuth et al., 2017

Method

Participants

A total of 22 coaches and athletes participated in the study based on the following criteria: a) participants had to be at least 18 years of age, b) they previously experienced conflict in coach-athlete relationships, and c) they participated at a national performance level or higher. Data saturation was reached after eleven coaches (9 male, 2 female) and eleven athletes (4 male, 7 female) were interviewed (see Table 1). All individuals lived in the UK and were fluent English speakers; three participants originated from Canada, Romania, and Slovenia.
Table 1. Participants demographics

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<td>$M_{experience}$</td>
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Notes:

* Individual sports: gymnastics, swimming, athletics, trampoline, canoeing;

** Team sports: rugby, cricket, volleyball, curling, netball & field hockey;

*** Breakdown coaches: 8 at World Cup level of which 5 coached Para-Olympic level athletes;

**** Breakdown athletes: 6 competed in international competitions (e.g., Nation Cups and Commonwealth Games) of which 3 participated also at World Cup level.

Data collection procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers' institution. Potential interviewees were then approached via a standardized email informing them about the purpose of the study, requirements of participation and ethical considerations. Meetings took place at a mutually convenient time and location; participants were asked to give informed consent and made aware that the interview was audio-recorded. Demographic data (e.g., age, gender, sport) was accessed with a brief questionnaire. As this research forms part of a larger project, in this manuscript only data focused on the characteristics, nature and content of conflict are presented. Overall, the semi-structured interview contained 26 questions covering five areas: sport experience, the personal meaning of conflict, specific experiences of conflict, determining factors, and consequences; eight of the 26 questions were relevant for this manuscript.

At the start of the interview, coaches and athletes were encouraged to
share insights about their personal development within sports and experiences in different coach-athlete relationships in order to build rapport with the interviewee. They were further asked what conflict meant for them personally to establish a shared understanding about the concept between researchers and participant (e.g., “What does coach-athlete conflict mean to you?”). Next, various topics of conflict were explored, thus, stimulating participants’ recall of multiple situations in which they experienced conflict (e.g., “What is conflict with your coach/athlete generally about?”). This was important as the following section focused on a specific conflict event which the interviewee identified as significant and described in rich detail (e.g., "Please think back to a situation in which you experienced conflict with your coach/athlete, can you find a specific event that you recall vividly? Tell me about it."); “What was the topic?”; “How did you experience the conflict?”). Afterwards, participants were asked more specific questions, for example, about the nature of conflict (e.g., "What are typical behaviours you show during conflict?”; “In your experience, what types of conflict are more/less severe?") in which they could draw on various conflict experiences. Finally, coaches and athletes were invited to share any other thoughts on the topic. Overall, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for a degree of flexibility (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014) enabling the researcher to prompt the given information appropriately without interrupting the flow of the conversation. When it became evident that data saturation was reached and no new information emerged from the interviews, data collection was terminated (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours 15 minutes ($M_{coaches} = 80.0 \text{ min}; M_{athletes} = 73.00 \text{ min}$) and added up to 888 pages of double-spaced transcript, approximately 25% of the data was relevant to the
Data analysis

A “directed content analysis” approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was utilized to examine all interviews individually, followed by a cross-case analysis of all participants. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) a directed approach to content analyses aims to “extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (p. 1281). Such an approach aligns with the present study as it aimed to corroborate and further extend the conceptual framework of conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). This framework provided a rudimentary coding scheme for data analyses. Subsequently, the coding scheme included the main categories: conflict characteristics and topics, as well as emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses. Sub-categories were added inductively throughout the analytical process (cf., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krane, Andersen, & Strean, 1997). A combination of a deductive and inductive analyses allowed the authors to make sense of the participants’ accounts by drawing parallels to existing findings (e.g., Mellalieu et al., 2013) as well as by adding further insights and details around the phenomenon under study.

The data analyses followed guidelines established in research (e.g., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, the principal researcher listened to and read all interviews carefully to become fully familiar with the data. Second, relevant extracts were identified and grouped according to the categories of the coding scheme; this process has been called “deductive category application” (Mayring, 2000, cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Third, general categories were then further divided into sub-categories to provide a more meaningful analysis of the data (e.g., topics of conflict; valence of emotions; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).
Fourth, the identified categories were mapped out to facilitate a deeper understanding of the data, its meaning and interconnectedness (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This final stage of sense making allowed the authors to draw conclusions upon the underlying processes of interpersonal conflict in coach-athlete dyads.

Tracey’s (2010) criteria for excellent qualitative research (e.g., worthy topic, rigour, credibility, ethics) were followed to ensure high quality standards of the current study. Though limited space prevents an in-depth discussion of all criteria, essential points referring to rich rigour and credibility are addressed. Accordingly, an established stream of research into a) coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Jowett, 2003, 2008, 2009) as well as b) interpersonal conflict (e.g., Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Wachsmuth et al., 2017) provided the theoretical foundations for the design of the current study. Additionally, data was collected from diverse participants (e.g., coaches/athletes; team/individual sport) with experience in the area of inquiry (i.e., conflict). Thus, the gathered data offered rich accounts on the phenomenon under study which is reflected within the quotes provided in this manuscript. Credibility of the data analysis was further facilitated by the involvement of the co-authors who acted as critical peers by offering different perspectives and challenging the explanations and perceptions of the first author. Dissensions resulting from this process were resolved by critical discussion as well as by consulting conflict literature outside of sport (e.g., Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990; Sanford, 2012). Overall, the current research provides a meaningful contribution to the literature by forwarding a detailed understanding of coach-athlete conflict with significant practical implications.
Results

Data were divided into the five main categories (Figure 2) describing the nature of conflict by its characteristics and content (topics), as well as by cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects that were linked to the process of conflict.

Findings are illustrated using codes with examples as well as descriptive evidence as it has been recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005).

Figure 2: The categories and sub-categories describing the nature of conflict in coach-athlete relationships.

Conflict characteristics

Participants described that interpersonal conflict ranged from mild to severe (intensity), from lasting a short while (minutes) to long-term and ongoing (months, years; duration), and from occurring barely ever to nearly every day...
Athlete 1 noticed that “most of [conflict] comes in the build-up, in practice, cause you spend 95% of your time training with your coach and there is just that 5% in the competition.” However, both coaches and athletes, felt that conflict was likely to occur after competitions, especially when expectations were not met. Further, conflicts occurred at all times of the season (timing) and seemed to take place in various locations (both inductive), for example, training grounds, the competition venue, in meetings, equipment rooms and even in public (e.g., car park). Athlete 8 reported that conflict took place via phone and email. Lastly, participants described the succession of events over time leading to conflict onset, escalation and/or management:

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

Conflict topics

Participants perceived some conflicts as trivial (e.g., time management) and others as crucial (e.g., injury) for the coach-athlete relationship, and as such directly linked the conflict topic to its severity and process. Four different sub-categories of conflict topics emerged inductively from the participants’ reports: the majority of conflicts concerned sport- and lifestyle-related topics, whereas some conflicts related to individuals’ misconduct and the involvement of external parties.

Sport-related conflict topics were perceived to be directly linked to either, performance in practice or competition and included feedback, training schedules/goals and load, injuries, individual ambitions, team selection and performance.

Also, role expectations and their fulfilment were a topic of concern:
Communication was a big one […] if I text the coach, I expect a reply and if I don't get a reply, that's a massive problem. […] if people were dropped from a game if that's not communicated […] if people are not working hard in training or in matches and it's not picked up on, there's no point. (A4)

Further, lifestyle-related topics were recognized as a significant area of conflict between coaches and athletes. They concerned behaviours manifested outside the sport environment, however, they were thought to impact performance. On one hand, athlete behaviours included poor nutrition, alcohol consumption or public misbehaviour, and on the other hand coach behaviours included over-involvement with private decisions (e.g., university, work). For example, Athlete 2 reported:

[Coach] tries to take [private life] away from me, makes it part of our relationship when it should be outside, work is something different to [sport], family, friends, but then [coach] almost tries to incorporate it.

Additionally, conflict arose as a result of misconduct; behaviours that were perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate included, for example, being late, physical aggression and “if people were lying” (C2), or “clashed with [each other’s] core values” (C6), as well as behaviours that targeted the other conflict party on a personal level. Sometimes these conflicts arose out of unresolved sport-related disagreements, thus, Coach 7 explained a sport- and lifestyle-related conflict which escalated over time due to an athlete’s misconduct:

I said to him “You know, you blatantly lied to me, you told me you’ve done it running and you haven’t done it running” you know, “We talked about your behaviours and your conduct and whether they were appropriate for what you are trying to achieve and you then were still going out and getting drunk and this resulted in you doing this [injury]. I gonna make a recommendation that you are taken off the programme.”
Lastly, some participants mentioned conflict could occur due to the involvement of third parties, such as NGBs, other coaches or life partners as reported by Coach 10 who described a dispute being “about potential external influences from a life partner.” Additionally, coach 5 pointed towards conflicts arising due to other clubs trying to poach players stating that:

The guys are aspiring to play premiership rugby, so they get like drawn on by these clubs, and sudden like a drop form the heart, they are like “I can't make training tonight, I'm training with [club]” and “How long have you known? We wanna help you with this, but you just ditched us within a drop of the heart” [...] external factors like that - it's like anything in the world, the packing order, the above us they click their fingers and these guys go ...

Conflict cognition

Conflict cognition represents thought processes that occur during conflict and are linked to evaluations of the conflict situations. They may lead to conflict escalation or facilitate an initiation of conflict management. It is conflict cognition that captures thoughts that promote and hinder conflict management; all sub-categories are a result of inductive data analyses.

Participants described how initial appraisal of the situation left them often uncertain about the implications of a conflict event, doubting “What can I do?” (A10), thinking negatively of the other, helpless, insecure or worried. For instance, Coach 6 wondered “Did she use me to get here?”

During this evaluation process individuals ascribed the conflict experience to a specific source (attribution). Thus, conflict was either attributed internally to oneself (e.g., admitting a mistake), to the conflict partner (e.g., blaming) or both, as well as to external circumstances (e.g., stress due to an upcoming competition or travelling). The initial attribution often differed from an attribution made at a
later point of time during conflict. For example, Coach 6 described a specific conflict with an athlete, she initially reasoned that the difficulties they had were due to mental health issues, though subsequently she reasoned the lack of effort was at the heart of the problems they had. The coach said “I thought it's because of [athlete] learning behaviours and learning difficulties, and you really got to help the best in that, but actually they’re [expected characteristics] not there.”

Following this first appraisal of the conflict, participants explained on how this preliminary reflection influenced their behaviour. For example, a negative evaluation of the situation often seemed to lead to further conflict escalating behaviours and ineffective communication strategies. In turn, a conflict *escalating appraisal* was linked to disbelief, a perception of unfair treatment, “personal attack” (C6), or blaming the other conflict party for the conflict:

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

*Uncertainty*, on the other hand, was linked to withdrawal behaviours and was experienced by most athletes as worry and doubt about oneself, the other and/or the relationship; Athlete 5 described “I always felt not important enough, like ‘you are not good enough for me to be seen with you.” Similarly, few coaches contemplated their influence upon the individual or even team, like Coach 4 who said “I thought a few weeks ago that potentially I had lost the changing room and when you lose the changing room it's not a pleasant environment.” Lastly, a constructive *problem-orientated appraisal*, emphasized especially by coaches, was associated with an attempt to minimize conflict, and included thought processes such as considering the importance of the topic, prioritizing goals as
well as taking the conflict partners’ perspective or being concerned about the other’s feelings. For example, coach 5 expressed empathy for an athlete thinking that “he is just angry and quite upset [...] because it's a big deal for this guy, he's missing out and lashing out, it's the final.”

Conflict emotion

Conflict emotion describes affective responses that individuals experience during interpersonal conflict. Emotions were linked to conscious and subconscious cognitive processes and served as a barometer to conflict escalation. Guided by the data it was noticeable that these conflict-related emotions were distinguished in three categories: negative hard emotions, negative soft emotions and positive emotions (inductive; see Sanford, 2012). Participants referred to different emotional experiences during conflict. Negative emotions seemed to range from hard, associated with power and selfishness (e.g., “I was quite annoyed, I was a bit boiling” - C2), to soft emotions, associated with pro-social orientations and vulnerability (e.g., “I was just more gutted for him” – C4). Overall, the negative emotions experienced during conflict varied from strong, acute feelings (e.g., anger, panic) to ongoing frustration, resentment and worry. Especially, athletes mentioned how they became nervous or anxious in interpersonal exchanges with the coach in practice session and/or in meetings. Moreover, participants frequently reported feelings of regret as a consequence of conflict. Coach 7, for example, described that the athlete “was very remorseful and recognized that [he] failed me as well as failing themselves.”

Some positive emotions were also experienced with conflict situations. While some coaches felt calm and collected, like Coach 9 who stated “I was quiet, I was in control, quite calm, quite okay.”, athletes reported feeling relieved and
reassured. Athlete 3 said “I saw it coming for quite a while, so it was quite a release for me.”, and Athlete 6 perceived conflict as a chance to overcome communication barriers stating that “it was kinda relief in a way that there is some form of ice broken and we could then just discuss it.”

**Conflict behaviour**

The experienced emotions and cognitions were often accompanied by conflict behaviours displaying either *uncertainty, escalation, or problem-orientation.* These were mainly expressed through active *communication* processes between coaches and athletes during the time of conflict (all inductive). What seemed to make a difference in the development of conflict was not the one person who initiated it, but *how* the other person responded.

Thus, participants reported behaviours that prevented conflict from escalating by actively approaching the problem (*problem-orientation*). For example, Coach 1 reported “I asked her to explain what she meant with inconsistencies, and I tried to explain to her that this was my thought process and she was absolutely entitled to disagree.” It was evident from the interviews that coaches tended to react in a more controlled manner and either stepped away from the problem or facilitated rational thinking in the early stages.

In contrast, athletes’ reactions could be described as more negative and less adaptive or skilful; behaviours included crying, refusing to talk, making irrational excuses, shouting, answering back or not adhering to instructions. Athlete 9 said “I would just say ‘Okay’ and do my own thing, avoid doing that thing […] or I wouldn't do it to my full ability.” However, there were also times in which coaches employed less than desirable behaviours by shouting at their athletes or using inappropriate language. Such *escalating behaviours* mentioned
by participants also included swearing, ignoring the other, involving third parties,
not taking responsibility or being unwilling during conflict management. Other
escalating behaviours related to the communication style between coaches and
athletes during conflict: rhetorical questions, a harsh tone, loud voice, and giving
an opinion in a firm or confident manner and standing up for one’s point of view:

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

Other examples of less than optimal behaviours related to one’s experience of
uncertainty included athletes deciding to neither engage in nor trying to solve the
problem, but instead withdrawing from the situation. Thus, a common strategy
among them was to not address the problem, especially if they could not envisage
a solution. For instance, Athlete 2 explained that their coach “is a very intelligent
man and whatever you said [coach] would have a comeback for it, so it's just not
worth it.” These behaviours of uncertainty that contained an element of
resignation, insecurity or vulnerability seemed to worsen conflict, especially
during a long-lasting conflict. Coach 4 reported “I didn't answer questions well, I
felt like I was on the back foot, really the baddest of feelings [...] I didn't have an
answer for him.”

Discussion

Guided by the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships
(Wachsmuth et al., 2017) the current study aimed at understanding the nature of
coach-athlete conflict. In line with Wachsmuth et al. (2017), the qualitative data
revealed that when the topic of conflict was considered to be significant and the
relationship partner was identified as the source of interference or disagreement, coaches and athletes were likely to manifest cognitive (e.g., blame), emotional (e.g., anger) and behavioural (e.g., shouting) conflict responses which influenced the characteristics of conflict. These findings are consistent with the multi-dimensional nature of conflict reported in the literature (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Paradis et al., 2014a, 2014b; Wachsmuth et al., 2017).

**Conflict topic and characteristics**

Participants highlighted that the topic of conflict influenced the conflict processes as reflected in the behavioural, emotional and cognitive responses which in turn seemed to be linked to conflict characteristics such as intensity and/or duration. It was reported that deeply rooted or external conflicts (e.g., influence of life partner) intensified the situation and were harder to resolve than internal conflicts (e.g., training load). Four main topics emerged from the participants’ reports and included sport- and lifestyle-related topics as well as one’s misconduct or manners, and involvement of third parties. Considering the dichotomy provided by Barki and Hartwick (2004), sport- and lifestyle-related topics mainly reflected task conflicts, whereas ones’ misconduct and manners reflected social conflicts. Consistent with research in both social and sport psychology (e.g., Amason, 1996; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jowett, 2003), the current findings indicate that it was common for task and social conflicts to co-occur and/or merge. Overall, coaches and athletes referred more often to task conflicts than to social conflicts, which contradicts with the findings of Holt and colleagues’ who reported a higher number of social conflicts within female sport teams (Holt et al., 2012). Considering that coach-athlete relationships are task purposeful (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and so coaches and athletes strive for performance
achievements often agreed and understood by both, this finding is not too surprising. Besides, females operating in team sports emphasize the importance of strong personal relationships and thus may create an environment in which social conflicts are likely to erupt (Eys et al., 2015). Our study, however, did not specifically examine gender differences.

Lastly, the setting and time in which conflict arises should be taken into account. In contrast to Mellalieu et al. (2013) the current findings indicate that the majority of conflict took place within training or individual meetings rather than during competition or within social settings. Additionally, it seemed that the time of the season influenced the occurrence of conflict. However, more research is needed which investigates the determinants and outcomes linked to particular conflict characteristics.

Coaches and athletes’ responses to conflict

The current study further extents the existing work on conflict within sport relationships, which often presented a positive-negative dichotomy of conflict responses (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), by highlighting multiple levels in which coaches and athletes processed conflict resulting in diverse behavioural options during conflict episodes. An initial appraisal to the onset of conflict occurred spontaneously and was based on identifying the event as significant (or not) to themselves (cf. Fincham et al., 1990). Secondly, a more in-depth evaluation followed leading either escalating, uncertain or problem-oriented conflict responses. Accordingly, it emerged that attributions of accountability were linked to behaviours and emotions experienced. For example, blaming the conflict partner was part of an escalating response linked to negative hard emotions (e.g., feeling angry) and aggressive behaviours (e.g., yelling), which in turn intensified
and prolonged conflict (Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a; Patridge & Knapp, 2016). In addition, a perceived lack of control and influence (e.g., self-doubt) was linked to withdrawal behaviours and negative soft emotions (e.g., disappointment, worry), forming uncertain responses to conflict. In contrast to previous research (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017), some participants also referred to the experience of positive emotions (e.g., relief) and attempted to approach the problem at both a cognitive and behavioural level. This set of experiences and others alike seem to encompass problem-orientated responses to conflict.

Overall, the three identified response patterns are in contrast to what Partridge and Knapp (2016) describes as the manifestation of conflict. In their study on peer conflict in adolescent sport the authors approach conflict through a behavioural perspective highlighting victimization at the centre of conflict, while not considering related emotional and cognitive processes in either victim or perpetrator. Moreover, the representation of conflict as victimization rather aligns with bullying or emotional abuse, which indeed may cause or accompany conflict, but embody distinct concepts (Stirling, 2009). The findings of the current study, however, indicate that conflict responses of emotions, thoughts and behaviours appeared to inextricably interlinked and so one dyad member’s responses fuelled another member’s responses, reflecting high interdependency of conflict partners and as such support the self-reinforcing feedback loop described by Roberts (2006). In contrast to Roberts, however, this reciprocity seemed to occur for both, dysfunctional as well as functional responses to conflict. Considering that problem-oriented responses were primarily shown by coaches; this difference may be explained by the hierarchical relationship and role expectations (Potrac & Jones, 2009). However, there is more scope for research in this area.
Future directions and conclusion

This study represents the first systematic approach to examining interpersonal conflict in the context of coach-athlete relationships. Even though initial results shed light on the complexity of this line of inquiry, there is substantial need for further investigations. Future research should, for example, advance conflict knowledge by collecting data from entire coach-athlete dyads as there is initial evidence within the current data suggesting that perceptions of specific conflict events differ between them. Additionally, the gender composition, culture and type of relationship (e.g., typical vs atypical; see Jowett & Meek, 2000) requires further investigation. In future, different sample characteristics, such as length of relationship, performance level, sport type or training set-ups (e.g., training camps, training group) may also be worth investigating. The development of a psychometric tool to measure the nature of conflict in coach-athlete relationship may help generate knowledge about its antecedents and consequences employing cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental research. Further work that warrants attention may also target specific questions such as: Are frequent conflicts detrimental to the partnership between coaches and athletes even if resolved? How does conflict influence athletes and coaches’ wellbeing?

In summary, interpersonal conflict presents researchers in sport with a relatively new theoretical and empirical as well as measurement challenge. Clearly there is ample scope to explore and thus discover. The present study contributes to this new field of investigation by exploring nature and topics of conflict. Several recommendations can be concluded that enable practitioners to approach conflict constructively and as such enhance the effectiveness of coach-athlete dyads. Conflict is inevitable in any kind of relationships, and thus it is
important to increase coaches and athletes’ awareness and highlight that while conflict can be detrimental, it may also be beneficial if it is approached in a manner that is functional. It has been highlighted how conflict-related cognitions, emotions, and behaviours manifest both separately and together over time and as such influence the course of conflict. Thus, responding to conflicts with self-doubt, insecurity and withdrawal (uncertain response), or even angry, aggressively and self-centred (escalating response) may lead to an escalation of conflict, whereas a more problem-oriented, caring approach connected with a sense of calmness and relief potentially facilitates coping and conflict management. Overall, the current study provides a first attempt to closely investigate conflict between coaches and athletes within the context of their dyadic relationships and paves the way for enhancing the body of research within this field.
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