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Third party interventions in coach-athlete conflict: can sport psychology practitioners offer the necessary support?

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2020.1723737>

PUBLISHER

Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Applied Sport Psychology on 5 Feb 2020, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10413200.2020.1723737>.

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Wachsmuth, Svenja, Sophia Jowett, and Chris Harwood. 2020. "Third Party Interventions in Coach-athlete Conflict: Can Sport Psychology Practitioners Offer the Necessary Support?". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/13607552.v1>.

1 **Third party interventions in coach-athlete conflict: Can sport psychology practitioners**
2 **offer the necessary support?**

3 The relationship athletes develop with their coaches is instrumental for improved sport
4 performances and wellbeing (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). Sport psychologists have been
5 encouraged to facilitate the development of effective coach-athlete relationships and may also
6 play a vital part in dealing with disruptions, such as interpersonal conflict. With this in mind,
7 the present study aimed to explore sport psychologists' roles in preventing and managing
8 coach-athlete conflict, as well as to examine potential challenges in doing so. Data were
9 collected via sixteen semi-structured interviews with experienced sport psychology
10 practitioners. A thematic analysis resulted in two overarching themes. The first theme
11 encapsulated *roles of sport psychology practitioners in managing coach-athlete conflict*. The
12 six identified subthemes included such roles as educating sport participants, facilitating
13 dyadic interactions, or protecting individual conflict parties. The second overarching theme
14 covered *challenges perceived by sport psychology practitioners* when providing support to
15 coaches and athletes, the five subthemes included, for example, environmental and
16 professional concerns. Based on this study, practical recommendations for the education of
17 sport psychologists are drawn. These may include training in conflict prevention, mediation or
18 even organizational change. Applied sport psychologists should furthermore be better
19 prepared to cope with and manage power differences between themselves and others as well
20 as between the various members of sport organizations (e.g., coaches, athletes, manager).

21 *Key words:* Conflict management, communication, mediation, coaching, ethical practice

22 **Lay summary**

23 The relationship between coaches and athletes is crucial for sport performance and individual
24 wellbeing. Thus, the presented study explored how sport psychology practitioners may
25 facilitate this relationship during times of interpersonal difficulties and conflict by providing
26 information, practicing interpersonal skills and mediating between conflict partners.

27 **Third party interventions in coach-athlete conflict: Can sport psychology practitioners**
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29 Though sport psychologists are often hired to focus on performance-enhancement
30 through mental skills training (e.g., Wrisberg, Loberg, Simpson, Withycombe, & Reed, 2010;
31 Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, & Zizzi, 2013), their remit can also cover a wider range
32 of roles and responsibilities within diverse sport settings. Their work may, for example, target
33 athletes' abilities to cope with injury and rehabilitation, to overcome competitive anxiety and
34 withstand performance pressure, or to manage stress in general; it may also include life skills
35 training more broadly (e.g., time management, goal setting). Additionally, sport psychologists
36 have been suggested to offer pastoral care for athletes as well as to ensure sport participants'
37 overall wellbeing (e.g., Cook & Fletcher, 2017; Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Wrisberg et al.,
38 2010; Zakrajsek et al., 2013). Moreover, Cook and Fletcher (2017) emphasized elite coaches'
39 desire to work closely with sport psychologists to support their management of personal
40 demands within performance environments, as well as to synchronize coaches and staff
41 members' messages communicated to performers. Thus, while coaches were concerned that
42 sport psychologists potentially undermined their authority and presented a threat to coach-
43 athlete relationships, they also recognized sport psychologists' potential to establish a
44 common vision and effective working relationships by coordinating communicative processes
45 within an organization (Cook & Fletcher, 2017). Overall, these findings align with the
46 overarching tasks sport psychologists have been given in regards to shaping interpersonal
47 processes, such as enhancing communication skills, increasing coaching effectiveness through
48 leadership training, or promoting intra-team/ -organization relationships via teambuilding and
49 conflict management (e.g., Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Langan, Blake, & Lonsdale, 2013;
50 Rhind & Jowett, 2012; Vealey, 2017; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2010; Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

51 The importance of effective conflict management in the pursuit of close, trusting and
52 collaborative sport relationships has been highlighted in recent research (e.g., Rhind & Jowett,

53 2012; Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017). Within sports coaching and
54 psychology, the topic of conflict has recently received some focused attention. Aligning with
55 Barki and Hartwick's (2004) multidimensional conceptualization, interpersonal conflict has
56 been defined as "a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement [...] that is
57 manifested through negative cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions" (Wachsmuth et
58 al., 2017; p.89). While conflict has generally been considered a dysfunctional process, recent
59 studies on conflict in sports show that effective conflict management may help to negotiate
60 potentially negative outcomes (e.g., stress reeducation, negative emotions) and even facilitate
61 positive consequences (e.g., Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2018). For
62 instance, a constructive approach to conflict marked by open communication, mutual
63 understanding and willingness to find acceptable solutions for both sides, may enable athletes
64 and coaches to form even closer working partnerships through the re-alignment of
65 expectations, values and goals. However, given the environmental challenges within high
66 performance settings (e.g., high pressure, hierarchical structures) as well as individuals'
67 personal characteristics in regards to, for example, maturity and skill level, effective conflict
68 management is not an easy endeavor. Hence, sport participants reportedly turned to third
69 parties to seek support through these challenging times (e.g., Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012;
70 Vealey, 2017). In addition to family and friends, who may provide a safe space to vent
71 frustration and seek emotional support sport psychologists can promote conflict prevention
72 and management within sport relationships by offering advice, instilling accountability, or
73 facilitating the conflict resolution process itself (Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2018).
74 While there is some empirical evidence on team-focused interventions aiming at promoting
75 positive athlete-athlete interactions (e.g., team building, mutual disclosure, conflict
76 management; Holt et al., 2012; Martin, Carron, & Burke, 2009; Vealey, 2017), limited
77 information is available on how sport psychologists may support coaches and athletes in their
78 efforts to form effective relationships and dealing with crises, such as conflict,

79 misunderstandings or incompatibility. Yet, the coach-athlete relationship is understood to be
80 vital to sport performance as well as for the overall development and wellbeing of athletes
81 (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and therefore, its effectiveness and quality should be a major
82 concern for sport organizations.

83 Vealey's (2017) case study illustrated an applied example within which sport psychology
84 consultants approached conflict management in sport teams and coach-athlete relationships by
85 improving communication, fostering mutual disclosure and instilling a value-driven sporting
86 culture. As communication provides an important medium for improving the quality of
87 interpersonal relationships, the strategies outlined within the COMPASS model (Rhind &
88 Jowett, 2010) may provide a theoretical basis for building interventions that aim to promote
89 more effective coach-athlete interaction. Within this model, seven communicative strategies
90 are outlined which are thought to facilitate closeness, commitment and collaboration between
91 coaches and athletes. Furthermore, Rhind and Jowett (2012) encouraged sport psychologists
92 to "think dyadically" (p. 234) and offered advice on how to utilize these COMPASS strategies
93 within their applied work. They explained that by enhancing open channels of communication
94 and honesty as well as providing support, offering assurance and highlighting the expectations
95 while outlining the consequences if expectations are not fulfilled, instances of conflict may
96 not occur or can be resolved quicker if they do occur. Acknowledging that conflict may also
97 occur within well-functioning coach-athlete relationships, it was further recommended to
98 focus on the roots of disagreements rather than "treating the symptoms" (p. 236), and to
99 support relationship members to communicate openly in an effort to identify mutually
100 acceptable solutions to problems, as well as to review and revise adopted solutions over time.
101 As such Rhind and Jowett (2012) highlighted sport psychologists' responsibility to help
102 prevent and manage coach-athlete conflict. However, while these suggestions seem plausible
103 and are supported by empirical research conducted on the coach-athlete relationship, they
104 may not reflect the professional experiences of sport psychology practitioners.

105 In contrast to the dearth of research that examines the role of sport psychology
106 practitioners in situations where coaches and athletes deal with challenge and conflict, ample
107 literature exists on conflict management and resolution within other domains (e.g., business,
108 psychotherapy). Thus, a wide range of approaches has been forwarded to successfully
109 negotiate conflict within interpersonal relationships aiming at either directly solving the issue
110 at hand or improving the relationship in general to promote long-term collaboration (Fisher,
111 2001); these approaches include traditional mediation, informal third party consultations or
112 conciliation, and conflict resolution training (e.g., Fisher, 2001; Kressel, 2014). Of these,
113 mediation has received the greatest research attention and is considered one of the most
114 effective methods for managing moderate to high intensity conflict (Kressel, 2014). It is
115 understood to be a rather formal, task-oriented process often utilized in professional settings.
116 Besides mediation, relationship-oriented approaches such as conciliation or third party
117 consultations have been recommended for conflicts of lower intensity (Fisher, 2001). These
118 may be described as “informal communicative links” (Fisher, 2001; p. 11) aiming at reducing
119 friction and increasing rapport between conflict parties. Overall, third party interventions
120 seem to facilitate conflict resolution and additionally buffer negative conflict-induced
121 consequences (e.g., Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Being aware of established third party
122 interventions in non-sport settings, research is warranted investigating whether and how these
123 approaches inform the conflict management practice within sport.

124 In conclusion, few recommendations have been made in regards to sport
125 psychologists’ roles and possibilities to facilitate coach-athlete interactions and promote high
126 quality working relationships, as well as to intervene in conflicts among athletes (e.g., Holt et
127 al., 2012; Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2017). While the conflict management strategies
128 proposed within the sport psychology literature seem to be similar to established practices in
129 other settings, they are neither substantiated by empirical research nor described with enough
130 precision to allow transfer into sport psychologists’ own practices. Concerns may also arise

131 about the overall contextual circumstances impeding sport psychologists' opportunities to
132 support coaches and athletes in conflict; for example, in regards to psychologists' general
133 roles and responsibilities within sport organizations. Thus, the current study aimed to, on one
134 hand, explore sport psychologists' roles in and approaches to managing coach-athlete conflict,
135 and, on the other hand, to examine barriers encountered by sport psychologists when working
136 with coach-athlete dyads in conflict.

137 **Methodology**

138 The present study was approached from a pragmatic philosophical standpoint which
139 describes the construction of knowledge (i.e., warranted assertions) through competent
140 inquiry by the functionality of individuals' actions within a given context (Dewey, 1922).
141 Thus, truth and knowledge are not external entities that can be discovered but rather represent
142 practical beliefs about the usefulness of warranted assertions which is ultimately formed
143 through social interactions. Drawing on the experiences of sport psychology practitioners as a
144 community engaged in high-performance sport (i.e., context), the current study explored
145 individuals' practical knowledge as it relates to conflict prevention and management (i.e.,
146 action) to identify functional actions which may in future be adopted and further improved by
147 practitioners working within such settings. As research underpinned by pragmatism may be
148 expected to provide immediate real-world impact, the current study's quality may not only be
149 evaluated based on methodological rigor but also by the applicability and additional benefit of
150 these findings to sport psychology practice. While the study does not aim to forward "rules"
151 for conflict management within sports in general, practitioners working in performance
152 settings are provided with information to which they can contrast their personal experiences.
153 This information may facilitate reflective practice and expand personal resources in terms of
154 specific conflict management strategies while considering specific environmental barriers.
155 Moreover, by shedding light on community practices and experienced challenges as well as
156 by pointing out alternative behaviors, the accumulated experiences and knowledge of

157 practitioners can help to shape and transform future conflict-related practices within
158 performance sport.

159 **Participants.** A purposeful sample consisting of sixteen sport psychology
160 practitioners (SPP) working within the German ($n = 9$; $M_{age} = 45,56$ years; 7 male, 2 female)
161 and British ($n = 7$; $M_{age} = 44,71$ years; 6 male, 1 female) sport system was recruited for this
162 study. While participants were chosen from both countries for mainly practical reasons (e.g.,
163 accessibility), this decision can be justified considering the well-developed sports systems in
164 Germany and the UK as well as the integration of sport psychology services on a performance
165 level. Throughout the data analysis, especially the first author, who is of German origin but
166 had been living in the UK at the time of data collection, paid attention to possible cross-
167 cultural differences which are addressed within the results and discussion sections.

168 Several inclusion criteria were employed to ensure participants' capability to offer in-
169 depth information on the topic of interest while, at the same time, collecting a range of
170 experiences within diverse sport environments. In addition to holding a recognized
171 qualification in sport psychology within the respective country¹, participants were required to
172 have at least three years of practical work experience delivering sport psychology services to
173 athletes and coaches within high-performance sports (e.g., international level; professional
174 sports). Moreover, participants had to confirm previous circumstances in which they were
175 confronted with coach-athlete conflict in their role as a sport psychology provider. These
176 criteria were chosen above and beyond the minimal accreditation requirements as these differ
177 between both countries. This way, similar baseline levels of consultancy experience could be
178 guaranteed. Overall, participants in this study had been delivering sport psychology services
179 between 5 and 43 years; averaging a work experience of 14.6 years (German sample; 5-43
180 years) and 13.0 years (British sample, 5-22 years). They had worked within various settings,

¹ BPS Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology - Stage 2/ BASES chartered sport and exercise scientist; sport psychological expert with the Germany Society of Sport Psychology

181 including freelance work with individual athletes and coaches, as part of Olympic/
182 Paralympic (e.g., canoeing, beach volleyball, gymnastics, diving, skiing) associations as well
183 as within professional sport teams (e.g., football, handball, hockey). It should also be noted
184 that the majority of British participants worked solely within sport, while German participants
185 could draw on a variety of professional experiences within clinical or organizational settings.
186 Participants further based their practice on diverse philosophical beliefs and practical
187 approaches (e.g., solution-focused coaching, humanistic approaches), and also differed in
188 regards to their own prior involvement in sports (i.e., performance/coaching level).

Data collection

189 After ethical clearance was obtained from the authors' university's ethics committee
190 participants were contacted via standardized emails, via telephone or personally. They were
191 informed about the content and purpose of the study, made aware that interviews would be
192 audio-recorded and parts of the data may be used for scientific publications under which
193 circumstances their anonymity would be protected. The interview guide was based on
194 previous research into interpersonal conflict in sports (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Wachsmuth et
195 al., 2017) and contained 26 questions across four parts: 1) a main introduction, 2) SPPs
196 perception about coach-athlete conflict and their role within it, 3) challenges in dealing with
197 coach-athlete conflict, and 4) a reflective summary and outlook.

198 Before each interview, participants were asked to provide basic demographic
199 information, such as experience as a SPP and work conducted in other fields; they were also
200 given a short summary of the interview process. The introductory questions of the interview
201 focused on participants' development as a SPP covering one's professional training,
202 philosophical approach and views about the importance of coach-athlete and client-SPP
203 relationships. This first part aimed to create a comfortable atmosphere and facilitate
204 researcher-participant rapport, as well as to help develop an understanding of participants'
205 perspectives on working with coach-athlete dyads. Within the main part of the interview,

206 questions covered SPPs' experiences of coach-athlete conflict (e.g., "What different conflicts
207 between coaches/athletes have you experienced in your work as a SPP?") and their
208 approaches to prevent and manage coach-athlete conflict (e.g., "What methods do you employ
209 to prevent or manage conflict? What is your role during an episode of ongoing coach-athlete
210 conflict?"). Subsequently, participants were asked to reflect upon barriers or challenges they
211 perceived when managing coach-athlete conflict (e.g., "What ethical issues have you come
212 across when working with coach-athlete dyads in conflict?"). Finally, the interview concluded
213 with a reflective summary of the participants' account on coach-athlete conflict (e.g., "How
214 would you reflect on your experiences during coach-athlete conflict?") and an invitation to
215 share any other thoughts they may have had on the topic.

216 Interviews lasted between 46 and 105 minutes ($M_{duration\ GER} = 65.5$, $M_{duration\ UK} = 79.1$)
217 and equated to 491 pages of double-spaced transcripts. All interviews were carried out in
218 personal meetings ($n = 11$; 46 to 105 min) or via Skype ($n = 5$; 48 to 90 min). The semi-
219 structured nature of the interviews allowed for some degree of flexibility and as such ensured
220 a naturally flowing conversation in which the interviewer had the opportunity to prompt
221 responses of participants to gain further in-depth information. Moreover, the study was led by
222 the first author who has experience in qualitative research and whose own sport psychology
223 background further promoted rapport between interviewer and interviewees. Additionally, the
224 main researcher was familiar with some participants which may have facilitated rapport with
225 these individuals. However, no systematic differences regarding the length and depth of these
226 interviews were observed in such cases where the participant had already known the
227 researcher in some capacity. Notes taken during the interviews and as part of personal
228 reflections supported the data analysis process.

Data analysis

229 **Thematic analyses.** An inductive thematic analysis of all interview transcripts was
230 conducted to identify common patterns across participants' reports (Braun, Clarke, & Weate,

231 2017). This was initially done separately for all participants, before a cross-case analysis was
232 carried out. The data analysis followed the approach forwarded by Braun et al. (2017). Thus,
233 the main researcher familiarized herself with the interviews by re-listening to the audio-tapes
234 as well as reading carefully through the transcripts. This also involved an initial semantic
235 (e.g., misuse of sensitive information) and latent (e.g., experiences of internal turmoil due to
236 conflicting expectations) coding of the data as well as taking reflective notes about the
237 researcher's understanding of potential questions about the data. Moreover, initial codes (e.g.,
238 opportunity to vent frustration, facilitate self-reflection, help understand other's perspective)
239 were explored to form connections between the participants' reports and as such to identify
240 shared, underlying concepts and patterns within the data set. This clustering process resulted
241 in a preliminary set of lower-order themes, for example, SPPs' function as a *sounding board*,
242 *translator* or *consultant*. Thereafter, connections were drawn between the lower-order themes
243 combining similar data patterns into larger organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2019; e.g.,
244 SPPs' *role as an educator, facilitator, or protector*). While here described in a linear fashion,
245 the process of clustering and re-clustering themes and subthemes underwent multiple
246 iterations. Additionally, all themes were critically reviewed by revisiting the original
247 interview transcripts in order to contextualize participants' accounts and thus add depth to the
248 interpretation of the researcher (Braun et al., 2017, 2019). Moreover, by placing participants'
249 quotes back into context it was possible to see as to whether these actually addressed the
250 theme they were intended to. Continuously engaging with the transcripts also ensured that the
251 generated themes were represented within the data meeting the pragmatist assumption that
252 warranted assertions (i.e., knowledge) need to be supported by sufficient reason. Within this
253 step, minor changes in the organization (i.e., hierarchy, clustering) of the themes were
254 undertaken before notes and preliminary descriptions were refined into final theme
255 definitions. These definitions encapsulated the essence of each theme and outlined the

256 individual links to the main research question. Finally, higher-order themes were grouped into
257 overarching themes (*roles, challenges*) marking the distinct structure of the data.

258 **Methodological rigor.** Several measures were taken to ensure *rigor* of the data
259 analysis within this study. For example, the analyses were supported by reflective notes and
260 visual maps of the data as well as regularly discussed with both co-authors to facilitate
261 reflection and critical thinking of the researcher (e.g., Braun et al., 2017). By initially
262 analyzing every interview individually equal attention has been given to every single
263 participant rather than creating themes based on few salient examples (Braun et al., 2017).
264 Moreover, independent sport psychology practitioners and researchers acted as *critical friends*
265 in the final stages of data analyses (Smith & McGannon, 2017). The critical feedback offered
266 on the results supported the definition and structuring of final higher- and lower-order themes.
267 Overall, the developed themes provide a *coherent account* (Smith & Caddick, 2012) of how
268 SPPs can support coaches and athletes in preventing and managing interpersonal conflict.
269 They describe distinct roles and approaches to dealing with such difficult situations and also
270 consider situational circumstances, such as environmental barriers and individual challenges.
271 Aligning with the pragmatist perspective and based on the concept of *natural transferability*
272 (Smith, 2018), the audience of this paper may recognize parallels to their own professional
273 experiences and derive practical knowledge for their sport psychology practice from the
274 findings of this study.

275 **Results**

276 The thematic analysis resulted in the two overarching themes of *sport psychology*
277 *practitioners' (a) roles in managing coach-athlete relationships* (6 subthemes; see figure 1)
278 and (b) *perceived challenges* (5 subthemes; see figure 2).

Sport psychology practitioners' roles in managing coach-athlete relationships

279 The first higher-order theme covers six distinct lower-order themes describing the
280 perceived roles and responsibilities of SPPs in preventing and managing conflict between

281 coaches and athletes. It should be emphasized that most participants referred to all of these
282 roles across different conflicts with different coach-athlete dyads. However, the extent to
283 which practitioners engaged in these roles differed between particular instances of conflict.

284 *** insert figure 1 ***

285 **The SPPs as an educator.** As an educator, participants explicitly provided
286 information (e.g., in presentations, continued professional development, formal workshops) to
287 athletes and coaches which they deemed important for conflict prevention and management.
288 These were oftentimes one-off sessions covering a wide range of topics directly or indirectly
289 related to interpersonal conflict. While some topics were perceived relevant to either athletes
290 or coaches, a set of topics could be identified as essential for both. These core topics included
291 communication and conflict skills (e.g., expressing personal needs, active listening), self-
292 regulation (e.g., managing own emotions), personality (e.g., personality profiles), and stress
293 management skills, with one German participant stating:

294 I'm working in coach education. So in Basketball one aspect is self-regulation,
295 so coaches learning to regulate themselves. I'm also doing that for the coach
296 academy in [city], there I'll also talk about work-life balance and cover
297 communication strategies. (GER-4)

298 Overall, SPPs reported a wide range of topics related to conflict which they may cover within
299 *coach education*. Depending on the needs of clients and the educational setting (, small
300 groups, CPD courses) the content varied between areas of social psychology (e.g., leadership,
301 group dynamics), developmental psychology (e.g., development of attachment styles and
302 effects on individuals' self-regulation/interpersonal skills), psychodynamics (e.g., emotional
303 suppression, counter-/projection), as well as consultancy skills (e.g., caregiver sensitivity,
304 Littlefoot approach; Petitpas, 2000). Conflict was highlighted as a process that naturally
305 occurs within relationships, especially within high performance environments, with one
306 British participant emphasizing the importance of general education in this context:

307 [We] try to raise awareness through education. So actually to come in and
308 normalize dysfunction by understanding human development and human
309 behavior in performance contexts. So in terms of when we put ourselves into
310 pressured environments or pressured systems. [...] You can come in at a level
311 which is education for everybody and through that hopefully people can
312 recognize some of what you are talking to and see it in themselves, see it in
313 people they work with. And that gives permission to be spoken about more
314 generally. (GB-7)

315 While also covering a few aspects of social psychology (e.g., group dynamics/team building)
316 within *athlete education*, SPPs mainly focused on psychological skills (e.g., traditional mental
317 skills, acceptance commitment training), and coping with set-backs or negative feedback. For
318 example, a German SPP (GER-4) offered “a workshop at the Olympic training center with the
319 topic ‘Dealing with criticism’ [...] the aim was to train unambiguous communication.”
320 Overall, these educational sessions introduced important information and basic competencies,
321 however, they were not set up for guided skills development nor did they intend to manage an
322 explicit case of coach-athlete conflict.

323 **The SPPs as a consultant.** In contrast to the role of an educator, participants focused
324 on long-term skill development (e.g., communication skills) and individualized problem-
325 solving (e.g., dealing with undesired behaviors) when engaging in the role of a consultant.
326 Accordingly, they mainly worked with small groups or individuals over a prolonged period of
327 time on a specific problem or skill set. For example, participants mentioned how they aimed
328 at improving the quality of coach-athlete relationships by developing the social skills
329 necessary to build these connections:

330 I’m thinking of a situation with a development swimmer, from the beginning I
331 had an agreement with the coach “This young man needs guidance as to how to

332 shape social processes” – he doesn’t have any idea how to keep agreements or
333 solve conflicts. (GER-5)

334 This process often included the development and practical training of communication
335 strategies as outlined by one of the British SPPs:

336 I have a real responsibility to upskill other members of staff, to upskill coaches,
337 to upskill the physios and sport scientists around things like managing conflict
338 or how to deal with relationship conflicts and building support networks for
339 those different people within a high-performance environment. (GB-5)

340 In regards to coaches, an emphasis was put on the development of leadership skills and an
341 optimal team environment. However, while SPPs perceived that “The best work you’ll do is
342 working through coach and cultivating that climate” (GB-7), the work with coaches often
343 proved to be challenging and frequently required a less direct, more tacit nudging approach
344 (e.g., providing bits of information, indirect suggestions, reinforcing desired behaviors).

345 Yet, it was not always possible to work with coaches or influence the overall team
346 environment, therefore, participants described how they would work on improving athletes’
347 mindset, motivation, and assertiveness over the course of multiple individual sessions. For
348 example, one athlete received “assertiveness training [...], three or four sessions [...] get them
349 to understand that [talking to the coach] was achievable and possible, and the technique that
350 they could use to try to do that” (GB-6). However, SPP consultancy was not only important to
351 prevent conflict, but also to cope with conflict and its potential negative consequences, for
352 example, by strengthening individuals’ coping mechanisms (e.g., gaining distance, managing
353 emotions, seeking support).

354 **The SPPs as an analyst and action planner.** Whereas the first two roles as an
355 educator and consultant included a direct focus on conflict as well as a more general
356 developmental approach, SPPs’ function as an analyst and action planner refers to specific
357 conflict events. Thus, as an analyst and action planner participants aimed at a) identifying and

358 assessing explicit situations of conflict within coach-athlete dyads, b) analyzing the reasons
359 for these conflicts, and c) developing strategies to manage specific coach-athlete conflicts.

360 To identify (potential) conflict, participants observed individuals' behaviors (e.g.,
361 body language) and coach-athlete interactions (e.g., communication), as well as assessed
362 situational and personal factors which would contribute to conflict (e.g., perceived stress,
363 personality). Often, SPPs were also directly approached by coaches and athletes asking for
364 advice. Participants further explained how they would aim at gathering information, for
365 example, via observations or interviews in order to understand the complexities of the specific
366 conflict event. A German SPP emphasized the importance of a "clean diagnosis" by
367 "primarily doing training observations [...and] conducting interviews and having
368 conversations with coaches and athletes, and if necessary also using a scale" (GER-7). Formal
369 psychometric tools like personality tests were mainly used by British SPPs to support the
370 assessment process, but also to identify potential areas of future conflict (e.g., due to
371 contrasting values, personality characteristics or communication styles) for which 'What-if
372 scenarios' could be created to avoid a potential escalation:

373 You can always pre-empt the conflict, it's hard to find the time and space for
374 this, but if you do, you can really plan on "what situation might occur?" and
375 "how can we support that before it happens?" [...] it comes down to having that
376 psychologically informed environment where you know your practices are
377 having a positive impact on the athletes' psychological state. (GB-4)

378 Within individual or small group sessions, SPPs further aimed at analyzing conflicts by
379 defining the core problem, inquiring about conflict promoting factors and identifying potential
380 solutions. Some British participants referred to multidisciplinary team case formulations
381 which they either took part in as a staff member or led as an external consultant:

382 One thing that we try and do is what we call a MDT case formulation, where
383 we have, so the player in question that we are kinda looking to discuss, we will

384 normally have the two coaches that work with the player, the sport scientist, the
385 video analyst, myself as a psychologist and who often facilitates that session is
386 my boss [senior SPP] who is less involved –and we’ll review the conflict as a
387 MDT and try and resolve why this conflict is occurring, so why this player is
388 struggling with this relationship or is struggling with his position in the team,
389 information sharing through what we call an MDT case formulation conference
390 – we all sit around the table, we share information, we identify what needs to
391 change, what are the action points. (GB-5)

392 An integral part of these MDT case formulations seemed to be the compilation of an action
393 plan which coaches and staff members were encouraged to comply with to solve conflicts
394 with specific athletes. Similarly, SPPs reported planning further actions with individual
395 clients whereby they usually focused on the performance-oriented purpose of the coach-
396 athlete relationship but also considered the wellbeing of conflict parties. SPPs gave detailed
397 insight about the content of these individual conversations which covered, for example,
398 considerations about one’s own and the other party’s goals, specific behavioral strategies to
399 achieve these goals, as well as planning and practicing communication strategies to approach
400 an issue with the conflict partner:

401 What I do is to think, together with the athlete, about possible solutions. So
402 initially we may look at “What was that actually supposed to mean?!” We work
403 together on the possibility to directly address it, so to say or ask something.
404 Maybe also consider a behavioral experiment, depending on whether it is
405 actually just a concern that the athlete may have. However, a lot of the time
406 athletes seek a conversation alone and we prepare before what say want to say
407 and also practice it in the form of a role play. (GER-4)

408 **The SPPs as a counsellor.** Compared to the previous three themes in which
409 participants adopted a practitioner-led approach, the role as a counsellor describes a rather

410 client-led approach to manage specific situations of conflict usually working with only one of
411 the relationship members. For example, one participant shared “All I’ll ever do generally
412 speaking is listen, offer opportunities to reconnect with that person, but most of all, hold up
413 that mirror. I find people get to their own conclusions quite quickly” (GB-4). Further, SPPs
414 reported how they acted as a sounding board for athletes and coaches and as such provided
415 opportunities to openly express emotions and vent frustration as well as a safe place for
416 “saying what cannot be said” (GB-7). Thus, an important element of SPPs’ role as counsellor
417 was to facilitate self-regulation and self-reflection. This included realizing that one’s
418 perception may be “a truth but not *the* truth” (GER-5) and reflecting upon the questions
419 ‘What is my part in the conflict?’ and ‘How do I come across?’. As a result of these
420 conversations, athletes and coaches further analyzed the situation with SPPs or made their
421 own conclusions about how to approach conflict so that often *no further action* was needed.
422 One participant (GB-2) recognized that “sometimes in conflict, there can be a cooling off
423 period, it doesn’t necessarily need an intervention” and explained “sport is pressured, it’s a
424 pressurized environment, as it should be in such a competitive arena, so conflict is possibly
425 just a by-product of the environment.”

426 **The SPPs as a facilitator.** However, at times SPPs perceived it as necessary to
427 directly intervene in coach-athlete conflict. Overall, three different approaches were identified
428 which aimed at enhancing interpersonal processes between sport participants; these ranged
429 from initiating coach-athlete conversations to moderating group sessions and usually involved
430 working with all conflict parties, either individually or mutually together (cf. counsellor).

431 *Forming a bridge between coaches and athletes.* An important part of this role was to
432 increase mutual understanding, thus, SPPs often acted as a translator of individuals’
433 personality or helped to understand different opinions by asking directive questions,
434 explaining complex situations or challenging individuals’ ways of thinking. One participant

435 described a severe conflict occurring during a major competition which caused a complete
436 breakdown of communication between a coach and their athletes:

437 It was mainly about trying to make them understand how the other perceived
438 the situation. I think that was the most important part, simply to explain the
439 athlete why the coach and NGB reacted like they did. And then [the athlete]
440 defended herself, did the same with the other athlete, and then I needed to
441 explain the athletes' position to the coach. So I think, I was more supporting
442 communication because they couldn't manage themselves. (GER-9)

443 SPPs further formed a bridge between coaches and athletes by focusing on common values
444 and goals as well as explaining individuals' behavioral preferences. Thus, SPPs enabled them
445 to better adapt to one another, especially under stressful or pressurized circumstances:

446 The athlete is now valuing the coach very differently based on the work we've
447 been doing on perceptions and evaluations. For me it's not necessarily trying to
448 tackle the conflict itself, it's about aligning those two individual outcome
449 beliefs, values and core principles. It's about synchronizing their beliefs, that's
450 when you see people thriving in an environment, and the conflict becomes very
451 healthy in a challenging way. (GB-3)

452 In contrast, few participants also mentioned how it was vital to continuously manage the
453 relationship between coaches and athletes who were involved in long-term, seemingly
454 unresolvable conflict:

455 Now in the second year of being involved with the team it is working, there is
456 still friction, but with many conversations and lots of balancing out between
457 them it's working, never with both of them – the relationship is too fragile, I
458 always have to get them back on track individually. (GER-2)

459 ***Catalyzing conversations.*** Building on the work with the individual conflict parties
460 as described above, SPPs also encouraged their clients, especially athletes, to seek open and

461 honest conversations and emphasized the importance of addressing concerns early on.
462 Participants highlighted how they actively created or even staged possibilities for these
463 conversations to take place. One participant (GB-6) pointed out that “when [conflicts] do get
464 talked about then normally because someone like myself [SPP] created an opportunity for
465 that [conversation] to come out, and paved the way for that opportunity to be perceived
466 positively and looked upon as a way forward”. German SPPs further mentioned that they
467 had sometimes addressed conflict directly with one or both parties, especially “if only one
468 party is aware of the conflict” (GER-1). Depending on the quality of the SPP-client
469 relationship they would use a more or less confrontational approach and sometimes only hint
470 at problems to not break confidentiality. For example, SPPs “would try to sensitize and bring
471 them back together”, for example, by asking them to reflect upon recent interactions with the
472 athlete/ coach, or “nudge the one who is not seeing the conflict and say ‘Look, there might
473 be an issue’ [...]”. However, the same participant stated that “it may also be that I tell the
474 coach or athlete” (GER-1), thus breaching confidentiality for the sake of conflict resolution.
475 While these incidents were rare, participants justified such behavior as means to an overall
476 positive end (see *perceived SPPs’ challenges*). Accordingly, one concern that all SPPs
477 shared was athletes’ safety, accordingly, participants only encouraged open conversations
478 when they perceived coaches would be approachable and fair (also see *role as a protector*).

479 ***Mediating and moderating coach-athlete interaction.*** As a mediator of coach-
480 athlete meetings or moderator of group sessions, SPPs were directly involved into
481 conversations aiming at resolving coach-athlete conflict. They described to be primarily
482 responsible for providing structure within such meetings, guiding conversations and
483 ensuring a safe and positive environment in which people were willing to openly share their
484 thoughts and feelings. Within group sessions that was usually achieved by discussing
485 problems without necessarily focusing on a single athlete, but rather by talking about

486 concerns shared by multiple team members. A British participant (GB-6) explained their
487 approach to these meetings:

488 One of the techniques I've used is taking it away from the personal, so between
489 one coach and one athlete, and having a group discussion [...] I would facilitate
490 the conversation and sometimes I would have an agenda that I would let the
491 coach know some of because if I would let them know the full agenda they
492 wouldn't have the meeting. You gotta prep up a couple of athletes as well to
493 engage with it in a particular way cause otherwise they would invariably just
494 keep quiet, worried of the damage that could be done.

495 Additionally, SPPs referred to mediation as a tool which was primarily used when dealing
496 with long-lasting, intense conflict situations or "if there is a deep mistrust and
497 misunderstanding" (GER-5) to which they were at times even invited as an external,
498 presumably independent consultant. Considering the difficulty of mediation, participants
499 frequently highlighted the importance of intuition and finesse on top of methodological skills:

500 I think two things play a role: On one hand, knowing how to shape solution-
501 oriented conversations – we have a common goal, it's ideal for both to find a
502 solution, how could this look like, both sharing their perspectives, gathering
503 potential solutions, see how realistic these solutions are and what would need
504 to be done to implement them, so the basic methods.... But it is as important to
505 approach it intuitively - being aware of the atmosphere, sensing how to interact
506 with each other, potentially creating ease by making a funny comment or
507 reminding [conflict parties] on positive, shared experiences - I can't actually
508 say for sure, it's intuition. (GER-5)

509 However, participants did not strictly differentiate between formal, task-oriented mediation
510 processes and more informal meetings, in which conflict parties focused on improving their
511 overall relationship (i.e., third party consultations) as described by a British participant:

512 One of the biggest challenges I've ever faced is one of the most beneficial bits
513 of work I've done [...] to have conversations about expectations, having
514 structured conversations about "what do you expect" and "what do I expect" -
515 What you work out through the communication process, when you have
516 conversations about expectations, the conflict in that relationship quite often
517 becomes more realigned and more conducive to a happy environment. (GB-3)

518 **The SPPs as a protector.** Lastly, the role as a protector as described by participants
519 encapsulated concerns about meeting conflict agreements which had been accepted by both
520 conflict parties as well as about individuals' wellbeing throughout times of conflict. As such
521 participants aimed at securing a nourishing and effective training environment for all sport
522 participants without losing sight of individuals' needs.

523 Thus, SPPs tried to establish and maintain such a healthy environment by noticing and
524 managing dysfunctional interpersonal processes, as well as by ensuring that conflict
525 agreements were adhered to or revised. This was achieved by implementing and monitoring
526 behavior change, utilizing debriefs to facilitate self-reflection and learning as well as by
527 holding individuals accountable for failures to comply with agreements.

528 I'm the one who then does a bit of a debrief following that session, to be like
529 these were the key things that came out, these are the key things that we said
530 we [are] gonna do, these are the things that you need to put in action and we
531 will have a follow up meeting to evaluate this. [...] I try to set up regular catch
532 ups with them individually, just keep track of how things are going and just be
533 on the ground and get some observation work in [...] you're not seeing him
534 having stuck to his part of the deal, haven't done the thing he said he was gonna
535 do [...] maybe at times having a conversation [...] boost them a little bit there,
536 so I think being on the ground and being around could be a bit of leverage itself
537 in terms of reminding them actually. (GB-5)

538 On the other hand, SPPs also emphasized their responsibility to ensure athletes' safety. As
539 mentioned briefly before, SPPs discouraged athletes from seeking conversations with coaches
540 or staff members if they expected negative consequences (e.g., deselection, aggressive
541 behaviors, belittling), and similarly limited their own communication based on the likelihood
542 that shared information would be misused against athletes; one participant warned:

543 You have to be realistic about levels of safety in different environments and
544 consequences of these conversations for people's selection or deselection. I
545 think it's fair to say for us as a process of providing that facilitation that we are
546 assessing all the time in the moment levels of safety in the way the
547 conversations are happening, we would be more than comfortable to say that
548 'Okay, maybe we should stop this process' if it feels like it's used unhelpfully
549 – either in the interest of the system or in the interest of the athlete. (GB-7)

Sport psychology practitioners' perceived challenges

550 Across five sub-themes the second higher-order theme covers information about the
551 challenges and barriers perceived by SPPs when trying to prevent or manage coach-athlete
552 conflict, including environmental, situational as well as profession-related aspects.

553 *** Insert figure 2 ***

554 **Procedural factors.** A fairly common challenge experienced by SPPs was tailoring
555 interventions to the specific coach-athlete dyad and situational circumstances. Factors that
556 needed to be taken into account were, for example, characteristics of the involved individuals
557 (e.g., age, personality, type of coach, status) as well as available resources to successfully
558 manage conflict. Participants, for example, identified lacking time as an inhibiting factor for
559 effective, long-term conflict resolution as described by a British SPP who found that "getting
560 time with the athlete" is problematic "cause their schedules are so ram-packed [...finding]
561 time to set up a session where you have the coach and the athlete together in the same room

562 can be quite difficult.” Another aspect that needed to be taken into account by SPPs was the
563 importance of a conflict and the urgency of its management as perceived by conflict partners:

564 ...the other thing that historically I haven’t dealt with well, but I do far better
565 now, is not put a time limit on when it needs to be resolved by. Some things do
566 just linger on, but people are fully happy and fully functional but they still have
567 underlying conflicts, that conflict may never need to be resolved. But that sense
568 that everything needs to be fixed by me and now, that, I now avoid. (GB-4)

569 Besides the significance of the conflict topic, also the importance and quality of the
570 relationships between the conflict parties as well as with the SPP need to be considered. Thus,
571 often participants were indeed only working with one individual (often the athlete) or had
572 unequally well-developed relationships with the conflict parties, as shared by one practitioner:

573 I still didn’t feel the capacity to provide that feedback to the coach. I did voice
574 the concerns to the athlete and at times did agree with his initial questions about
575 his relationship with the coach. (GB-3)

576 In line with above provided quote, the role of a facilitator was primarily occupied when SPPs
577 either have had established relationships with coaches and athletes (e.g., possibilities to
578 initiate conversations or “translate” perspectives) or were brought in as an external “more
579 neutral” consultant (GER-1). The latter, however, carried the danger of not knowing personal
580 characteristics or even hidden objectives of conflict parties. Thus, SPPs always needed to be
581 aware of individual agendas, including skepticism as to whether conflict parties were honestly
582 interested in solving a dispute or simply pretended to be engaged in the process as
583 experienced by a German participant who pointed out that “it is a difficult situation if you
584 notice that one party doesn’t mean it, for example, that the association cooperates pro forma
585 but if in doubt would stab the athlete in the back” (GER-1).

586 **The sport environment.** In line with the previous example, some of the most severe
587 barriers concerned the sport environment of which SPPs were part of, for example, in regards
588 to *SPPs' role within the organization* and sport participants' *welfare*.

589 **Welfare concerns.** SPPs continuously emphasized the need to ensure coaches and
590 athletes' wellbeing. However, at times they perceived to be caught between their duty of care
591 and the sport organizations' performance focus. This was especially the case if conflicts were
592 caused by coaches' use of controlling or even abusive behaviors; GER-8, for example,
593 described how they quit their job after watching an athlete "being pushed towards burnout" by
594 a coach that only cared about performance. Nevertheless, SPPs' concern was not only with
595 athletes but also with coaches' wellbeing who may experience "personal trouble with the
596 association in that they have already achieved two gold medals but don't get their contracts
597 extended" (GER-2). Thus, SPPs recognized that coaches' interactions with athletes were
598 influenced by a constant insecurity within a highly-pressurized environment as well as by
599 lacking leadership and organization within the sports associations, however, intervening on an
600 organizational level was usually beyond the means of the interviewed SPPs. Considering the
601 wider sports environment, SPPs had to weigh up the likelihood of positive change against
602 negative consequences when intervening in coach-athlete disputes. If action was taken, SPPs
603 had to anticipate how information was used and which consequences were to be expected:

604 Honesty and openness, that understanding of someone else's perspective on
605 something is really undervalued and, I think, dismissing of that as a pattern of
606 behavior in the sporting environment is often the root of that perpetuated
607 conflict. No one is allowed to be honest, no one is allowed to be open - just shut
608 people down - that just creates a whole world of pain and once you chip away
609 all that or allow that honesty then you can get over quite a lot. (GB-6)

610 *SPPs' role within the organization.* SPPs further perceived their position to be reliant
611 on coaching and management staff (e.g., contracts, access to athletes, type of work) which
612 restricted them in carrying out their job as they desired; one participant (GB-1) explained:

613 I'm employed by the club, but the coach is the one who's engaged me on behalf
614 of the club. You go and then find out that a large amount of the environmental,
615 organizational trouble within the club, is [caused by] the person who employed
616 you which is a huge dilemma, I tried to do it sensitively, because we had a good
617 relationship, but he really didn't want me to go there. I've now learnt from that.

618 Moreover, SPPs reflected upon which tasks they were hired for and whether it was their place
619 to intervene in coach-athlete conflict; it was explained that "if you are between the two it'd be
620 your task to satisfy both, but that's really not your job" (GER-3); but another (GER-2) argued:

621 [...] sport psychologists don't take a position as they wouldn't get a job, they
622 need to watch out for who is deciding whether a sport psychologist will get
623 involved or not – the coach. Therefore, sport psychologists walk on eggshells –
624 how often do they confront coaches saying "What you are doing is nonsense,
625 you're treating [the athlete] like crap, you're not taking them seriously at all,
626 but you insult him" – and then the sport psychologists complain "How can the
627 coach treat the athlete like this?" – but it's our job to mirror that to the coach!

628 Correspondingly, SPPs often reported being considered part of the coaching team and
629 therefore were assumed to always side with the coaches in times of coach-athlete conflict.

630 Paradoxically, participants described how they often worked in isolation and did not feel
631 accepted by staff members and thus could not contribute much to coach-athlete relationships
632 due to their personal lack of high quality working relationships within the sport organization.

633 Even more difficulties were experienced when SPPs were not part of an organization at all but
634 rather acted as an external consultant and worked only with one conflict party, usually the

635 athlete who “don’t want their coach to be involved” (GER-7). Therefore, they often lacked
636 information of and influence on at least one, if not both, conflict parties.

637 **Objectivity versus appropriate support.** Another frequently reported theme, which
638 in some extent related to the above outlined role of SPPs within the sporting organization,
639 concerned their ability to be objective during coach-athlete conflict:

640 Sport psychologists need to work with the coaches as well as the players
641 because somewhere in the middle of those two perceptions is truth, and
642 sometimes neither party can see the truth [...] the dilemma for a sport
643 psychologist is being part of the team but not being so emotionally engaged that
644 you become part of the problem. (GB-1)

645 Thus, while it was generally deemed appropriate to not side with either conflict party,
646 participants perceived it as challenging to keep neutral based on their previous involvement
647 with conflict parties (e.g., one-sided relationships; part of coaching team). One participant
648 even considered it “a disadvantage to be part of the system as you lose the outside
649 perspective” (GER-8). Moreover, athletes and coaches tended to take SPPs’ support for
650 granted, presuming that SPPs “had their back” - not meeting these expectations could
651 potentially cause “a crack in the coach/athlete-sport psychologist relationship” (GER-1). And
652 while participants acknowledged to sometimes position themselves on either side, they
653 highlighted several factors worth considering when deciding where to place themselves
654 during coach-athlete conflict, or whether to stay out of it entirely. For example, it was
655 “important to not worsen the coach-athlete relationship through one’s own actions” (GER-6)
656 as well as to “put performance in the center of everything you do” (GB-4). Thus, SPPs
657 sometimes believed it was appropriate to clearly align oneself with coaching staff, for
658 example, if SPPs were an established part of the coaching team, the majority of athletes
659 worked well with a certain coach, or if an athlete had a negative impact on the training
660 environment. In contrast, SPPs supported athletes if multiple individuals struggled with a

661 certain coach, coaches were overstepping role boundaries and athletes needed to be protected,
662 or if SPPs did simply not work with the respective coach.

663 **Rigid beliefs.** Part of SPPs' struggle to effectively manage coach-athlete relationships
664 was caused by athletes and coaches' rigid beliefs. While athletes on "the world class level see
665 the coaches as an unchanging part of the environment [...] they don't see the coaches as
666 adapting or flexing at all" (GB-6), coaches were indeed often "confident of their approach"
667 and "very resistant to information to how they might change to do things" (GB-6) or had
668 difficulties converting advice into action. Especially during deeply-rooted conflicts, positions
669 between the conflict parties increasingly hardened so that any mediation attempts by SPPs
670 were prone to fail. Participants explained coaches and athletes would shift responsibility to
671 each other – the athlete saying "the coach needs to see that, that's his responsibility" and
672 coaches expecting the athletes to speak up – and as such creating "a barrier that is hard to
673 overcome when individuals are unwilling and stubborn" (GER-8). Sometimes these
674 stalemated conflicts could only be settled if, encouraged by SPPs, "the management of the
675 sport organization takes the lead" (GER-2).

676 **SPPs' professional challenges.** Finally, SPPs perceived their effectiveness in
677 managing coach-athlete conflict to be inhibited by their own training and working philosophy.
678 Thus, most participants emphasized how they lacked formal training in conflict management
679 and were therefore hesitant to act as a mediator, especially if they expected the conflict to
680 further escalate. Accordingly, participants at times refused to get involved as GB-4 reported:

681 It's about what is and what's not in the job description, conflicts where it's quite
682 obvious that I can't resolve it, are things I've learnt to avoid in the first few years
683 of my career. I think recognizing if you can have an impact in the first place.

684 Further, participants were challenged by their ambivalent position towards confidentiality.

685 While underlining the importance of not sharing confidential information and standing up to
686 coaches who demanded such, SPPs felt limited in their possibilities to manage conflict:

687 I think there is a risk that confidentiality is sometimes used as a barrier to talk
688 about something that is actually already known in the group, and probably what
689 we are talking about there is that the athlete likes to have a good moan about
690 the people in the system and that then the SP feels a bit that they are in a difficult
691 position cause if they tell the system that information that could come back to
692 be used in a negative way against the athlete. (GB-7)

693 Therefore, participants weighed up between the long-term benefits of sharing some
694 information for the coach-athlete dyad versus keeping confidentiality and trust within their
695 own client-practitioner relationship. Few SPPs mentioned how they would extensively discuss
696 the matter of open communication with the individual in order to resolve the dilemma:

697 At first [the athlete] was very reluctant to the coach to know any of the
698 information that he disclosed, so we did a lot of work prior to this to get to the
699 stage that he [would allow disclosing] information to the coaches. (GB-5)

Discussion

700 The aim of this study was to gain in-depth insight about the roles and approaches SPPs
701 take when working with coach-athlete dyads in conflict. This also included exploring SPPs'
702 perceptions about the challenges they had to face in respect to the types of service delivery
703 they provide. Thus, this study ultimately builds upon previous research outlining applied sport
704 psychologists' roles in managing interpersonal and intragroup relationships in sport (e.g.,
705 McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; Vealey, 2017) and further aligns with findings
706 according to which sport participants sought out third party help to manage conflict
707 effectively (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). It further extends the applied sport
708 psychology literature which so far has focused on coaches and athletes' perceptions about
709 sport psychology delivery (e.g., Cook & Fletcher, 2017; Zakrajsek et al., 2013), interventions
710 (e.g., Martin et al., 2009), or experiences of applied sport psychologists in the build-up or
711 during major competitions (cf. Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; McCann, 2008). Thus, this study

712 enters uncharted territory by offering first-hand information on SPPs' approaches to optimize
713 coach-athlete interactions. The findings are expected to support consultants' professional
714 development and provide guidance through this challenging task.

715 In accordance with research in- and outside-of sport (e.g., Jowett & Shanmugam,
716 2016; McDougall et al., 2015), the present study underlined the importance of high quality
717 working partnerships in which relationship members are appreciative and accepting of another
718 realizing that they ultimately support each other in their quest to achieve a common goal.
719 Subsequently, SPPs' endeavor to support athletes and coaches to develop and maintain
720 harmonious working relationships underlined by open lines of communication and mutual
721 trust. Besides creating awareness for the importance of close, committed and collaborative
722 relationships, they actively supported this process by developing communication skills in
723 regards to sending well-constructed messages (e.g., needs, concerns), listening skills (e.g.,
724 active listening), perspective taking as well as appropriate responding. These approaches align
725 with established conflict resolution training programs as, for example, provided by Coleman
726 and Prywes (2014) who combined conflict education (e.g., conflict processes) with skills
727 training (e.g., communication, self- regulation) within diverse community settings.

728 The findings of this study also offer insights in terms of managing conflict
729 determinants, such as personality characteristics, maturity, and stress. For example, a clash of
730 different personalities has frequently been referred to as causing intense interpersonal conflict
731 (e.g., Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014; Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2017), but can
732 potentially be prevented by raising awareness for one's and others' personality and their
733 behavioral tendencies (cf. Arnold & Sarkar, 2015). Similarly, coaches were supported in their
734 work with diverse groups of athletes, not only by increasing their ability to adapt to different
735 personalities, but also by creating a holistic understanding of psychological and interpersonal
736 processes in regards to leadership, group dynamics, and human development. An emphasis
737 was further put on coaches' personal wellbeing through enhanced self-care (e.g., work-life

738 balance; coping with environmental pressure; stress management), an aspect that coaches felt
739 was neglected by sport psychologists within former studies (e.g., Cook & Fletcher, 2017).
740 Overall, SPPs seemed to equip coaches with skills and knowledge which aimed to increase
741 their psychological and behavioral flexibility, and thus, facilitated conflict prevention as well
742 as coaches' ability to guide through conflict management in a rational but caring manner.
743 Athletes, on the other hand, seemed to be taught skills which enabled them to react to and
744 cope with conflict (e.g., assertiveness, communication, mental skills and coping strategies).
745 Although athletes may also benefit from an education focusing more on conflict prevention,
746 these two different educational approaches and the differencing emphasis placed on each
747 approach reflect the reciprocal roles of coaches and athletes within their overall relationship
748 (e.g., Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Becker, 2009).

Third party interventions in coach-athlete conflict

749 While it is common practice for sport psychologists to offer a wide range of
750 educational work, including some of the above outlined areas, little attention has been paid to
751 their role within interpersonal conflict (cf. Vealey, 2017). The results of the present study,
752 however, suggest that sport psychologists may indeed play a crucial part in solving coach-
753 athlete disputes effectively. Accordingly, participants' reports outlined a range of roles and
754 practical approaches to support sport participants in their efforts to cope with disputes and to
755 find commonly acceptable solutions. SPPs attempted to do so by working with conflict parties
756 individually as well as dyadically. On an individual level, athletes and coaches used current
757 participants in an attempt to regulate emotions, for self-reflection as well as to shed light on
758 the complexities of ongoing conflicts, but also to provide reassurance and improve one's
759 coping mechanisms. Thus, rather than purely focusing on specific performance-enhancement
760 strategies as hired for by coaches (e.g., Wrisberg et al., 2010), SPPs provided a much broader
761 range of counselling and consultancy services, recognizing that "everything is a performance
762 issue" (McCann, 2008; p. 267) – not just during the Olympics. Further, participants in this

763 study also thought dyadically (cf. Rhind & Jowett, 2012) trying to bring coaches and athletes
764 closer together by bridging the gap between them. As previously described in the literature
765 (e.g., Mellalieu, Shearer, & Shearer, 2013; Wachsmuth et al., 2017), participants recognized
766 that conflict was often down to a breakdown of communication which caused a split in the
767 coach-athlete dyad. In accordance with Vealey (2017), SPPs considered it as one of their main
768 responsibilities to overcome these communication barriers by improving individuals'
769 interpersonal skills, building trust, as well as by encouraging open and honest conversations
770 and guiding sport participants through these conversations.

771 While participants only scarcely differentiated between the diverse conflict
772 management approaches that have been long established within the non-sporting literature,
773 several interventions became apparent through participants' reports. In line with Vealey's
774 (2017) descriptions of a conflict-ridden basketball team, sport psychology consultants in this
775 study acted as a facilitator of interpersonal relationships. In early stages of conflict that meant,
776 for example, acting as an "informal communicative link" between coaches and athletes based
777 on strong working alliances with their clients (i.e., *conciliation*; Fisher, 2001, p. 11). Thus,
778 they initiated communication processes by promoting problem understanding and regulating
779 emotions informally. However, if conflict progressed to a stage in which a coach's and
780 athlete's relationship declined and opposing positions formed, more formal approaches to
781 conflict management were deemed necessary which participants within this study often
782 described as mediation or moderation (cf. Holt et al., 2012). Considering the literature on
783 third-party interventions, however, it seems that SPPs in fact engaged in two different
784 approaches when working with coach-athlete dyads. While traditional mediation was used to
785 solve task-related conflict (e.g., Fisher, 2001; Holt et al., 2012), SPPs also acted as third-party
786 consultants to facilitate the coach-athlete relationship quality. In line with the guidelines for
787 such interventions (Fisher, 1972), participants aimed to minimize perceived threat and
788 increased individuals' motivation to seek conflict resolution by reminding on common goals

789 and shared values, and facilitated effective communication by forming a shared understanding
790 of the conflict issue. Thus, the study supports previous suggestions (Paradis et al., 2014a;
791 Rhind & Jowett, 2012) in that SPPs solved conflict by focusing on the task at hand
792 (mediation), and also met coaches' expectations of promoting interpersonal relationships
793 throughout difficult times (Cook & Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, it may be concluded that both,
794 a task- as well as a relationship-focused intervention, may be constructive approaches to
795 manage coach-athlete conflict.

796 While these third-party interventions generally seem to provide a large pool of
797 strategies for sport psychologists to draw from, the appropriate line of action may depend on a
798 number of variables, including to the stage of conflict escalation, the power distribution
799 between the conflict parties, as well as individuals' skills and characteristics which were
800 likely to shape the conflict process (e.g., Coleman & Prywes, 2014; Wachsmuth et al., 2017).
801 Therefore, Fisher (1972) emphasized the importance of holding contextual knowledge about
802 the conflict and the involved conflict parties, as well as possessing sound diagnostic and
803 interpersonal skills to clarify and overcome conflict resolution impasses or to offer emotional
804 support. In general, these characteristics have been identified as desirable for sport
805 psychologists by coaches and athletes (e.g., interpersonal skills, sport experience, rapport;
806 Cook & Fletcher, 2017) and are met by SPPs within this study. Being part of the high-
807 performance environment, SPPs seemed to hold a sound understanding of the structural and
808 cultural context in which coach-athlete conflict occurred. Within their role as analyst and
809 action planner, participants made use of diverse diagnostics, such as interviewing, systematic
810 observations as well as psychometric assessments in order to gather the particular information
811 necessary to appropriately support coaches and athletes throughout conflict experiences.

Micropolitics - diluting boundaries to facilitate positive change

812 Despite SPPs' efforts to conduct a thorough analysis of any coach-athlete conflict, the
813 majority of participants perceived it as a challenge to identify and carry out appropriate

814 interventions. Thus, while possessing the knowledge necessary to support coaches and
815 athletes, Arnold and Sarkar (2015) warned practitioners to not intervene simply to prove one's
816 competence but to find the appropriate time and approach to do so. Indeed, participants in the
817 current study often seemed to be hesitant and were challenged by deciding whether and how
818 to promote conflict management within coach-athlete dyads. Often, these struggles were
819 attributed to environmental or structural factors (cf. McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016), such as
820 practitioners' roles within an organization, their dependency on coaches and management
821 staff, or their perceived lack of influence on conflict parties. Overall, the (micro)political
822 landscape influenced SPPs' perceived possibilities of intervening in coach-athlete conflict.
823 Micropolitics hereby refers to "the use of formal and informal power by individuals and
824 groups to achieve their goal" (Blase, 1991, p. 11) with power being determined by the
825 availability of resources and the quality of relationships within a certain, potentially
826 conflictual, situation. Participants of the current study felt restricted in their possibilities to
827 manage interpersonal conflict effectively due to the power differentials and formal hierarchies
828 existing within sporting organizations (McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Rowley et al., 2018).
829 While mediation, for example, is understood to be a means to equalize power distributions
830 between conflict parties (Kressel & Pruitt, 1985), this is only possible if the mediator (i.e.,
831 sport psychologist) can indeed act independently. However, SPPs' independence was not just
832 limited by their link to coaches (e.g., influence, access, job security) or one-sided working
833 relationships with athletes, but also due to the expectations of management boards and their
834 power to distribute resources (e.g., finances, time, status). SPPs, moreover, were at risk to be
835 used for the micropolitical actions of others (i.e., coaches, athletes, staff) who at times tried to
836 use their established relationship with practitioners in order to gain an advantage over the
837 opposing party within conflict negotiations. McDougall et al. (2015) highlighted the challenge
838 of managing these multiple relationships and meeting the accompanying expectations of a
839 diverse range of individuals within elite sporting environments in order to effectively deliver

840 sport psychology services. Similarly, the current participants, who had also been involved in
841 high-performance sports, emphasized the necessity of building close working relationships
842 with athletes, coaches and other staff members, and thus, to reduce existing boundaries and
843 promote team unity prior to difficult conflict interventions. This process included clarifying
844 how sport psychologists positively contributed to the overarching objectives of sporting
845 organization as well as creating a psychological informed environment (cf. Arnold & Sarkar,
846 2015; Haberl & Peterson, 2006).

847 Being a fully integrated member of a sport organization, however, created further
848 challenges which largely related to ethical concerns such as conflicts of interest, objectivity,
849 or confidentiality (e.g., Andersen, van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010;
850 McDougall et al., 2015). For example, SPPs reported to experience internal conflicts as to
851 whether to act according to the sport organizations' performance expectations (i.e., winning at
852 all costs), personal interests (e.g., job security) or their duty of care for athletes and coaches
853 (e.g., burnout, injury), which impeded consultants' attempts to approach conflict objectively.
854 While participants were aware that true "objectivity" was barely possible, they still felt a
855 responsibility for taking everybody's interests into account and thus, for seeing the bigger
856 picture more clearly than conflict parties themselves. Further, internal conflicts also included
857 concerns related to confidentiality which seemed to be especially delicate in times of
858 interpersonal conflict during which SPPs often had to weigh up between keeping information
859 confidential versus breaching confidentiality as a mean to solve coach-athlete disputes. In line
860 with Aoyagi and Portenga's (2010) recommendations, participants in this study often
861 followed a best interest or stealth approach by either sharing confidential information or
862 nudging conflict parties in the right direction in order to facilitate conflict management and
863 promote effective coach-athlete relationships. Thus, participants acknowledged and embraced
864 the "blurry boundaries that exist in this setting" (Haberl & Peterson, 2006, p.31). Always

865 keeping the best interest of their clients in mind, sport psychologists overall aimed at creating
866 sport relationships which were positive and rewarding.

867 **Strengths, limitations and future directions**

868 In conclusion, this study aimed at investigating SPPs' roles and approaches to
869 preventing and managing coach-athlete conflict. The study hereby draws on a wealth of
870 experiences of sport psychology experts working within elite sport settings and looks beyond
871 traditional practices of mental skills training. It serves as a call for a more nuanced, process-
872 oriented investigation of sport psychology practice which may indeed be more concerned with
873 building effective interpersonal relationships with and between sport participants and thus,
874 shaping nourishing performance environments (McDougall et al., 2015). The current results
875 highlight the importance of creating psychologically informed performance settings in which
876 sport participants acknowledge the impact interpersonal relationships can have on sport
877 performance, wellbeing and personal development, as well as recognize the external (e.g.,
878 public expectations, cultural norms), intra- (e.g., personality, maturity, experience) and
879 interpersonal (e.g., leadership, communication, power) factors influencing the quality of these
880 relationships. As such, sport psychology services described within this study went beyond the
881 immediate management and resolution of interpersonal difficulties, but rather presented an
882 inclusive approach to promoting effective relationships. Thus, coach-athlete conflict was
883 considered a chance for learning and personal development, as well as a means to promote
884 change within the sporting environment (cf. Vealey, 2017). Recently, sport psychologists'
885 role in promoting cultural change became an area of research interest (e.g., Cruickshank,
886 Collins, & Minten, 2013; Fletcher & Streeter, 2016; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016),
887 considering this line of inquiry scholars may consider exploring how dyadic conflict could be
888 deliberately used to initiate and positively influence these larger organizational processes.
889 Further, studies investigating sporting environments and cultural change may consider how

890 the process of “normalizing dysfunction” may break down communication barriers and
891 facilitate more open and collaborative working relationships within sport organizations.

892 While this study did not aim at investigating cross-cultural differences between
893 German and British participants explicitly, subtle differences with regards to SPPs’ work with
894 coaches and multidisciplinary teams could still be noticed. Thus, it seemed that British
895 participants spoke more frequently about working with and through coaches and staff
896 members than their German colleagues who, on the other hand, seemed to engage more in
897 formal mediation processes. A variety of reasons, such as consultants working philosophies,
898 training or simply their role within an organization could explain these differences. However,
899 more research is necessary to explore and compare distinct professional SP practices (e.g.,
900 formal approaches, habits, methods/techniques) and working possibilities (e.g., professional
901 roles, job structures) within different countries. Besides cultural differences, also the interests
902 of practitioners working in other settings than high-performance sports, such as youth sports
903 or talent development settings, as well as the needs of novice sport psychology consultants
904 should be taken into account when investigating more tacit processes involved in SP delivery.
905 These practitioners may face different or more amplified challenges with regards to building,
906 shaping and maintaining effective working relationships with athletes, coaches and staff (e.g.,
907 perceived lack of competence, career planning, financial security; McDougall et al., 2015;
908 Rowley et al., 2018). Considering the challenges outlined in regard to conflicts of interests by
909 the current – experienced - participants, more emphasis should be put on supporting (young)
910 practitioners in initiating difficult conversations, addressing unethical behaviors and
911 contesting widely established yet obsolete sporting practices (e.g., controlling coaching
912 habits, early-return to play). Overall, the current findings should thus be taken into account for
913 the education of future sport psychologists: Firstly, novice practitioners are likely to benefit
914 from a formal training in conflict management, mediation and other third party interventions.
915 Second, in line with recent calls for adopting a role closer to the one of an organizational

916 psychologist, sport psychology education should address topics such as organizational
917 dynamics and culture, thus, enabling them to better understand the wider political doings of
918 all involved stakeholders and drive cultural change initiatives if necessary. Lastly, such a
919 position presupposes a sound value system and working philosophy, ethical decision-making
920 and high levels of self-awareness on the part of sport psychology practitioners which may be
921 promoted through regular exchange with or guidance from experienced practitioners who
922 facilitate continuous engagement in reflective practice. With appropriate training, sport
923 psychologists may be more willing, confident and effective in managing interpersonal
924 relationships within sport organizations on every level.

925

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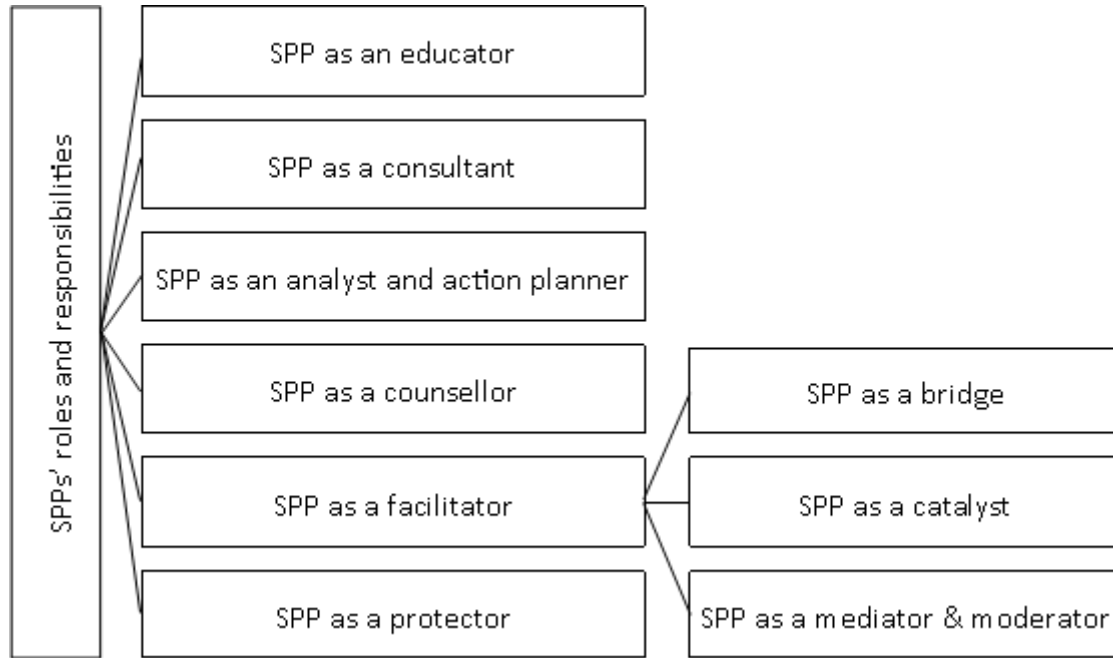
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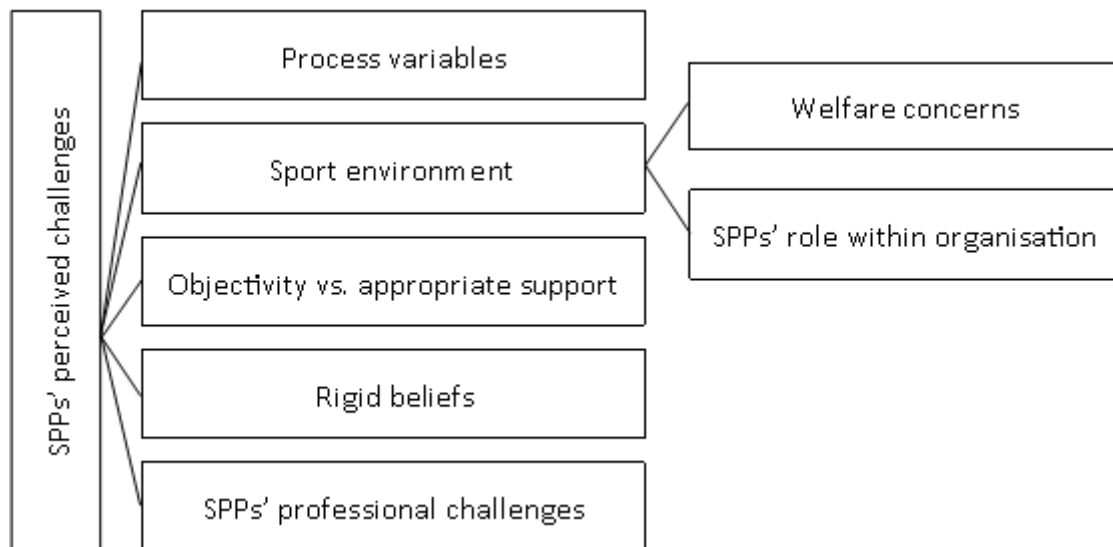
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1030 *Figure 1.* Sport psychology practitioners' perceived roles & responsibilities.

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1036 *Figure 2.* Sport psychology practitioners' perceived challenges in managing coach-athlete conflict.

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