

The coach–athlete partnership

THE Society's 'Year of Relationships' is a piece of good fortune for researchers and practitioners like me, providing a unique opportunity to showcase an exciting and expanding field within psychology. In a sport context there are many personal relationships (e.g. coach–parent, athlete–athlete, athlete–partner) that can impact on performance, but the coach–athlete relationship is considered to be particularly crucial (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Lyle, 1999).

The coach–athlete relationship is not an add-on to, or by-product of, the coaching process, nor is it based on the athlete's performance, age or gender – instead it is the foundation of coaching. The coach and the athlete intentionally develop a relationship, which is characterised by a growing appreciation and respect for each other as individuals. Overall, the coach–athlete relationship is embedded in the dynamic and complex coaching process and provides the means by which coaches' and athletes' needs are expressed and fulfilled (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). It is at the heart of achievement and the mastery of personal qualities such as leadership, determination, confidence and self-reliance.

This article aims to offer a perspective on the coach–athlete relationship and show how sport psychology can contribute to the study of relationships whilst learning from, and building on, the work of scholars in social and relationship psychology.

The significance of the coach–athlete relationship

The significance of the coach–athlete partnership has been acknowledged by a number of official sport organisations. For example, Sports Coach UK (formerly the National Coaching Foundation) in several publications (e.g. *Working with Children*,



SOPHIA JOWETT with a contribution to the Society's 'Year of Relationships'.

1998; *Protecting Children*, 1998) has described the coach–athlete relationship in terms such as, commitment, cooperation, communication, bonds, respect, friendship, power, dependence, dislike and distrust. Moreover, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (*A Sporting Future for All*, 2000) referred to the coach–athlete partnership, and the coaches' mentoring and supportive roles, as prominent issues of coach education. Finally, UK Sport in a recent strategic document (*The UK Vision of Coaching*) stated: 'By 2012 the practice of coaching in the UK will be elevated to a profession acknowledged as central to the development of sport and the fulfilment of individual potential' (p.5).

It is perhaps surprising then that, historically, coaching has been preoccupied with merely enhancing athletes' physical, technical and strategical skills (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Now that the coach–athlete relationship is recognised as the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the development of athletes' physical and psychosocial skills, coaches' ability to create perfect working partnerships with their athletes becomes paramount. The question is 'What makes the ideal coach–athlete relationship?'

Effective versus ineffective relationships

Effective coach–athlete relationships are holistic in that the emphasis is placed on positive growth and development (i.e. 'to be the best you can be') as an athlete/coach and as a person. Effective relationships include basic ingredients such as empathic understanding, honesty, support, liking, acceptance, responsiveness, friendliness, cooperation, caring, respect and positive regard (e.g. Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). In contrast, ineffective relationships are undermined

by lack of interest and emotion, remoteness, even antagonism, deceit, exploitation and physical or sexual abuse (e.g. Balague, 1999; Brackenridge, 2001; Jowett, 2003).

Successful versus unsuccessful relationships

The nature of sports coaching implies an achievement situation, where the performance of both coach and athlete is evaluated. Thus, people are often inclined to evaluate a given coach–athlete relationship as either successful or

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unsuccessful. Successful relationships are those that have unambiguously reached a level of normative performance success (e.g. a World championship gold medal). A taxonomy that allows us to view successful versus unsuccessful and effective versus ineffective relationships together is an interesting one (Jowett, in press). An unsuccessful yet effective coach–athlete relationship will invariably have some positive outcomes for the athlete (and the coach) in terms of psychological health and well-being – but obviously not performance-related ones. Although successful relationships are desirable, without their being effective they run a risk of breaching ethical and professional issues that are associated with codes of conduct formulated to protect coaches and athletes.

Helping relationships

Carl R. Rogers explained that a helping relationship involves an ability or desire to understand the other person's meaning and feelings, an interest without being overly emotionally involved, and a strong and growing mutual liking, trust and respect between the two people. Helping

relationships are optimally effective relationships, in that they facilitate self-actualisation (i.e. 'to be the best you can be'). According to Rogers (1967), helping relationships are not exclusive to client–counsellor but include other types of relationships such as teacher–pupil and parent–child.

The task of a coach in developing optimally effective relationships that the athlete can use for growth, change and personal development is a challenging one, because it is a measure of the growth they have achieved in themselves. This implies a responsibility on the part of the coach in that they must continually strive to develop their own potentials. Ultimately, optimally effective coach–athlete relationship is reflected in the maturity and growth of both coaches and athletes.

Studying the coach–athlete relationship

Sport and exercise psychology research has largely studied the interpersonal dynamics between coaches and athletes from a leadership approach. Since the late 1970s, the multidimensional model (Chelladurai, 1993) and the mediational model (Smoll & Smith, 1989) of coach leadership have been the main frameworks for studying the behaviours, actions and styles coaches employ in their coaching. Emphasis is placed on how behaviours are perceived by the athletes and the coaches themselves, and their relative impact on outcomes such as satisfaction, self-esteem, and performance. This approach may be limited especially if one considers coach leadership as a function that can be shared ('a coach cannot do it alone') (see Jowett & Chaundy, 2004). Ultimately, a focus on what one person does to another may not accurately reflect what goes on between coaches and their athletes.

To fill this gap, over the last five years a relationship approach has resulted in the development of several conceptual models (e.g. Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Poczwadowski *et al.*, 2002; Wylleman, 2000). Although this shift opens up an exciting direction to the study of coach–athlete interpersonal dynamics, the emphasis of the majority of the proposed models is still on exploring coaches and athletes' interpersonal behaviours. Whilst there is little to argue against this investigative approach, there may be a risk of neglecting other important non-behavioural components of

THE 3 Cs CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The coach–athlete relationship is defined by mutual and causal interdependence between coaches' and athletes' feelings, thoughts and behaviours (e.g. Jowett, in press; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett *et al.*, in press). Coaches' and athletes' interconnected feelings, thoughts and behaviours have been operationalised and systematically studied through the constructs of **Closeness**, **Commitment** and **Complementarity** (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Ntoumanis, in press).

- **Closeness** describes the emotional tone of the relationship and reflects the degree to which the coach and the athlete are connected or the depth of their emotional attachment. Coaches and athletes' expressions of like, trust, respect and appreciation indicate a positive interpersonal and affective relationship.
- **Commitment** reflects coaches and athletes' intention or desire to maintain their athletic partnership over time; it is viewed as a cognitive representation of connection between the coach and the athlete.
- **Complementarity** defines the interaction between the coach and the athlete that is perceived as cooperative and effective. Complementarity reflects the affiliation motivation of interpersonal behaviours and includes behavioural properties, such as being responsive, friendly, at ease and willing.

THE CO-ORIENTATION MODEL

The construct of Co-orientation adds another layer to the study of the coach–athlete relationship by uncovering coaches' and athletes' perceptions about each other (e.g. Laing *et al.*, 1966). In the case of the coach–athlete relationship, there are two sets of interpersonal perspectives: the direct perspective and meta-perspective (e.g. Jowett *et al.*, in press). The direct perspective deals with how, for example, the athlete perceives the coach in terms of the 3 Cs (e.g. 'I trust my coach'), whereas the meta-perspective reflects the athlete's ability to accurately infer the coach's 3 Cs (e.g. 'My coach trusts me'). This allows the assessment of three dimensions of Co-orientation (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett *et al.*, in press):

- **actual similarity** (e.g. 'I trust my coach' and 'I trust my athlete');
- **assumed similarity** (e.g. 'I trust my coach' and 'I think my coach trusts me'); and
- **empathic understanding** (e.g. 'I think my coach trusts me' and 'I trust my athlete').

relationships (Vergeer, 2000), such as thoughts and feelings. This is where the conceptual models of the 3 Cs and Co-orientation come in (see box, p.413).

A series of recent research studies has demonstrated that high scores along the 3 Cs dimensions are associated with higher levels of satisfaction with performance and personal treatment (Jowett & Don Carolis, 2003), higher levels of team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), higher levels of harmonious passion toward the activity – as opposed to obsessive passion (Olympiou *et al.*, 2004), and lower levels of role ambiguity in team sports (Olympiou *et al.*, 2005).

Co-orientation has recently been quantitatively examined in a study I conducted with David Clark-Carter (2005). The study examined empathic understanding (or accuracy) and assumed similarity in coaches' and athletes' perceptions about their athletic relationship. A total of 121 coach–athlete dyads completed self-report measures of their direct-perspective and meta-perspective for closeness, commitment, and complementarity. We found that athletes were more understanding or accurate in identifying the specific content of their coaches' feelings in terms of closeness. It was proposed that due to athletes' role in the relationship as the more vulnerable in terms of expert knowledge, power, and authority, athletes' higher levels of empathic understanding in terms of closeness cause them to feel more in control, comfortable and confident. Another finding revealed that athletes from moderately developed relationships displayed higher levels of empathic understanding in terms of commitment and complementarity. Perhaps athletes in the earlier stages of their relationship are motivated to observe their coaches closely in an attempt to build their common ground. Finally, female athletes displayed higher levels of assumed similarity in terms of commitment. Perhaps female athletes may choose to display greater levels of assumed similarity in an effort to affirm, support or indeed enhance their mental presentations of self (i.e. that they are worthy of their coaches' attention).

Conflict and communication

The measurement of the 3 Cs and Co-orientation allows us to relationally analyse coach–athlete dyads and to identify problem areas (e.g. Jowett & Cockerill,

2002). Different dimensions of Co-orientation can play an important diagnostic role in identifying ineffective or dysfunctional coach–athlete relationships by uncovering the dyad's points of disagreement, misunderstanding or dissimilarity across the 3 Cs. For instance, research has shown that athletes and coaches need to 'get on' with one another (e.g. Jowett & Meek, 2000); however, getting along is difficult if coaches fail to accurately understand the athlete's intentions or feelings.

Given that we are not all mindreaders, conflict in the relationship is inevitable (e.g. Greenleaf *et al.*, 2001; Scanlan *et al.*, 1991). Various elements can lead to conflict – for example, lack of commitment (including compromises and sacrifices), lack of a balanced approach of connectedness and autonomy, and riskier and closer self-disclosure in the absence of trust (Jowett, 2003).

A series of qualitative case studies that we have conducted over the last five years (e.g. Jowett & Cockerill, 2003) shows that

communication is an important unifying relational component. Communication promotes the development of shared knowledge and understanding about various issues (e.g. goals, beliefs, opinions, values) and forms the basis for initiating, maintaining, and terminating the coach–athlete relationship. Particularly in youth sport, communication that evolves around spontaneous dialogues of daily activities related to school and training has been shown to form the basis for developing trust in the coach (Timson-Katchis & Jowett, 2004). Thus, coaches that create opportunities for talk and disclosure related to the athletes' daily activities are more likely to develop trustworthy coach–athlete relationships.

Mapping out the future

In our Relationship Laboratory at Loughborough University, we are conducting a series of prospective and longitudinal studies that tap into motivational perspectives, conflict,

relationship styles, social networks, interpersonal perceptions and transitional issues of interpersonal relationships in sport. We hope to develop an evidence-based approach to practice of sports coaching and coaching education. Ultimately, the generated knowledge and understanding will help coaches create a certain type of relationship that athletes can use toward becoming independent, self-reliant, disciplined and successful athletes and persons.

The progress of such research can be facilitated if policy makers (including national governing bodies in sport) consider investing in relationship research so that important sporting issues of national concern are further explored and addressed. The field of interpersonal relationships in sport was described as an 'uncharted territory' not that long ago (Wylleman, 2000), however, the progress since then is extraordinary. The very nature of sport has provided sport psychology researchers a valuable naturalistic laboratory to study

alongside the coach–athlete relationship, athlete–parent and peer relations. Thus, paraphrasing Berscheid's (1999) assertion, I would like to think that it is not long before we start evidencing the greening of a science of relationships in sport settings.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Is the gender of the coach and the athlete a determinant of the quality and content of the relationship established?

How is the coach–athlete relationship likely to change over time?

How appropriate or necessary is it to study the coach–athlete relationship via the application of relationship theories and models developed to examine relational behaviour in romantic, married and other types of relationships?

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