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Coping rarely takes place in a social vacuum:

Exploring antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships

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26 Abstract

27 *Objectives:* Despite widespread acceptance that coping is an interpersonal phenomenon,
28 sport psychology research has focused largely on athletes' and coaches' ways of coping
29 individually. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore coping from an interpersonal
30 perspective (i.e., dyadic coping) in coach-athlete relationships.

31 *Methodology and methods:* Antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping were discussed with
32 five coach-athlete dyads. We conducted individual interviews with athletes and coaches and
33 then one interview with each coach-athlete dyad. Interviews were analyzed using dyadic
34 analysis and composite vignettes were created to present the data. Methodological rigor was
35 enhanced by focusing on credibility, resonance, rich rigor, significant contribution, and
36 meaningful coherence.

37 *Results:* Five themes were identified. These represented the essence of dyadic coping (theme:
38 the essence of dyadic coping), antecedents of dyadic coping (themes: lock and key fit,
39 friendship and trust, communication of the stressor), and outcomes of dyadic coping (theme:
40 protection and support). The first theme captures coaches' and athletes' understanding of
41 dyadic coping. The antecedent themes represent the factors that were necessary for dyadic
42 coping to occur. Protection and support relates to the positive nurturing environment that was
43 discussed as an outcome of dyadic coping.

44 *Conclusion:* The results extend published research by exploring antecedents and outcomes of
45 dyadic coping in sport. The findings highlight that dyadic coping was prevalent in coach-
46 athlete relationships when various antecedents (lock and key fit, friendship and trust,
47 communication of the stressor) existed. Protection and support were pertinent outcomes of
48 dyadic coping that contributed to personal and relationship growth.

49 *Keywords:* communal coping, intimate relationships, relational coping, social support.

50 Coping rarely takes place in a social vacuum:

51 Exploring antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships

52 In the sport psychology literature, psychological stress is an overarching term that
53 encompasses stressors, appraisals, coping, and outcomes (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu,
54 2006). Coping can be defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to
55 manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding
56 the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). This definition stems from
57 the transactional perspective of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is a seminal theory
58 that has been used to guide research on coping in sport (see, for a review, Nicholls & Polman,
59 2007). The findings of the research in this area collectively highlight some of the individual
60 coping strategies that are used by athletes (e.g., planning, venting emotions, mental
61 disengagement; Hoar, Kowalski, Gaudreau, & Crocker, 2006) and coaches (e.g., planning,
62 self-talk, centering; Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010). They also provide preliminary
63 understanding of how coaches and athletes learn to cope with stressors (Tamminen & Holt,
64 2012). The majority of coping research that has been framed by transactional based theories
65 of stress (e.g., Weston, Thelwell, Bond, & Hutchings, 2009) overlooks the dynamic nature of
66 coping that rarely takes place in a social vacuum (Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). Indeed,
67 researchers have focused on either athletes or coaches and minimal attention has been paid to
68 the notion of coping as an interpersonal process (Crocker, Tamminen, & Gaudreau, 2015;
69 Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). This is contrary to literature in other
70 disciplines, which supports the view that coping should be considered as a dynamic interplay
71 between two or more people (Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne,
72 1998).

73 In relationship and health psychology contexts, coping research has often been framed
74 by dyadic conceptualizations (Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). According to these

75 conceptualizations, dyadic coping is defined as the combined effort of both partners when
76 they experience a shared stressor (cf. Bodenmann, 1995, 2005). This definition highlights the
77 shared social context of coping that should be considered in addition to individual coping
78 efforts that are detailed in transactional stress theory (Bodenmann, 2005). One widely used
79 model of dyadic coping is the systemic transactional model (STM; Bodenmann, 1995), which
80 extends transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) by focusing on the dynamic
81 interplay between two people. The STM maintains an appraisal based view of stress and
82 suggests that one partner's appraisal of a stressor is communicated to the other partner who
83 responds with positive and or negative forms of dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 1997, 2005).
84 Despite the potential relevance of this model to coach-athlete relationships and specific calls
85 for research on interpersonal coping in contexts other than romantic relationships
86 (Bodenmann, 1997), such an approach is yet to be qualitatively explored in sport. This is
87 surprising given the potential for dyadic coping to enhance relationship functioning and
88 stability (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006; Papp & Witt, 2010) and the importance of
89 these factors in coach-athlete relationships (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002).

90 The coach-athlete relationship has been conceptualized as a mutual and causal
91 interdependence between the coach's and the athlete's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors
92 (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Such relationships have been the focus of scientific
93 research for over 15 years (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) and, collectively, the findings
94 suggest that dyads are interdependent (Jowett, 2007) and that individual differences (e.g.,
95 gender; Lorimer & Jowett, 2010), social-cultural factors (e.g., sport environment; Felton &
96 Jowett, 2013), and relationship factors (e.g., leadership; Jowett & Chaundy, 2004) are
97 important for maintaining quality in the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Poczwardowski,
98 2007). Researchers (e.g., Jowett & Nezelek, 2011) have also highlighted that coaches are an
99 important source of support for athletes when they experience stressful situations. With this

100 and the notion that interdependence is an important aspect of coach-athlete relationships in
101 mind, the STM may provide a useful framework for research that focusses on coaches' and
102 athletes' coping.

103 Despite dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships being underexplored, researchers
104 have acknowledged the role of social parties when athletes seek support to cope with stressful
105 situations (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2014). In addition, it is thought that athletes may
106 appraise stressors as less threatening when in the presence of a coach (Nicholls et al., 2016)
107 and that a coach can supplement and extend an athlete's coping resources (Bianco, 2001).
108 Research that has explored social support in sport has considered the coach as a general other
109 who can provide unidirectional support to athletes (e.g., Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Thus, the
110 concept of social support is conceptually similar but distinct from dyadic coping, which is a
111 broader term under which social support is nested (Lim, Shon, Paek, & Daly, 2014). In
112 contrast to social support per se, dyadic coping involves both partners using coping strategies
113 to support each other in a bidirectional manner (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006) and
114 acknowledging the cooperative process of coping (Lyons et al., 1998). This approach to
115 coping represents a novel avenue for sport research that has potentially powerful implications
116 for research and applied practice. This is because research that explores interpersonal coping
117 will allow us to better understand and develop shared coping experiences between coaches
118 and athletes, which may contribute to more successful performance outcomes.

119 Although some sport psychology researchers have highlighted the need for studies
120 that approach coping from an interpersonal standpoint (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), little
121 empirical research of this nature exists in sport. The sustained academic interest in athletes'
122 and coaches' individual ways of coping appears nonsensical when considering the mutual and
123 causal interdependence of coach-athlete relationships. This study responds to calls for
124 research on dyadic coping in sport (Didymus, 2017) by working towards an understanding of

125 how coping occurs as an interpersonal process. In doing so, we move beyond the exploration
126 of coping as a process that occurs in a social vacuum and toward a more complete
127 understanding of how athletes and coaches work together to cope with stressors. The first
128 logical step in developing such understanding is to explore the essence of dyadic coping, and
129 the factors that lead to (i.e., antecedents) and occur as a result (i.e., outcomes) of dyadic
130 coping. This was, therefore, aim of the current project.

131 **Methodology and Methods**

132 **Methodology**

133 Using an interpretive paradigm, this study was informed by our relativist ontology
134 and constructionist epistemological perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). We were,
135 therefore, actively involved in the construction of the findings presented in this manuscript.
136 The exploration of coaches' and athletes' experiences provides an opportunity to explore how
137 individuals in close working relationships form meaning and understanding through their
138 social worlds. The findings are a construction of the interaction between the researchers and
139 the coach-athlete dyads (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and, therefore, capture *one* interpretation of
140 antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. Readers are encouraged to interpret the findings
141 in ways that are meaningful to them and to explore alternative interpretations to those that are
142 presented here.

143 **Interviewees**

144 Six coaches ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.88$, $SD = 14.45$) and six athletes ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.06$, $SD = 2.97$)
145 volunteered to take part in this study. These individuals made up six independent dyads: three
146 male coach and athlete dyads, two male coach and female athlete dyads, and one female
147 coach and male athlete dyad. Multiple cases were used to facilitate breadth of understanding
148 relating to antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping (see Schwandt, 1997). Criterion
149 sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit dyads from individual sports (track and field, $n =$

150 3; squash, n = 1; triathlon, n = 1; swimming, n = 1). Individual sports were targeted due to the
151 relevance of this context to the focus of our study. To expand briefly, Rhind, Jowett, and
152 Yang (2012) suggested that athletes who compete in individual sports perceived their coach-
153 athlete relationships to be closer and more committed than athletes who compete in team
154 sports. Closeness and commitment to a relationship has been shown in other non-sport
155 contexts (e.g., marital relationships) to be important for dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann et
156 al., 2006) and, thus, focusing on individual sports allowed us to target individuals who could
157 co-construct knowledge that was relevant to the aim of this study. Despite the fact that the
158 coach-athlete dyads in this study worked in individual sports, four of the coaches reported
159 that they worked with numerous athletes (i.e., they were not solely employed to work with
160 the athlete that was interviewed for this study). Based on previous coping literature (Olusoga,
161 Butt, Maynard, & Hays, 2010), the inclusion criteria for this study were (a) the coach was
162 working with an athlete who was competing at University level or above at the time of the
163 study, (b) the coach held a minimum of a level three coaching qualification from his or her
164 appropriate governing body, (c) the coach and the athlete had been working together for at
165 least one season at the time of the study, and (d) the coach and the athlete were working
166 together on a weekly basis.

167 **Interview Guide**

168 Three semi-structured independent but related interview guides were developed to
169 facilitate both individual (athlete, coach) and dyadic (athlete and coach) interviews (Morgan,
170 Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). In line with our constructionist perspective, semi-
171 structured interview guides were used to ensure that information relevant to antecedents and
172 outcomes of dyadic coping was captured while allowing an element of freedom for co-
173 construction of information that was important to the interviewees (see Sparkes & Smith,
174 2014). Previous dyadic coping literature (e.g., Bodenmann, 1995) provided a loose

175 framework for the two individual interview guides. The third interview guide, which was
176 used to facilitate the dyadic interviews, was developed from the key themes that were
177 identified during the analysis of all of the individual interview transcripts. A combination of
178 open questions and probes were included in each of the three guides. For example, the athlete
179 interview guide contained open questions such as “what factors are required for shared
180 coping between you and your coach?” and probes that encouraged elaboration (e.g., “what do
181 you mean by that?”). Similarly, the interview guide that was aimed at the coaches included
182 open questions such as “how does dyadic coping influence your relationship with [athlete]?”
183 and probes (e.g., “can you think of anything else?”). At the start of each individual interview
184 the interviewer used open questions to ask each interviewee about his or her understanding of
185 coping (e.g., “what does the term coping mean to you?”). Following each individual’s
186 response the interviewer shared the definitions that we adopted prior to data collection and
187 discussed discrepancies in understanding. The aim of these discussions was to ensure that the
188 interviews stimulated conversations that were relevant to the research aim. The dyadic
189 interview guide focused on dyadic interactions relating to coping experiences and, therefore,
190 contained open-ended questions (e.g., “how do you both cope when you experience a
191 demand?”) and a variety of probes (e.g., “tell me more about that”).

192 **Pilot Study**

193 Before beginning the individual interviews, feedback was gathered on the focus,
194 content, and clarity of the individual interview guides during two pilot interviews: one with a
195 female athlete and one with her male coach. Although not always necessary when researching
196 from a constructionist perspective, pilot interviews were conducted during this study to
197 ensure that the interview guides could assist the co-construction of knowledge (Kezar, 2000)
198 that was relevant to the research aim. The data gathered from the pilot interviews highlighted
199 that some of the probes required modification to encourage more detailed discussion with the

200 interviewees. For example, “how has this changed over time?” was changed to “tell me more
201 about how this has developed over time?” The guide for the dyadic interviews was piloted
202 using the initial pilot dyad after the individual interviews with the main sample had been
203 conducted. The aim of this part of the pilot study was to ensure that the questions included in
204 the dyadic interview guide were appropriate for eliciting information that addressed the aim
205 of the study. Minor refinements were made to three of the interview questions (e.g., “what is
206 the distinction between your stressors?” was changed to “what are the similarities and
207 differences in the demands that you experience?”).

208 **Procedure**

209 Following institutional ethical approval, one member of each dyad (the coach) was
210 contacted via email. This correspondence informed each coach of the purpose and procedures
211 of the study, invited them to participate in an interview, and asked them to extend the
212 participation opportunity to athletes with whom they worked. The first athlete who expressed
213 an interest in the study was asked by the coach if they could be contacted directly by the first
214 named author. During each correspondence, potential interviewees were informed that they
215 did not have to participate in the study, that they could withdraw at any point in time and
216 without reason, that they would remain anonymous during reproduction of the results, and
217 that the interviews would be recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus VN-733PC).

218 The data collection process involved two distinct phases. Phase one consisted of
219 individual interviews with the coaches and athletes and phase two involved one dyadic
220 interview with each coach-athlete dyad. The decision to conduct two phases of data collection
221 was made to capture individual athletes’ and coaches’ thoughts about antecedents and
222 outcomes of dyadic coping (individual interviews) in addition to knowledge that athletes and
223 coaches co-constructed during their dyadic interview. Thus, the data collection procedure
224 allowed coach-athlete interactions that are important when studying coping as an

225 interpersonal phenomenon to be considered. At the start of phase one, each coach and athlete
226 completed, signed, and returned to the interviewer a written informed consent form. At this
227 stage, each interviewee was informed that the content of their individual interview would not
228 be disclosed by the interviewer to the other member of their dyad. Individual interviews were
229 then organized and conducted ($M_{\text{length}} = 65.25$ minutes, $SD = 11.16$) to offer each interviewee
230 an opportunity to talk about their experiences of the antecedents and outcomes of dyadic
231 coping. At the start of every interview, each of the interviewees identified the sport that they
232 were involved with, the number of years that they had been involved with that sport, the
233 length of their relationship with the other member of the dyad who had volunteered to be
234 interviewed, and the average number of hours that he or she spent working with the other
235 member of the dyad each week. Following the individual interviews, one of the coaches
236 requested to withdraw from the study and, therefore, the audio file representing his interview
237 and that of the associated athlete was permanently deleted and removed from the sample.
238 Thus, the final sample consisted of five coaches ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.65$, $SD = 10.07$) and five athletes
239 ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.85$, $SD = 2.92$).

240 At the start of the second phase of data collection, which took place approximately
241 three months after phase one, each interviewee was contacted via email and invited to take
242 part in a dyadic interview ($M_{\text{length}} = 67.40$ minutes, $SD = 9.42$). The period of time between
243 the two phases of data collection provided each interviewee with an opportunity to reflect on
244 his or her experiences of dyadic coping (Polkinghorne, 2005). Each dyad that was interested
245 in taking part in phase two was invited to an interview on a mutually convenient date. At the
246 start of each dyadic interview, the interviewees were reminded of the purpose of the study
247 and were asked to provide written informed consent. Once each dyadic interview had been
248 conducted and transcribed verbatim, each individual was sent a copy of their individual and
249 dyadic interview transcript and was asked to comment on how accurately the document

250 represented their experiences of dyadic coping. Each of the interviewees provided written or
251 verbal feedback on the transcripts and reported that the content was a true reflection of his or
252 her experiences.

253 **Data Analysis**

254 The data were analyzed using a form of dyadic analysis (see Eisikovits & Koren,
255 2010), which involved two different but related interpretive analysis phases. First, prior to the
256 dyadic interviews, the 12 individual interview transcripts from the first main phase of data
257 collection (i.e., excluding those that were developed during the pilot study) were inductively
258 analyzed using six stages of thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of
259 analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns within the data that could be used to guide
260 the dyadic interviews. Second, thematic analysis procedures were applied to the dyadic
261 interview transcripts using abductive logic. This phase of the analysis involved the use of
262 themes from the individual interviews to guide the analysis (deductive) while remaining open
263 to the construction of new themes (inductive). The aim of this method was to deepen and
264 broaden the analysis using a dyadic perspective (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010) and to ensure that
265 the interactions between coaches and athletes were inherent in the analyses. Both phases of
266 data analysis involved iterative processes that allowed themes to be co-constructed by the
267 interviewees and the first named author. This recursive approach was applied within and
268 between the two phases of analysis and, therefore, the themes that were constructed during
269 phase one were reviewed and amended following the second phase of analysis.

270 **Data Representation**

271 Following the thematic analyses, ten composite vignettes were developed to represent
272 the data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). The aim of this method of data representation
273 was to allow us as researchers and the readers an opportunity to explore meanings in the data
274 (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The themes that were constructed convey one interpretation of the

275 data (MacDonald & Walker, 1977) as co-constructed by us (the researchers and the
276 interviewees) at the time of data collection and analyses. In presenting these findings we do
277 not suggest that the themes represent the only antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping
278 but, rather, those that we deemed pertinent at the time of data collection and analysis. By
279 presenting the data as composite vignettes, we have embraced elements of narrative enquiry
280 by adopting the position of story analysts and story tellers. This approach has been advocated
281 by various researchers (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) who suggest
282 that the dichotomy of these terms is not straight forward and that researchers may shift from
283 one standpoint to the other when presenting data.

284 Two composite vignettes were developed for each of the themes using the voices of
285 the coaches and the athletes (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011; Schinke,
286 Blodgett, McGannon, & Ge, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Composite vignettes represent a
287 variety of experiences that are amalgamated into a single all-encompassing narrative
288 (Blodgett et al., 2011; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). This type of vignette allowed the coaches'
289 and athletes' voices to be used to present a single theme within the results (Grbich, 2007).
290 Thus, each vignette represents the voices of five individuals and presents the depth and
291 richness of our data as composite accounts. It is worth noting at this juncture that although
292 the vignettes are presented separately for athletes and coaches, the data for each vignette
293 comes from both individual and dyadic interviews and, therefore, interactions between
294 coaches and athletes are inherent in each vignette. A multi-stage iterative process was used to
295 craft the vignettes and construct rich accounts (Blodgett et al., 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014)
296 of interviewees' thoughts about antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. The first stage of
297 this process was to extract data from the transcripts that was relevant to each theme. Second,
298 the extracted data were merged together to form a vignette that represented one of the
299 constructed themes and the athletes' or coaches' collective voices. We then reviewed and

300 sensitively revised the drafted vignettes to ensure that each one adequately represented the
301 relevant theme. The composite vignettes were then shared with the interviewees who were
302 asked to reflect on and report how well the vignettes represented their experiences, the
303 meaning that had been constructed, the contextualization of their experiences, and our
304 interpretations of the data (Smith, Papatomas, Martin Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2013). Nine
305 of the ten interviewees contacted us with their reflections and three specifically reported that
306 the vignettes resonated with them. One of the interviewees provided additional data relating
307 to friendship and trust, which he thought should be added to one of the vignettes. This request
308 was actioned, the updated vignette was sent to each of the interviewees, and the interviewees
309 confirmed that it more accurately represented their experiences.

310 **Methodological Rigor**

311 A time- and place-contingent list of criteria was applied to assess the quality of this
312 research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). With this in mind, the reader is encouraged to judge the
313 research using the following criteria: (a) credibility, (b) resonance, (c) rich rigor, (d)
314 significant contribution, and (e) meaningful coherence (see Tracy, 2010). Credibility was
315 sought by verifying the findings with each of the interviewees at multiple stages throughout
316 the project and by crafting real, rather than fictional, vignettes using the words and phrases of
317 the interviewees (Smith, 2013). We suggest that a degree of resonance was achieved because
318 three of the interviewees expressed a strong emotional connection when they were asked to
319 comment on how well the vignettes represented their experiences. Rich rigor was developed
320 by allocating sufficient time to interview the athletes and coaches and by conducting both
321 individual and dyadic interviews. This maximized the possibility of constructing
322 comprehensive representations of the interviewees' experiences that were relevant to the
323 research aim. Additionally, the period of time (three months) between phases one and two of
324 the data collection provided us with an opportunity to transcribe, analyze, and reflect on the

325 individual interviews prior to conducting the dyadic interviews. According to Polkinghorne
326 (2005), this period of time will have enhanced the quality of the information constructed
327 during the dyadic interviews. With reference to significant contribution, we suggest that
328 methodological (e.g., dyadic interviewing and dyadic analysis) and conceptual (e.g., dyadic
329 coping within the coach-athlete relationship) contributions have been made that extend the
330 sport coping literature and aim to stimulate future research (Tracy, 2010). This article also
331 makes a contribution to the literature by highlighting the usefulness of using composite
332 vignettes as a way to present research findings (see also Blodgett et al., 2011; Schinke,
333 Blodgett, McGannon, Ge, Oghene, et al., 2016). The chosen methods (i.e., dyadic
334 interviewing and analysis) are methodologically and meaningfully coherent because they are
335 suited to studying dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. Meaningful coherence was
336 further enhanced by achieving the stated aim and by establishing meaningful connections
337 between previous literature, the aim of this study, the methods used, and the co-constructed
338 findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

339 **Results**

340 The processual nature of dyadic coping means that the vignettes presented in this
341 section inform the reader of the antecedents and outcomes of managing demands together,
342 rather than dictating a fixed sequence of events. We provide ten vignettes that capture our
343 interpretations of the interviewees' experiences of dyadic coping and highlight the
344 antecedents and outcomes of dyadic coping. Five key themes are presented: the essence of
345 dyadic coping, lock and key fit, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor, and
346 protection and support. To enhance methodological rigor, each of these themes was
347 constructed and defined via our regular discussions between each of us as research team
348 members. Although we have tried to be transparent in how these vignettes and themes were
349 constructed, we are conscious that our personal experiences and backgrounds may have

350 shaped how the findings and the vignettes have been constructed and reported (Randall &
351 Phoenix, 2009).

352 **The Essence of Dyadic Coping**

353 This theme represents our understanding of dyadic coping within the coach-athlete
354 relationship. The theme addresses how coaches and athletes defined dyadic coping and to
355 what extent this type of coping supplemented and extended an individual's coping resources.
356 The theme was defined as "the sharing of demands experienced by an individual as a means
357 to supplement and develop coping strategies for both members of the dyad."

358 **Coach perspective.**

359 "Dyadic coping is basically the fact we get to share demands placed on us. At times
360 we may go to an expert but we don't actually pass stress to them, it's still us coping
361 together. Sport matters to the athlete because they are the athlete and it's all about
362 them. I think it can get very overwhelming so when they have a problem and can't
363 manage it they share it. When you're coaching someone their problems are your
364 problems, that's a given. I take their problems on board and I get angry because I feel
365 bad for them. I know I can't take the problems away but I can help them come up
366 with strategies to manage them. We believe one way of coping is to find ways of
367 keeping moving in the right direction by sharing the burden and trying to get over it. I
368 think every athlete that I work with impacts on my coping in some way or another but
369 I don't think they would be aware how much they do. These experiences of helping
370 other people cope with their demands has helped me because the way they cope rubs
371 off on me. I now know how to deal with stuff in my life and have forged some coping
372 strategies that I can use outside of coaching. Year on year we are never going to get
373 rid of the demands but we can get better at coping with them. The hard times just
374 cement things further down the line. We build trust when we cope together so the next

375 time we're put in a stressful position we can shoulder the burden together."

376 **Athlete perspective.**

377 "In terms of dyadic coping, I think we cope with things together, because coach
378 understands my emotions, we share our problems, and we help each other out because
379 you have to work together to get through it. Sometimes I feel I can handle stuff
380 myself, so there are problems that can take a couple of days for me to tell my coach.
381 But then other times I'll say something is annoying me and I need to sort it out
382 straight away. When I share the things that are stressing me out, coach puts things into
383 perspective. In my head it amounts to a lot of things but my coach just sees it as
384 another competition so maybe things aren't as bad as I thought. My coach doesn't
385 burden me with their problems but when they tell me I do my best to help them deal
386 with the rubbish they have to deal with. These problems and our experiences of
387 managing them has brought us closer together and developed our friendship.
388 Nowadays I don't get as stressed and a large part of that is coach teaching me how to
389 cope. Over time we've just realised how each other deals with things. I've taught
390 coach about stress but coach has taught me so much more."

391 **Lock and Key Fit**

392 This theme relates to the individual nature of each coach-athlete relationship, which
393 the interviewees perceived to be an antecedent to dyadic coping. The theme represents the
394 ways in which the fit between the coach and the athlete develops mutual support and
395 contributes to relationship growth. The lock and key fit appeared to extend an individual's
396 coping resources and facilitate shared approaches to coping. This theme was defined as
397 "flexible approaches used to foster a lock and key fit, shared understanding, a nurturing
398 environment for athlete growth, and dyadic coping."

399 **Coach perspective.**

400 “Each athlete has their own locks and as a coach you’ve got to find that particular key
401 to unpick their lock. You recognize that you are coaching individuals so everything
402 works in a totally different kind of way; whatever solutions I find for one are going to
403 be different for the others. So, I’ve got to develop a relationship with each of these
404 guys fairly bloody quickly to figure out which are the right keys. Some athletes like to
405 deal with things on their own but others use me as a leaning post. For example, one
406 athlete, if I was standoff-ish with them, they wouldn’t say anything to me and I
407 wouldn’t understand anything about them. I feel that with some athletes that they will
408 tell you a problem and if you don’t come back with a magic fix then you’ve let them
409 down. You don’t always get the right key every time and I’d be naïve to think I
410 always will. I’ve had athletes who have been members of the group and you’re
411 probably more like a fitness instructor, you know, they turn up, do their training, so it
412 varies. However, when you find that key and have a really good relationship, it’s still
413 professional, it’s a job, and at any point they could fire me as their coach or I could
414 say I’m not coaching them. But the athletes grow with you, so it becomes a closer
415 bond developed through experience, to start with I wouldn’t have felt comfortable
416 talking to them about my life, but I think recently I have. It’s made me become a
417 different kind of coach, I know that I have to have a lot of different attributes to
418 connect with different people. I like to think that to coach Jimmy how to play football,
419 you need to know about football, you need to know how to coach, and you need to
420 know about Jimmy...you’ve got to work on each of those elements to be able to
421 coach.”

422 **Athlete perspective.**

423 “Dyadic coping probably does exist in lots of different areas but it depends on the
424 people doesn’t it, and your relationships with people and different situations. My

425 coach and I are both so similar. At the beginning of the athlete-coach relationship I
426 felt comfortable with my coach because we felt the same things, we thought the same
427 things, and they just made me feel comfortable that way. I think the coach should
428 make more of an effort because it's your sports career it effects, so you've got to be
429 patient as a coach, and as athletes we have to commit to the cause. For example, my
430 coach has to initiate the conversation with new athletes, as some of them need
431 someone to come to them, and talk to them. My coach is a nice person and we get on
432 well, so I am willing to turn up for them. I guess it initially takes some adapting to
433 different people and their personalities.”

434 **Friendship and Trust**

435 This theme captures the main ingredients that coaches and athletes deemed important
436 precursors to dyadic coping. The theme focuses on the coach-athlete relationship as a shared
437 endeavor and, more specifically, on the friendship and trust that was reported by each of the
438 dyads in this study. The findings suggest that failure to develop trust within the coach-athlete
439 relationship will limit how much coaches and athletes share their stressors within their dyad.
440 Friendship and trust was defined as “the mutual connection and integrity of the relationship,
441 which forms the building blocks of a shared coping experience between two individuals in a
442 close personal relationship.”

443 **Coach perspective.**

444 “Our relationship has developed around friendship, because if there was no trust in
445 what we were trying to say or do, that openness, the way we share stress then our
446 sport relationship would be nothing. I know that this is a two-way thing, we keep
447 going and we keep ourselves on track. The two of us are growing a shared experience;
448 we get to know each other. I take a big interest in their life, I want to know what they
449 want to achieve, what their ambitions are, how will they get there. I think the key

450 driver is actually trust and I think that is a trust developed through experience; you
451 know, on both sides. The stronger the friendship, the stronger the trust. If things go
452 wrong we will both be devastated afterwards and it will be equal. I accept
453 responsibility, it's weird because I coach somebody to perform and they have to take
454 ownership of that performance but we achieve that performance by mutual and shared
455 endeavor. We are in it together; it matters to them because it's them and it's all about
456 them but equally it matters to me. It's like me facilitating a shared approach to dealing
457 with stuff; the better we get, the bigger we will fall. It's just friendship you know,
458 even though they're younger than me. I think it's a fundamental connection that is
459 coaching, as opposed to running a program or teaching someone. Overall, it's a lovely
460 relationship that we've got, but the key, the kernel, the nut of it all is that we trust
461 each other."

462 **Athlete perspective.**

463 "I think a good coach shouldn't be just your coach, they should be more like your
464 friend, in a professional manner, but so you can talk to them about an issue and they
465 can talk to you like their friend. My coach took an interest just before they started
466 coaching me, which was positive. At first, I did everything coach said and to a certain
467 extent, I still do, but as I'm getting older my coach can trust me enough to talk
468 through things a bit more. It can depend on how much I'm willing to give, so I think if
469 they give everything but I'm not giving the same back, I don't think it's entirely their
470 fault. We've got to work through everything together. You've got to be honest
471 otherwise there is no point having a coach, it's a two way kind of thing, they learn to
472 grow with you. I see my coach as a good friend; somebody who I trust and has my
473 interests at heart. At difficult times, our friendship has meant that I continued and
474 persevered with the sport. For me, sport is better because I'm close to my coach. It

475 takes time to build up any relationship doesn't it, so yeah, in the time you spend
476 together you get to know each other better. I'm lucky to have them as my coach, I
477 trust them."

478 **Communication of the Stressor**

479 When using dyadic coping the coach-athlete dyads sought to establish meaning
480 through communication. It appears that an individual's role within the relationship may
481 influence the level of communication within the coach-athlete dyad. Communication of the
482 stressor was defined as "the verbal and non-verbal communication that coaches and athletes
483 used to share a stressor and promote dyadic coping, and the ways in which communication
484 influenced and directed a partner's coping strategies."

485 **Coach perspective.**

486 "If there is a problem we talk, I coping together starts by talking. We both talk readily
487 and openly about the things that are pissing us off about work and we talk about stuff
488 associated with both of our jobs and about both of our relationships. We have chats at
489 like 10, 10.30 at night, just because we're kind of supporting each other. My athletes
490 are fairly easy to chat to about things; it's a two-way relationship, that's a good way
491 to describe it. If they appear stressed I will pull them to one side and speak to them,
492 plant the seed because I know from experience if something's was not quite right in
493 my life, it affected my game. Sometimes I can't cover anything up, it shows in my
494 face whatever mood I'm in and other times I hide it completely. Naturally you end up
495 having conversations about things not related to sport, even if it's girlfriend or
496 boyfriend problems, you become a confidant. I leave it open for them to come to me.
497 After a bad performance we just talk about what we could do better from both sides
498 and help him manage it."

499 **Athlete perspective.**

500 “It isn’t just a hi, bye relationship. We are in constant communication, you know, all
501 the time. It took a while for me to open up about like niggles and pains that I have
502 during training because I thought coach would think that I was trying to get out of the
503 session. But now we have chats just jogging in the warm up, coach will speak to me
504 and say maybe you need to do this or perhaps you should talk to this person. Before
505 competition, my coach can see I get stressed, they know where things are going
506 wrong for me and I can tell when coach is getting annoyed, probably not as well, but I
507 can tell. My coach can get a bit emotional, you know? Once they get it all out of their
508 system they seem fine and we chat to take their mind off whatever it is that they’re
509 worried about. My coach is very good at, you know, just talking about life really.
510 Coach will tell me openly and honestly, I will rant and rave and they will calm me
511 down, tell me to ignore it, help me cope. When coach puts it into perspective I guess
512 it’s calming and I think ‘why am I worried about that?’ Before competition, we speak
513 about the event, the week leading up to it, the night before, the morning of, straight
514 after it. Sometimes I’m quite a closed book so unless someone does ask me I won’t
515 come out and say I’ve had a bad day. I guess it comes out in my mannerisms, my
516 body language. My coach can just tell by the way that I do things, the way I am. My
517 coach is a good coach, able to recognize certain things. I’m fortunate that they are
518 there to speak me through it.”

519 **Protection and Support**

520 Protection and support was defined as “outcomes of dyadic coping that facilitate a
521 supportive and nurturing environment for personal and relationship growth.” Protection and
522 support were described as two positive outcomes of dyadic coping for the coaches and
523 athletes who took part in this study. The vignettes capture elements of protection and support
524 that were directly offered by the coaches and the indirect provision of protection and support

525 by the athletes.

526 **Coach perspective.**

527 “I have noticed the athletes actually have a big effect on me in terms of their energy. I
528 think every athlete that I work with impacts on my coping mechanisms some way or
529 another. So, when I’m doubting myself as a coach after a bad performance and they
530 aren’t, I think it’s the best thing I could have to know that they still believe in me. It’s
531 just them and they don’t need to do anything differently, just them being who they
532 are; that’s why I coach. It’s more of me actively looking after or looking out for them,
533 rather than the other way around because I try to allow the athlete to only concern
534 themselves with the physical preparation and let me basically carry the baggage. But
535 it’s a shared load, shared burden, shared task to try and get over it. I think over time
536 we’ve realized how each other deals with stress. I try to hide things from them and try
537 to be happy with how things are going. Some days it’s not always the case and some
538 days we have bad days but I always just try and get them through the day. I won’t let
539 them down and walk away, I’m not going to quit until they quit. I’m pretty sure most
540 coaches would say that; you recognize certain things in the sports person that you try
541 and influence, whether it’s their behavior or preparation, without them realizing. You
542 try to empower your athletes to take some responsibility because you might not be
543 directly helping them to cope but you’re giving them the skills to be able to cope and
544 then kind of exploring with them. We are both understanding, both learning, so I
545 suppose it’s supporting each other and we’re exploring all avenues together.”

546 **Athlete perspective.**

547 “When you can see that coach is not in the best mood there will be no back chat, no
548 trying to get out of the session. Sometimes my coach just cuts straight down to
549 business rather than like you know the whole how are you sort of thing, like banter,

575 nature of coping. This is problematic because it is difficult to isolate and analyze an
576 individual's coping when they are operating in a social environment, such as sport. Thus, our
577 focus on dyadic coping extends the body of existing knowledge by providing insight to the
578 factors that may lead to (i.e., antecedents) and occur as a result (i.e., outcomes) of dyadic
579 coping.

580 The first theme in our results represented the essence of dyadic coping. Our
581 interpretation of the data in this theme is such that coaches and athletes understand dyadic
582 coping to be a process of coping together. This finding is similar to those in other domains
583 where it has been highlighted that individuals need to perceive stressors as 'our problem'
584 for dyadic coping to occur (Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons et al, 1998). The interviewees in our
585 study suggested that a shared approach to coping extended their own coping resources.
586 Indeed, athletes reported that they sought coping-related support from their coach when they
587 had exceeded their own resources or when their available coping resources were insufficient.
588 Thus, it may be that dyadic coping enhances and develops individuals' coping resources,
589 which is consistent with other researchers' suggestions that coaches play a role in developing
590 athletes' coping strategies (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Our findings extend this knowledge by
591 suggesting that both athletes' *and* coaches' coping resources may be extended by dyadic
592 coping and that shared coping is mutually beneficial for both parties. This also extends
593 previous literature on social support in sport psychology (e.g., Tamminen & Holt, 2012) by
594 suggesting that support may be bidirectional between coaches and athletes. Turning to our
595 second theme, lock and key fit, our findings support and extend previous research by
596 identifying that a coach's role can vary according to contextual factors and athlete
597 requirements (cf. Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). These findings add weight to the suggestion that
598 athletes may perceive the coach as an attachment figure (Davis & Jowett, 2010) who can
599 facilitate an environment that fosters the development of life skills (Vallée & Bloom, 2005).

600 Moreover, our interpretations of the data suggest that coach-athlete relationships may not
601 involve a mutually supportive partnership from the outset and, in doing so, extend the body
602 of knowledge on coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2007; Poczwardowski, Barott, &
603 Peregoy, 2002). Current conceptualizations of coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Jowett &
604 Cockerill, 2003) highlight that mutual and causal interdependence is a key element of
605 effective and successful relationships. Our findings add to this by suggesting that a lock and
606 key fit is not only essential for relationship sustenance but also for the promotion of dyadic
607 coping. This suggestion is similar to findings in health (Fife et al., 2010) and relationship
608 (Hamama-Raz, Hemmendinger, & Buchbinder, 2010) psychology that have identified
609 relationship roles as an antecedent to dyadic coping.

610 Our third theme, friendship and trust, suggests that these elements may promote and
611 shape shared coping experiences between athletes and coaches. This supports and extends
612 previous work (e.g., Carpenter & Scott, 1992; Papp & Witt, 2010; Wunderer & Schneewind,
613 2008) by suggesting that the initiation and development of relationships is fundamental to the
614 ways in which individuals manage demands together. Some researchers (e.g., Jowett and
615 colleagues, 2003, 2005, 2007) have highlighted that closeness and interdependence offered in
616 coach-athlete relationships can facilitate athletes' optimal functioning (Jowett, 2005). The
617 interpretations presented here extend these thoughts by highlighting that friendship and trust,
618 which are similar to closeness and interdependence, promote the sharing of stressors between
619 athletes and coaches and may antecede dyadic coping. Indeed, researchers in other domains
620 (e.g., fostering) have shown that individuals require trust when sharing their experiences and
621 stressors (e.g., Steenbakkens, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2016). In sport, trust has been found
622 to be a building block of close coach-athlete relationships (Poczwardowski, Barott, &
623 Henschen, 2002). Our focus on friendship and trust supports this notion by highlighting that
624 both members of the coach-athlete relationship should be concerned for the wellbeing of the

625 other to facilitate shared experiences and foster dyadic coping. Our findings do, however,
626 contradict those of some published works. For example, the communal coping theory
627 suggests that shared coping experiences can be facilitated if one person in a dyad holds a
628 communal coping orientation (Lyons et al., 1998). Our interpretations of our data, however,
629 suggest that investment from both members of the dyad is essential for dyadic coping to
630 occur. One possible explanation for this divergence is that the extant research on communal
631 and dyadic coping has typically explored the reciprocal nature of personal (e.g., marital)
632 relationships. However, these types of relationships differ from the hierarchical, role-divided
633 nature of coach-athlete partnerships, which appear to require both individuals to value a
634 dyadic approach before friendship and trust can develop and dyadic coping can occur.

635 Our fourth theme highlighted verbal and non-verbal communication of a stressor as an
636 important antecedent of dyadic coping that allowed athletes and coaches to share stressful
637 experiences and influence the other's coping strategies. This finding is consistent with a body
638 of non-sport literature (e.g., Bodenmann, 1995; Lyons et al., 1998) that indicates that there
639 must be an element of communication for coping to be shared. Indeed, Bodenmann (2005)
640 conceptualized dyadic coping as a phenomenon that encompasses a stress communication
641 process that mobilizes both partners' coping resources. Our interpretations extend this
642 concept to the context of coping in sport, by drawing attention to the importance of
643 communication between athletes and coaches to facilitate shared coping experiences when
644 managing stressors. One explanation for the importance of communication for our sample
645 relates to appraising and coping resources (see Lazarus, 1999). For example, communication
646 between a coach and athlete may shape the individual's appraisal of a stressor and may
647 augment the coping resources that are available by promoting a shared approach to coping
648 (Meuwly et al., 2012). Crocker et al. (2015) suggested that the use of "we-talk" among team
649 members may provide valuable information about the stressors faced and the use of

650 communal coping. Our results extend this literature by focusing on dyadic, rather than
651 communal, coping in sport and by exploring this concept in coaches and athletes who are
652 operating in individual sports.

653 With reference to protection and support, which was the fifth theme that we
654 presented, it is generally accepted that coaches aim to provide a nurturing environment to
655 facilitate athletes' growth (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). It is the exchange of care between
656 coaches and athletes that is deemed important for coach and athlete growth (Poczwardoski,
657 Barott, & Henschen, 2002). Our inferences extend this work by suggesting that athletes also
658 offer support to the coach and that this support may be indirect and unacknowledged by both
659 parties. In contrast to previous relationship literature (e.g., Lyons et al., 1998), we suggest
660 that coaches and athletes do not necessarily need to use collaborative coping strategies (e.g.,
661 joint problem solving) to reduce the negative effect of stressors. Instead, the coach may play
662 a direct role in dyadic coping with a shared stressor and the athlete may play a less direct
663 role. These contrasting interpretations could be explained by the unique nature of coach-
664 athlete relationships, which differs from other types of personal relationships (e.g., husband
665 and wife) that have been explored in the published literature. For example, marital
666 relationships include mutual reciprocity, which is not as prominent in the "authority figure-
667 subordinate" (Stebbins, Taylor, & Spray, 2016, p.292) relationship of coaches and athletes.
668 To expand briefly, the notion of empowerment is unique to coach-athlete relationships
669 (Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012) and there is often less of a focus on mutual support
670 provisions. Thus, there are distinct roles that are present in coach-athlete relationships that
671 may influence how dyadic coping manifests.

672 **Strengths and Limitations**

673 A noteworthy strength of this study relates to the coaches and athletes who were
674 interviewed. Specifically, we worked with experienced coaches and athletes who had been

675 together for at least one season at the time of data collection. This facilitated breadth of
676 understanding relating to dyadic coping (see Schwandt, 1997) and allowed knowledge
677 relating to the essence, antecedents, and outcomes of dyadic coping in effective and
678 successful coach-athlete relationships to be constructed. Another notable strength relates to
679 the use of composite vignettes, which allow the reader to understand the perspectives of the
680 coaches and the athletes through the interviewees' voices (Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, Ge,
681 Oghene, et al., 2016). Despite these strengths, the findings should be considered in light of
682 potential limitations. For example, self-selection bias may have influenced the sample
683 because interview based research tends to attract individuals who engage in altruistic
684 behaviors, and find the experience innocuous and therapeutic (Peel, Parry, Douglas, &
685 Lawton, 2006). In addition, the research did not explore how dyadic coping was considered
686 alongside individual coping, did not thoroughly explore how dyadic coping may come into
687 play once individual coping resources are exhausted, and did not seek to understand helpful
688 and unhelpful instances of dyadic coping. Researchers would do well to address these
689 shortcomings when exploring dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. It is also
690 important to consider that our vignettes are influenced by our own experiences and
691 motivations (Randall & Phoenix, 2009) and that the data gathered may have been
692 unintentionally influenced by the lead author. In addition, the focus on coach-athlete dyads
693 who were working together at the time of data collection and reported having a positive
694 relationship overlooked those working in new coach-athlete relationships who may have
695 offered interesting insight to dyadic coping. This is noteworthy because the findings of
696 previous research have suggested that relationship length is a contextual characteristic that
697 influences dyadic coping (Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008).

698 **Implications**

699 Two important implications emerge from the findings. First, our interpretations of the

700 data show that coach-athlete relationships can offer a supportive environment to manage the
701 demands that individuals experience in competitive situations. Thus, dyadic extensions of
702 transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) are required to better understand and
703 explain the interpersonal coping processes that are at play in coach-athlete relationships
704 (Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). Exploration of the coach-athlete relationship offers novel
705 and complimentary insight to dyadic coping theories that have been identified in research to
706 date. Indeed, while previous researchers have acknowledged dyadic coping processes within
707 personal relationships (e.g., husband and wife; Bodenmann & Cina, 2006), this study is
708 among the first to capture the essence of interpersonal coping in context dependent
709 relationships (e.g., coach-athlete; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Future research
710 should build on our interpretations by using a narrative tradition to explore the specific ways
711 in which coach-athlete dyads use dyadic coping processes to overcome stressful experiences.
712 The second implication relates to the application of these insights to applied practice. For
713 example, the lock and key fit between the coach and the athlete, a focus on friendship and
714 trust, and verbal and non-verbal communication of stressors appear to antecede dyadic coping
715 and foster protection and support of each member of the dyad. These findings may be useful
716 for national governing bodies (NGBs) and practitioners because they bring to the fore the
717 existence of dyadic coping in coach-athlete relationships. This is noteworthy because it is
718 acknowledged that this type of coping increases available resources (Traa, De Vries,
719 Bodenmann, & Den Oudsten, 2015) for managing the negative outcomes of stressors. The
720 results also highlight some of the adaptive support structures that relate to dyadic coping
721 (e.g., fostering friendship and trust) and can be used by coaches and athletes when managing
722 stressors. Thus, it may be useful for NGBs to incorporate a focus on dyadic coping in coach
723 education programs.

724

Conclusion

725 This study has advanced knowledge of coping in sport by highlighting coping as an
726 interpersonal process, rather than an individual phenomenon. In addition, the results capture
727 the essence of dyadic coping as shared coping processes and recognize that the lock and key
728 fit between an athlete and a coach, friendship and trust, communication of the stressor, and
729 protection and support are important elements of dyadic coping in sport. Future research that
730 develops knowledge of these elements will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of
731 how dyadic coping manifests and how coaches and athletes can work together to take shared
732 responsibility for coping with stressors. This will be helpful because dyadic coping has
733 implications for appraisals of stressors (Nicholls & Perry, 2016), relationship satisfaction
734 (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015), and psychological well-being
735 (Gudmundsdottir et al., 1996). Researchers should explore the coach-athlete relationship in
736 more depth with a specific focus on the support structures that facilitate enhanced sport
737 performance. This approach would help to identify some of the factors that can enhance
738 athlete well-being and performance in high-level sport.

739

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