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Review

Interpersonal coping in sport: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To systematically search for, appraise, and synthesize peer-reviewed literature on interpersonal coping (IC) in sport.

Design: A systematic review adhering to PRISMA-P guidelines.

Method: Systematic searches of CINAHL, PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, and SPORTDiscus were conducted. To be eligible for inclusion, papers had to be published in full in the English language in a peer-reviewed journal and had to contain empirical data that focused on IC among individuals in sport (i.e., athletes, coaches, sport parents, practitioners).

Results: The final sample consisted of 28 studies (22 qualitative, five quantitative, one mixed methods) spanning from September 01, 1981 to July 10, 2023. The results highlight eight antecedents and facilitators of IC (closeness, commitment, communication, complementarity, cultural values, environment and situations, sharing of demands, support), three mediators and moderators of IC (appraisal of own and others' emotions and coping, gender, individuals within the relationship), and three outcomes of IC (performance, relationships, regulation or management of emotions). The findings were used to develop the first working definition of IC in sport.

Conclusion: A volte-face of thought is needed to shift attention toward the interpersonal manifestation of coping. IC has wide-reaching implications for individuals, relationships, and other psychological constructs. Methodological innovation is needed to realize stepwise changes in intellectual and practical progress and to develop quantitative measures of IC. Coaches, family members, practitioners, and retired athletes are considerably underrepresented in research on IC. This systematic review offers a vantage point from which composed and coordinated action can be taken to develop research on IC.

Stemming from decades of research on intraindividual coping in sport (see, for reviews, Crocker et al., 2015; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Nicholls et al., 2016b; Norris et al., 2017) and in light of knowledge that coping often involves more than one person (Folkman, 2009), interpersonal coping (IC) is becoming more widely researched. IC is a unique form of coping that manifests between two or more people. Thus, IC is an umbrella concept, or hypernym, under which various hyponyms (e.g., relationship-focused coping, coping congruence, dyadic coping) are nested. Whilst a definition of IC in sport has not yet been developed, various theories and models of IC have been proposed in sport and wider psychology domains. These include those that encompass relationship-focused coping (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1991), coping congruence (e.g., Revenson, 1994), dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann, 1997, 2005; Staff et al., 2017a, 2017b), communal coping (e.g., Lyons et al., 1998), relational coping (e.g., Kayser et al., 2007), and collective coping (e.g., Kuo, 2012). These theories and models each refer to some

form of IC but represent different conceptualizations that require distinct operationalizations. Relationship theorists (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1991), for example, proposed the relationship-focused coping model, which focuses on protecting and maintaining quality in marital relationships as part of the coping process (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1991). Whereas Revenson's (1994) model of coping congruence, which is underpinned by French et al.'s (1974) person-environment fit theory, emphasizes discrepancies in and harmony between partner coping responses as a predictor of adaptation.

In response to critique about the coping congruence model focusing on the individual as the unit of analysis, Bodenmann and colleagues (e.g., 1995, 1997, 2005) developed the systemic-transactional model (STM) of stress and coping among couples. This model has informed much research on dyadic coping to date and was used to develop a grounded theory of dyadic coping in sport (Staff et al., 2020). Both the STM and the sport-specific theory of dyadic coping are underpinned by

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transactional perspectives of coping, which focus on individuals' "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Inherent in these theories is dyadic coping, which Bodenmann (1995) describes as the combined efforts of both partners when experiencing a shared stressor. Dyadic coping has also been explained by the developmental-contextual coping model (Berg & Upchurch, 2007), which focuses on couples who are coping with chronic illness. This model emphasizes that dyadic coping can change at different stages of illness. Additionally, communal coping, defined as the "pooling of resources and efforts of several individuals" (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 580) refers to a cyclical process of dyadic stress that includes appraising, responding, coordinating, and growing (Kayser et al., 2007).

A common thread among the various theories, models, definitions, and conceptualizations of IC is the notion that coping can and does occur as a social process between two or more people and outside of the social vacuum that is inferred by intrapersonal explorations. In addition to there being much complexity in how best to define various forms of IC and how they overlap, many other concepts exist that intersect with IC. For example, social support is "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 13). This definition exemplifies the overlap between social support and coping by focusing on how one person can support another, possibly during times of stress. Social support can also buffer the maladaptive outcomes of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and can help people to overcome stressors (Revenson, 1994). In sport, some researchers (e.g., Staff et al., 2017a) have argued that social support is distinct from coping because it symbolizes unidirectional provision of support whereas dyadic coping, for example, signifies bidirectional support between two people. Others (e.g., Norris et al., 2017) have explored social support as a coping option that athletes use when managing stressors such as injuries or underperformance. Researchers have also discussed the facilitation of coping resources via supportive sport relationships, such as those between athletes and coaches (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Staff et al., 2020). Collectively, this research highlights the complexity of the social support-IC interplay and suggests a need to better understand how social support may or may not function as a form of IC.

Another concept that is closely associated with IC is interpersonal emotion regulation (IER), which is concerned with how individuals regulate their own emotions and the ways in which they regulate the emotions of others (e.g., Gross & Thompson, 2007). IER, therefore, shares conceptual similarities with coping in that they are both processes of regulation that are involved with development and adaptation. Both coping and IER also include controlled, purposeful, and effortful regulatory attempts but IER may be distinguished from coping by encompassing automatic processes as well. Coping is also distinct in that it is a process that occurs exclusively in relation to stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) whereas IER can occur following a wider range of situations and stimuli (Compas et al., 2014). Given the points of convergence and divergence in coping, social support, and IER, some researchers in sport may have explored IC indirectly when studying social support or IER, for example.

IC is a unique form of coping that operates at dyadic, triadic, group, and relational levels. Given the lack of consistency in IC related terminology and the conceptual overlaps between IC and various other concepts (e.g., social support, IER), a comprehensive review that incorporates all peer-reviewed literature that has directly or indirectly explored IC in sport is needed. A review of this nature will develop conceptual competence (Aftab & Waterman, 2021) to begin progress towards a working definition of IC in sport that is grounded in literature and avoids "sloppy, careless, or subjective definitions" (Locke, 2003, p. 415) that have been widely discussed as a hindering factor in intellectual progress (e.g., Bringmann et al., 2022; Gerring, 1999, 2012; MacKenzie et al., 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Such a review is also needed to

examine potential adaptive and maladaptive consequences of IC for development, health, well-being, and performance. To date, published systematic reviews have focused on intraindividual coping in sport (e.g., Nicholls & Polman, 2007), coping with organizational stressors (Simpson et al., 2021), and social support (Norris et al., 2017), for example. No systematic review exists that synthesizes findings on IC in sport despite knowledge that researchers are making a strong turn toward the examination of coping outside of the social vacuum that is inferred by intraindividual explorations. Such a review is necessary because it will offer a timely and rigorous point of reference that can be used to develop research on IC in sport from its relatively infantile current state. A systematic review of this nature will also provide directions for future research and will offer insight to IC in sport that can be used to inform coaches', athletes', and practitioners' coping behaviors and education. The purpose of this study was to systematically search for, appraise, and synthesize peer-reviewed literature on IC in sport. The aims were to assess the quality of studies that have directly or indirectly explored IC; to develop conceptual competence in relation to IC; to offer an initial working definition of IC in sport; and to identify conceptual, theoretical, and methodological gaps in literature.

1. Method

1.1. Study design

Preliminary scoping searches indicated that IC has been studied both directly and indirectly using a range of study designs and methods (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) and with a variety of individuals (e.g., athletes, coaches, family members, practitioners) and teams. Therefore, a systematic review was appropriate to allow the systematic collection and synthesis of research papers from a heterogeneous portfolio of literature that other methods (e.g., meta-analysis, meta-synthesis) are not suited to (Shamseer et al., 2015). Non-sport specific reviews of IC (e.g., Gómez-López et al., 2019; Staff et al., 2017a) exist and a small number of reviews in sport (Norris et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2021) have indirectly explored IC in relation to coaches and athletes. However, no reviews exist that focus explicitly on IC in sport to systematically search for, appraise, and synthesize all relevant literature.

1.2. Procedure

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with PRISMA-P guidance (Shamseer et al., 2015; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)). A PRISMA-P checklist is included in the supplementary material (see [Supplementary Material 2](#)). The first named author electronically searched four databases (CINAHL, PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, SPORTDiscus) for literature published between September 01, 1981 and July 10, 2023, without enlisting a librarian. The databases searched represent those that have been used in previous systematic reviews that have examined elements of psychological stress in sport (e.g., Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Norris et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2021; Staff et al., 2017a). To ensure that the search was effective in identifying all relevant literature, a comprehensive range of keywords and synonyms were initially developed using keywords that have been used in previous reviews (e.g., Neely et al., 2017; Staff et al., 2017b, 2020), via discussions with independent researchers who are experts in coping, and via iterative scoping searches. The first named author experimented during scoping searches with various search strings, Boolean operators, and wildcards, and maintained a comprehensive audit trail via a reflective log of the strings, the number of retrieved articles, and the foci of the retrieved papers. This process fed into discussions with the wider research team and independent researchers, which helped to refine and develop the search string that was used for this review.

To ensure a robust search strategy and comprehensive retrieval of papers, searches were conducted at full-text and abstract levels (see

Supplementary Material 3). Each article in the final sample was recorded in a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet to ensure a comprehensive audit trail. Once the searches were complete, citation pearl growing (Schlosser et al., 2006) was used to gather additional papers that may have been missed during the initial searches and involved forward and backward citation searches of published papers (e.g., Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Norris et al., 2017; Staff et al., 2017a). Manual searches of journals (e.g., Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise, and Health; Anxiety, Stress, and Coping; Psychology of Sport and Exercise) that housed articles under embargo or those that were not yet listed on electronic databases were also conducted. Each member of the research team engaged in formal meetings throughout the project, offered feedback at each stage of the review, shared their experience and expertise of conducting previous systematic reviews, and contributed to the production of this manuscript.

1.3. Inclusion criteria

For literature to be included, retrieved papers must have: (a) been published in full-text in the English language in a peer-reviewed journal, (b) contained primary empirical data that directly or indirectly explored IC in sport, (c) reported data from individuals involved in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents of athletes), (d) used a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods design, and (e) been published between September 1981 (i.e., when the first paper on IC in sport was published) and July 2023 (i.e., the point at which the searches were conducted).

1.4. Sifting of retrieved articles

The sifting process was carried out in three stages (see Norris et al., 2017; Rumbold et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2021). Papers were reviewed for appropriateness by title, then by abstract, and then by full text (see Supplementary Material 1). Duplicate papers were removed and recorded in a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet. Papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded at each stage of sifting. All decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion were documented in a reflective log and discussed between all members of the research team.

1.5. Risk of bias

In light of its validity and reliability in comparison to other quality assessments tools (e.g., the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool; Pace et al., 2012), Kmet et al.'s (2004) standard quality assessment criteria (SQAC; a 14-item checklist for quantitative studies and a 10-item checklist for qualitative studies) were used to assess the included papers. The SQAC provides a reproducible and systematic means of assessing the quality of quantitative and qualitative studies and has shown to be effective in assessing the quality of papers included in other systematic reviews in sport (see Norris et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2021; Staff et al., 2017a). Studies were checked against the corresponding checklist and graded based on whether they met the criteria (Y = fully met the criteria, P = partially met the criteria, N = did not meet the criteria). Items that were not applicable to a particular study were marked with "n/a" (see Supplementary Materials 4 and 5). Mixed-methods studies were assessed using the relevant criteria for the qualitative and quantitative aspects. A total quality score was calculated for each article and converted to a percentage for standardization purposes. Kmet et al. (2004) suggest that 50% is the quality threshold for articles to be included in a systematic review. Each of the 28 articles in our final sample scored above 50% and, thus, no studies were removed from the review at this stage. To further minimize bias, the first named author selected a random sample of five papers (Potts et al., 2021) to be evaluated by the second and third named authors. An overall kappa score of 0.90 indicated strong inter-rater reliability (Cohen, 1960; McHugh, 2012).

1.6. Data extraction and synthesis

Once the final sample had been identified and quality assessed, data extraction and synthesis took place. This involved tabulation (Popay et al., 2006) and thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) to systematically extract, record, and synthesize relevant data. Tabulation entailed the construction of a table that housed relevant information from each study in the final sample (see Supplementary Material 6). After tabulation, thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to identify codes, descriptive themes, and analytical themes. The first stage of thematic synthesis involved immersion in the final sample by reading, annotating, and coding a paper copy of each article. Codes were then collated on a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet and were used to create both descriptive themes that remained close to the primary studies and analytical themes that went beyond the primary studies' data to generate new understanding (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The development of analytical themes was important in the current work because some retrieved papers only examined IC indirectly. Thus, interpretation of retrieved data that could be used to further understanding of IC in sport was necessary. Throughout the analysis, codes and themes were shared with and discussed among the research team to enhance rigor and minimize bias (Popay et al., 2006).

2. Findings

2.1. Study characteristics

The final sample ($n = 28$) consisted of 22 qualitative papers, five quantitative papers, and one mixed methods paper that adopted cross-sectional (75%), longitudinal (14%), or case study (11%) designs. In total, 2016 participants were recruited to the studies in the final sample. With reference to participants' gender, 55% ($n = 1108$) were men, 44% ($n = 880$) were women, and 1% ($n = 28$) did not specify. Of the participants, 86% ($n = 1726$) were athletes, 12% ($n = 246$) were coaches, 1% ($n = 25$) were family members (i.e., parents, siblings, partners), and 1% ($n = 19$) were practitioners. The average age of the participants was 23.31 years ($M_{experience} = 11.19$, $SD = 6.77$ years) for athletes, 41.25 years ($M_{experience} = 18.65$, $SD = 5.09$ years) for coaches, 31.83 years ($M_{parent\ age} = 41.85$, $SD = 3.35$ years; $M_{sibling\ age} = 21.80$, $SD = 0$ years) for family members, and 37.55 years ($M_{experience} = 11.25$, $SD = 4.64$ years) for practitioners. Six of the of the 28 studies (21%) included participants that were involved with individual sports (e.g., badminton, ice skating, triathlon), 32% ($n = 9$) participated in team sports (e.g., football, rugby, volleyball), 36% ($n = 10$) explored both individual and team sports, and 11% ($n = 3$) did not state the type of sport studied. Regarding participation level, 18 studies stated the level at which coaches and athletes competed or coached (1777 participants; 89% of the total sample). Of these, 51% ($n = 906$) were athletes participating at amateur level, 6% ($n = 113$) were semi-professional, 31% ($n = 558$) were elite athletes, and <1% ($n = 5$) were retired. With reference to coaches, 7% ($n = 131$) were coaching at an amateur level, <1% ($n = 3$) at academy level, 2% ($n = 31$) at semi-professional level, 2% ($n = 27$) at elite level, and <1% ($n = 3$) were unspecified.

Turning to the theories that underpinned studies in the final sample, 50% ($n = 14$) adopted one theoretical framework, 11% ($n = 3$) utilized more than one theory, and 39% ($n = 11$) did not draw on a theoretical framework (see Supplementary Material 6). The five quantitative studies used questionnaires, inventories, or scales for data collection (Jowett & Cramer, 2009; Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2016a; Pété et al., 2022, 2023). Twelve of the qualitative studies used semi-structured interviews (Campo et al., 2017; Didymus, 2017; Friesen et al., 2013; Leprince et al., 2018; Neely et al., 2017; Nelson & Strachan, 2017; Poczwardowski et al., 2020; Potts et al., 2019; Tamminen et al., 2016; Van Woezik et al., 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2013). Six studies used a combination of semi-structured individual interviews and other methods, such as case study (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018;

Teck Koh et al., 2019), grounded theory (Prewitt-White et al., 2016; Staff et al., 2020), dyadic semi-structured interviews (Staff et al., 2017b), or triadic semi-structured interviews (Simpson et al., 2023). One study used semi-structured group interviews, case study, and photo voice reflections (Johnson et al., 2020). Three studies used a longitudinal design including face-to-face meetings, bi-weekly telephone monitoring, and video analysis of conversations (Wall et al., 2020); semi-structured interviews (Norris et al., 2022); or semi-structured interviews and audio diaries during a sport season (Braun & Tamminen, 2019). One paper adopted a mixed methods research design by using two questionnaires coupled with open-ended questions (Hoar et al., 2010). The findings of this systematic review highlight that research has predominantly been conducted in Europe ($n = 15$) and North America ($n = 11$), with one paper from Asia and one from Australasia.

2.2. Antecedents and facilitators of IC

Twenty-six papers in the final sample discussed antecedents and or facilitators of IC (i.e., closeness, commitment, communication, complementarity, cultural values, environment and situations, sharing of demands, support; see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Of these 26 studies, four adopted a quantitative research design, 21 implemented a qualitative research design, and one paper used mixed methods.

2.2.1. Closeness

Twelve papers (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)) referred to closeness and how it can nurture environments that we interpret as facilitative of IC. For example, closeness among the coach-athlete dyad has been shown to be positively associated with positive dyadic coping, which involves supportive, delegated, and common forms of dyadic coping (Nicholls & Perry, 2016). Furthermore, Staff et al. (2017b) found that fostering a lock and key fit (i.e., a form of closeness) in the relationship facilitated shared understanding between coaches and athletes and allowed dyadic coping to evolve among the dyad. In relation to IER, closeness among the coach-athlete relationship played an important role in coaches' efforts to regulate their athletes' emotions (Braun & Tamminen, 2019). Further, teammates who felt close to one another were able to exchange feedback and constructive criticism and to support one another during stressful encounters (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018). Similarly, and interrelated with closeness, was the notion of trust, particularly between athletes and those with whom they have relationships. Jowett and Cramer (2009), for example, found that athletes and their romantic partners who experience interpersonal trust, which the authors interpret an important element of IC (see also Staff et al., 2017b), were less likely to experience stress relating to spillover, which involves negative emotions interchangeably transferring from the romantic relationship to, and from, their career as an elite athlete. Trust between the coach-athlete dyad has been shown to promote and shape shared coping experiences (Staff et al., 2017b) whilst a trusting environment seems to be important among sport triads for IC to occur (Simpson et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Commitment

Six papers shared findings relating to commitment and our thematic synthesis highlights the role of commitment as an antecedent of IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). In Braun and Tamminen's (2019) study, athletes discussed how commitment from the head coach was perceived as higher than that from assistant coaches, which resulted in more IER from head coaches towards their athletes. Commitment among coach-athlete dyads encourages positive forms of dyadic coping (i.e., common, delegated, supportive), whilst members of dyads who exhibit less commitment are thought to experience negative forms of dyadic coping (i.e., ambivalent, hostile, or superficial responses to the other person, which signify insincere or unwilling support; Nicholls & Perry, 2016). Coaches who establish relationships and exert continual efforts to support athletes (e.g., through prompt correspondence) found that they

were able to better support those athletes and maintain their presence in the athlete's journey (Teck Koh et al., 2019). With reference to parents, these individuals can help athletes to negotiate their training, school, social, and extracurricular commitments. This in turn can facilitate IC because parents create shared understanding that helps parents to better support children during times of stress (Wall et al., 2020).

2.2.3. Communication

Communication was discussed in 14 papers, which can be interpreted as an antecedent of IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Regular and honest communication is important to ensure that stressors are communicated to others, rather than concealed. For example, Jowett and Cramer's (2009) study on the spillover of negative feelings and behaviours from one domain (e.g., an athlete's romantic relationship) to another (e.g., sport), highlighted that frequent communication between athletes and their romantic partners diminished the transfer of negative emotions from one realm (i.e., work) to another (i.e., personal), and vice versa. Verbal and non-verbal communication of stressors seems an important antecedent to dyadic coping among coach-athlete dyads and one that can influence each partner's choice of coping (Staff et al., 2017b). Furthermore, Staff et al.'s (2020) grounded theory implies that frequent verbal and non-verbal communication between athletes and their coaches to share a stressor can promote dyadic coping. Didymus (2017) found that coaches tried to understand situations with others via debriefing and honest conversation, which facilitated dyadic coping. Van Woezik et al. (2020) discussed the importance of ongoing and transparent communication within a team when a teammate was injured, and how IC was preferred over individual coping efforts to avoid conflict. Simpson et al. (2023) found that communicating emotions was a form of IC that the athlete-coach-sport psychology practitioner triad engaged with to collectively cope with stressors shared within the relationship.

2.2.4. Complementarity

Seven studies (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)) discussed complementarity in various contexts, which can facilitate IC. Where partners display complementary coping efforts, IC can be used to overcome relational- and performance-related stressors (Neely et al., 2017; Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Poczwadowski et al., 2020). Practitioners may cooperate with athletes and coaches to help them overcome conflict within the dyad (Wachsmuth et al., 2022) and some studies have highlighted that complementarity is an important facilitator of dyadic coping (Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2016a; Staff et al., 2017b) and communal coping (Leprince et al., 2018) in sport contexts.

2.2.5. Cultural values

Five papers (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)) discussed cultural values, and our thematic synthesis shows that such values can act as an antecedent of IC. For example, ice hockey captains discussed the importance of establishing cultural values, mentalities, or ideologies within a team, which were often related to winning, positivity, and productivity (Friesen et al., 2013) and nourished an environment where IC is facilitated. In another study, varsity volleyball athletes shared that social norms (e.g., crying in front of others) were appropriate emotional expression and regulation strategies in some contexts but were unacceptable in others because the expression of emotions can have maladaptive effects on the team (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018). This exemplifies the wider interpersonal implications of cultural norms on others' and one's own coping resources. Adopting and maintaining a culture that prioritizes "we" over "me" seems important for coping with stressors in teams whilst utilizing the interpersonal resources that a team provides can help athletes to cope with stressors (Van Woezik et al., 2020).

2.2.6. Environment and situations

Four studies discussed the environment and various situations that

act as facilitators for IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). For example, [Friesen et al. \(2013\)](#) found that when a situation changed from playing for fun to playing competitively, a team's collective emotional state became more intense. Teammates re-evaluated whether others' emotions helped or hindered their chances of goal attainment and decided whether or not to regulate teammates' emotions using that evaluation ([Friesen et al., 2013](#)). Further, if a team experienced an important loss, the team may not engage in IC, which implies that athletes may need a successful environment for IC to occur ([Tamminen et al., 2016](#)). For athletes living away from home, their parents and friends tried to maintain cultural connections and home comforts (e.g., speaking their native language) to defuse negative feelings associated with being away from home ([Johnson et al., 2020](#)), demonstrating how various environments and circumstances can facilitate IC for athletes.

2.2.7. Sharing of demands

Five papers discussed the sharing of demands (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)), which we have interpreted as an antecedent factor for IC. The coaches in [Didymus' \(2017\)](#) study, for example, delegated coaching tasks to athletes and referred athletes to discipline specialists. Collectively, these delegative IC strategies helped to alleviate coaches' experiences of stress. [Staff et al. \(2017b\)](#) suggested that the sharing of demands between coach-athlete dyads is part of the essence of dyadic coping, which helped to develop coping strategies for both members of the dyad. Further, [Leprince et al. \(2018\)](#) explored social joining and highlighted that teams would physically join forces to manage shared stressors using communal coping efforts (i.e., the efforts of individuals in a group as they collectively cope with stressors; [Lyons et al., 1998](#)). In relation to literature with parents and athletes, [Neely et al. \(2017\)](#) studied deselection in competitive youth sport and reported that parents attempted to protect their daughter from the negative emotions arising from deselection, and the athletes and parents then engaged in cooperative actions during their joint coping efforts to manage the shared stressor. Coaches in [Norris et al.'s \(2022\)](#) study relied on family members and partners to complete tasks at home (e.g., house chores) and shared tasks with their coaching partner (e.g., sharing responsibility of coaching tasks and workload) to alleviate the volume of perceived stressors. Actively participating in reciprocal support and collaborative efforts to manage stressors exemplifies the bidirectional nature of IC.

2.2.8. Support

Twelve papers discussed various types of support (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)) that can be explored in the context of IC. Esteem support from parents, coaches, and peers has been shown to be beneficial for athletes and can lead to positive outcomes (e.g., enjoyment, desire to continue participating in sport; [Williams et al., 2013](#)) even amidst challenging circumstances. This underscores the role that esteem support from others plays in shaping and facilitating athletes' coping resources during times of adversity. Another example of esteem support was demonstrated when athletes who were experiencing the stressor of losing and had feelings of guilt, were reassured by their teammates that the loss was not their fault ([Campo et al., 2017](#)). [Didymus \(2017\)](#) highlighted that Olympic and international level coaches engaged with supportive dyadic coping with their athletes by exchanging information and providing encouragement. [Potts et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study on coach stressors and coping found that full-time, part-time, and voluntary coaches sought various means of support (e.g., information seeking, emotional) to cope with stressors, including athlete-related and organizational stressors. Those who receive increased social support via coping efforts may be more likely to engage with IC ([Pété et al., 2022](#)), which indicates that social support may play an important role in encouraging individuals to engage in IC when managing stressors. In other research, emotional support was used by sport psychology practitioners during consultations with coaches and athletes to facilitate coping (e.g., with conflict) and to strengthen individuals' self-regulation (e.g., managing own emotions) and coping mechanisms (e.g., seeking support; [Wachsmuth et al., 2022](#)). Informational support (e.

g., advice, feedback) and tangible support (e.g., creating opportunities, sharing tasks) may be used by coaches to attenuate perceived stressors ([Norris et al., 2022](#)). The synergies between different forms of support aids stress reduction and cultivates an environment that promotes IC among individuals in sport.

2.3. Mediators and moderators of IC

Twenty-five studies in the final sample discussed mediators and moderators of IC in sport (i.e., appraisal of own and others' emotions and or coping, gender, individuals within the relationship; see [Supplementary Material 7](#)), of which four implemented a quantitative research design, 20 used a qualitative design, and one adopted a mixed methods approach.

2.3.1. Appraisal of own and others' emotions and or coping

Ten papers discussed appraisal of one's own and others' emotions and or coping, which we interpreted as a mediator of IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Developing an understanding of one's own emotional state and perceived inability to self-regulate emotions informed individuals' decisions to engage with IER ([Friesen et al., 2013](#)). Our interpretation is that such understanding establishes a foundation for engaging with IC. Acknowledging one's emotional challenges leads to the use of IER, which in turn seems to provide a platform for engaging in reciprocal coping behaviors. Empathy also mediated IC ([Friesen et al., 2013](#); [Staff et al., 2020](#); [Teck Koh et al., 2019](#); [Wall et al., 2020](#)). For example, parents may listen to, emphasize with, and acknowledge their daughters' concerns once they express their emotions regarding their parents' behavior and may then provide emotional support and regulation, thus allowing IC to occur ([Wall et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, older teammates may reflect on their own history as athletes, which helps them to know how to respond to and support younger teammates who were experiencing stressors ([Friesen et al., 2013](#)), resulting in a more collaborative and interpersonal approach to coping. This exemplifies how empathy among individuals, which the authors interpret as the ability to understand the perspectives of others through the appraisal of their emotions, nurtures the giving and receiving of support, which emphasizes the collaborative and bidirectional nature of IC.

2.3.2. Gender

Three papers discussed gender, which we have interpreted as a moderator of IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Gender differences were evident in IC among athletes, with women often seeking social support more than men ([Hoar et al., 2010](#); [Pété et al., 2022](#)). The divergence in seeking support based on gender underlines the nuanced ways in which individuals, shaped by societal norms and expectations, may engage with IC. With reference to coaches, [Braun and Tamminen \(2019\)](#) worked with five coaches who were men, six athletes who were women, and four athletes who were men. They found that gender influenced the coaches' IER with their athletes. However, the women athletes perceived women coaches as more empathetic about stressors when compared to their men athlete counterparts ([Braun & Tamminen, 2019](#)). This demonstrates how contextual factors such as gender moderate IER, which the authors interpret as closely related to IC.

2.3.3. Individuals within the relationship

Twenty-three studies in the final sample discussed the roles of different individuals and how they may be involved in IC processes (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). These individuals include athletes and teammates, coaches, family members, romantic partners, friends, and practitioners. Other athletes and teammates were important for the team's involvement in and engagement with IC. For example, female golfers received support from their teammates and found that this support was a factor in maintaining the golfers' involvement in sport, which the authors interpreted as a way for the athletes to avoid the

maladaptive effects of stressors (Williams et al., 2013). This embodies how support from teammates can moderate coping and underscores the need for effective interpersonal relationships between members of a team. Perceived roles (e.g., leadership) may moderate how teammates collectively engage with IC to manage their own and teammates' emotions (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018; Tamminen et al., 2016). For example, teammates may co-regulate one another's emotions using humor (Campo et al., 2017; Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018), appraisal of others' emotions and coping (Campo et al., 2017; Friesen et al., 2013; Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018), and cognitive change (Campo et al., 2017). Individuals may also draw on relationship-focused coping (Campo et al., 2017; Friesen et al., 2013; Leprince et al., 2018; Tamminen et al., 2016) when experiencing stressors. From a coach-athlete dyad perspective, coaches in Staff et al.'s (2017b, 2020) studies shared how the athletes who they work with influence their efforts to cope with stressors, elucidating a reciprocal relationship between athletes and coaches in relation to coping.

Coaches play a significant role in IC. Specifically, Olympic and international coaches have been shown to engage with common, delegated, and supportive dyadic coping (e.g., de-briefing, sharing tasks, relaying information) with athletes and colleagues to manage their own stressors and the stressors of others (Didymus, 2017). Coaches' individual (e.g., personality) and interpersonal (e.g., relationship length) differences influence how they engage with IER to help themselves and others cope with shared stressors (Braun & Tamminen, 2019). Staff et al. (2020) found that dyadic coping was implemented by coach-athlete dyads who used various strategies (e.g., information seeking, planning) to support one another or manage the influence of the partner's stressor on themselves. Similarly, coaches working in grassroots, university, academy, or professional performance contexts turned to support from their coaching colleagues to manage workload (Norris et al., 2022). In another study, coaches in full-time, part-time, and voluntary roles may seek support from other coaches, managers, and mentors in relation to the stressors they experience (Potts et al., 2019). The cooperative approach used by coaches relieved some coaches' workload and highlights the importance of teamwork and shared responsibilities in managing coaches' stressors. This demonstrates how coaches can mediate IC that is used in relation to their own and others' stressors.

Family members played different and multiple roles in mediating IC. For example, when looking at parents, fathers were cited as the technical experts and mothers were seen as emotional experts in the context of athletes' IC (Prewitt-White et al., 2016). Furthermore, mothers were seen as more supportive than fathers, and mothers often functioned as a mediator between fathers and their daughters (Prewitt-White et al., 2016). Daughters have also reported that seeking advice from both parents (Wall et al., 2020) accentuates the complex interplay of support-seeking in families. This emphasizes the important role of familial relationships in the development and utilization of IC among athletes. Coaches found that talking to their own parents about their coaching experiences was helpful because coaches perceived that their parents knew them best (Norris et al., 2022). Turning to siblings, within the athlete-sibling dyad, those who competed in the same sport had common ground to work from, making it easier for siblings to communicate with and relate to each other (Johnson et al., 2020; Nelson & Strachan, 2017). The authors interpreted that such a shared understanding between siblings serves as a foundation for IC, wherein they can exchange coping techniques, advice, and offer support due to their shared experiences in sport. Siblings moderate IC by cheering each other on, providing encouragement, and offering each other sport-specific advice (Nelson & Strachan, 2017). Turning to romantic partners as moderators of IC, coaches shared how talking with their romantic partners, maintaining a close relationship, and sharing duties was important when attempting to cope with tasks at home during demanding periods of coaching (Jowett & Cramer, 2009; Norris et al., 2022; Potts et al., 2019).

Friends were often a moderator of IC, particularly for athletes who

vented to friends via instant messages to cope with stressors (e.g., deselection; Neely et al., 2017). This emphasizes the mutual support and interaction between individuals within their social circles during times of stress. Parents may also vent their frustration and sadness about deselection to friends, often those who were sport parents themselves, who offered reassurance about their child's ability and provided comfort to help them to cope with their emotions (Neely et al., 2017). These insights showcase how both parties (i.e., parent seeking support and the friend providing reassurance) actively participate in a mutually supportive process, thus highlighting the bidirectional nature of IC. Furthermore, support from friends was drawn on by coaches to manage stressors (Potts et al., 2019), as well as by athletes when coping with transition to a new country and with a change in lifestyle (Johnson et al., 2020).

Practitioners (i.e., sport and exercise psychologists) acted as mediators for coach-athlete dyads to help them understand conflict by explaining situations, encouraging honest communication, and equipping coaches with the skills and knowledge to manage conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2022). Staff et al. (2020) also found that practitioners worked with coaches and athletes to implement strategies (e.g., empathy, perspective taking, distraction and avoidance) to increase dyadic coping within the coach-athlete dyads.

2.4. Outcomes

Sixteen studies in the final sample discussed one or more factors that we have interpreted as outcomes of IC (i.e., performance, relationships, regulation or management of emotions; see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Thirteen of the studies adopted a qualitative research design and the remaining three utilized a quantitative approach.

2.4.1. Performance

Seven studies discussed IC in the context of athletic performance (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Team captains, particularly in volleyball, regulated their teammates' emotions to improve the team's performance but, depending on the timing of regulatory efforts, regulating unpleasant emotions was sometimes detrimental for team performance (Friesen et al., 2013). Furthermore, athletes regulated teammates' emotions to avoid future negative consequences on team performance (Campo et al., 2017) and such interpersonal management of emotion can be effective for team performance (Pété et al., 2023). These interactions highlight the role of IC within a team and demonstrate the enhancing or potentially hindering effects it can have on performance.

2.4.2. Relationships

Five studies discussed effects of IC that can be interpreted as influencing relationships (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). Braun and Tamminen (2019), for example, found that coaches were more able to regulate the emotions of athletes who they shared a strong relationship with, and that emotion regulation strengthened the coach-athlete relationship. Staff et al. (2017b) reported that protection and support were outcomes of dyadic coping that allowed the coach-athlete relationship to grow and flourish. In another study, Nicholls and Perry (2016) demonstrated that relationship quality (i.e., closeness, commitment, complementarity) was negatively associated with negative dyadic coping and positively associated with positive dyadic coping. These papers highlight that those who implement IC are likely to have a robust relationship and that positive forms of IC can, in turn, contribute to positive relationship growth.

2.4.3. Regulation or management of emotions

Eleven papers discussed the regulation or management of emotions in a way that could be interpreted as an outcome of IC (see [Supplementary Material 7](#)). To expand, individuals who engage in some form of IC seem to be better able to control their emotions (Campo et al., 2017; Friesen et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2020; Pété et al., 2022; Tamminen

et al., 2016) and a lack of IC can lead to negative emotional consequences such as feeling demotivated or disengaged from sport (Leprince et al., 2018). Engaging in IC can distract athletes from both personal and sport related stressors (Braun & Tamminen, 2019; Campo et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2020), allowing athletes to channel their focus elsewhere and avoid maladaptive emotional outcomes. For example, when competing away from home, athletes spoke with their mothers on the phone to distract themselves from the stressor of being homesick and to feel better about their distance from home (Johnson et al., 2020). Further, athletes who were dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak and were engaged with IC experienced less maladaptive emotions than those who did not (Pété et al., 2022). Engaging in support that aims to manage emotions has been shown to have stress-buffering effects and can result in coaches feeling more relaxed when talking with athletes about potential stressors (Norris et al., 2022).

3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to systematically search for, appraise, and synthesize peer-reviewed literature on IC in sport. Thus, this paper offers a useful point of reference for research and practitioners alike. Twenty-eight studies spanning 14 years were included in the final sample. Collectively they highlighted antecedents and facilitators (closeness, commitment, communication, complementarity, cultural values, environment and situations, sharing of demands, support), mediators and moderators (appraisal of own and others' emotions and or coping, gender, individuals within the relationship), and outcomes of IC (performance, relationships, regulation or management of emotions). Whilst the search strategy was designed to extract all relevant sport-specific literature, it is evident that research that focuses directly or indirectly on IC is in its infancy. This is surprising given the importance of close personal relationships in sport and the knowledge that coping often involves more than one individual (Folkman, 2009). Various terms (e.g., communal coping, shared coping) have been used interchangeably throughout the IC literature in sport, which has created confusion about what the terms mean and makes it difficult to draw findings together and provide evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice. Nonetheless, given the infantile state of literature on IC in sport, researchers have a timely opportunity to find common ground in how to define this term to move forward with composed and coordinated action.

Two main conceptualizations of IC have been explored in sport: dyadic coping (e.g., Didymus, 2017; Nicholls & Perry, 2016; Staff et al., 2017a; Staff et al., 2020) and, to a lesser extent, communal coping (e.g., Leprince et al., 2018). Other phenomena, that is IER and social support, are closely related to IC, which signifies a need for researchers to be conceptually and operationally clear about their concepts of interest. A number of questions about these related phenomena remain unanswered. For example, the social support-IC interplay appears complex and there remains a need to better understand how social support may or may not function as a form of IC. Working towards a well-grounded definition of IC will help to progress literature in a pragmatic and coordinated manner. Using the findings of this review and transactional models of stress (e.g., Lazarus, 1999), the authors define IC as "cognitive, behavioral, and or affective efforts of two or more people to manage shared demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of one or more individuals." Thus, IC is an umbrella term, or hypernym, under which dyadic coping, communal coping, and collective coping are nested hyponyms.

Of the plethora of IC facilitators that are reported to provide broad understanding of IC, some of the most poignant relate to relationship characteristics among sport dyads (e.g., coach-athlete, athlete-parent, athlete-sibling). Team sport athletes who hold "we" over "me" as a core value and experience closeness in relationships appear to be more willing and able to use IC. IC appears to be a collaborative and cooperative process whereby individuals work together to overcome stressful

situations. To do so, individuals need to feel a sense of closeness to those with whom they are trying to cope, need to feel committed to those individuals, need to communicate and complement each other, and need to be willing to share demands and receive and offer support. Jowett's (2007) 3+1Cs framework offers a useful point of reference here because it acknowledges communication, complementarity, closeness, and commitment among coach-athlete dyads. Whilst a strong coach-athlete relationship has been shown to enhance performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), more research is needed to understand how IC is associated with various characteristics of sport relationships.

The findings of this review highlighted various mediators and moderators of IC among athletes, coaches, practitioners, and family members. Teammates, for example, are important for a team's involvement in and engagement with IC, and coaches and family members can moderate IC among athletes. Within coach-athlete dyads, coaches appear to be the main supporter of athletes, with athletes sporadically reciprocating this support for coaches. This shows that IC may occur most frequently on a dyadic plane among coaches and athletes and that athletes are more often supported by coaches, rather than experiencing truly dyadic coping whereby both individuals extend the coping resources of the other (Bodenmann, 1995). Other researchers who have explored triads in sport (e.g., Simpson et al., 2023) have shown that IC acts as a transfer mechanism for psychological well-being, which highlights the wider-reaching implications of coping with others. More work needs to be done to explore the dyadic and triadic manifestations of IC as well as the ways in which IC may operate among members of sports teams and among dyads, triads, and teams with different gender compositions. Given that coaches often act as supporters of athletes' coping efforts, future work should focus on coaches to understand their support networks and how members of these networks may mediate or moderate their IC efforts. Family members (e.g., parents and siblings), were discussed in this review as moderators of IC, demonstrating that IC extends beyond the immediate sport environment and that family members play an important role in athletes' IC. Indeed, the findings of this review highlight the importance of family members in sport (Felber et al., 2020; Harwood & Knight, 2016), yet further work is needed with a variety of stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, coaches, family members) to develop understanding of how and among whom IC flourishes. It was apparent that gender influenced individuals' engagement with IC (e.g., Hoar et al., 2010; Pété et al., 2022) as well as the individuals that athletes may turn to for assistance with coping efforts (e.g., female coaches, mothers for emotional support; Braun & Tamminen, 2019; Prewitt-White et al., 2016). It is known that there are gender differences in relation to intrapersonal coping (Nicholls & Polman, 2007) and reporting of stressors (Nicholls et al., 2007) among athletes. However, future research should aim to explore the role of gender in the moderation of IC among athletes, coaches, parents, and practitioners.

This review highlighted outcomes of IC relating to performance, relationships, and emotion regulation and management. The question of whether IC improves performance remains unanswered but it is understood that the timing and nature of emotion regulation, rather than IC per se, is important when considering performance related outcomes. Team captains may be particularly important stakeholders in the emotion regulation-performance interplay and teammates should remain mindful of how and when to attempt to regulate the emotions of others. With reference to outcomes for relationships, dyadic coping may help to protect relationships among coaches and athletes and may enhance the sense of support experienced among these individuals. Some researchers have highlighted that dyadic coping can facilitate positive relationship growth (Staff et al., 2017a) and can enhance relationship quality (Nicholls & Perry, 2016), whilst others (Leprince et al., 2018) have illustrated that a lack of IC can have negative consequences (e.g., feeling unmotivated or disengaged from sport). Taken together, these findings suggest that IC may play a nurturing role in sport relationships and may be one tool that coaches and athletes can use to enhance their working alliances. IC also has implications for emotion

regulation in that those who implement IC may be better able to regulate their emotions (e.g., Johnson et al., 2020) and may be less likely to experience maladaptive emotions (e.g., Pété et al., 2022). IC may also help to distract athletes from stressors (Braun & Tamminen, 2019; Campo et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2020), which highlights the potentially useful nature of IC during stressful experiences. To develop future research on the short- and long-term outcomes of IC among coaches, athletes, practitioners, and family members, Staff et al.'s (2020) grounded theory of dyadic coping may offer a useful bedrock.

The findings of this systematic review should be considered in light of potential limitations. For example, the thematic synthesis that the authors used to bring the findings together has inherent limitations (e.g., the subjective nature of the themes), which is particularly relevant to this review because some of the findings are based on our interpretations of the included papers. In addition, whilst the search strategy was appropriate for addressing the aims of the study, some literature that focused indirectly on IC may not have been retrieved. A large percentage of the studies retrieved for this review focused on participants of Western European and Northern American descent. This may have been due to our PRISMA-P informed decision to exclude studies that were not available in full text in the English (i.e., our native) language. Another potential limitation of the study was the authors' decision to not enlist a librarian. Historically, librarians have been enlisted in health science and medical literature since the 1990s (Murlow, 1994) to assist in the development and execution of systematic reviews (e.g., searching, source selection, document supply; Spencer & Eldredge, 2018). Due to scarce documentation of the potential roles of librarians in systematic reviews in the social sciences (Scott & Vogus, 2022), the authors did not appoint a librarian. Researchers who conduct systematic reviews in the future should consider doing so. Despite these limitations, this systematic review rigorously applied the inclusion criteria that allowed exploration of peer-reviewed, trustworthy studies that have investigated IC. Other strengths relate to the first named author's reflexive approach that was recorded via a reflective log and helped to maintain awareness of bias, sensitivity to the researchers' identities, and the transparency and appropriateness of decision making.

A volte-face of thought is needed to shift attention toward the interpersonal manifestation of coping and away from the social vacuum that is implied in research that takes an intrapersonal approach. To develop literature on IC in sport, researchers need to discuss, debate, and interrogate the working definition of IC that we present here. When an evidence-based, robust definition of IC is developed, further intellectual and practical progress can be made. The majority of research on IC to date has used cross-sectional methods to examine this phenomenon, which may be unstable and likely to flux over time. Methodological innovation will be needed to realize stepwise changes in intellectual and practical progress using, for example, longitudinal qualitative methods. Fostering methodological advancements will facilitate a transformative shift to further understanding of the temporal evolution of IC among sporting individuals. Researchers should also focus on the development of new quantitative measures of IC to facilitate future research that can explore cause and effect relationships. A robust quantitative tool is needed to accurately capture, measure, and analyze the complex and multifaceted nature of coping within interpersonal contexts in sport. Sport psychology researchers should work in cross-disciplinary teams to capitalize on knowledge and skills that researchers in other disciplines can bring to the study of IC. Coaches, family members, and practitioners are considerably underrepresented in research on IC and should, therefore, be the focus of future research. Published work with retired individuals is minimal so researchers would do well to exploit the potential benefits of retrospection to explore IC among athletes, coaches, family members, and practitioners who are no longer involved in sport. Research exploring different environments and situations where individuals experience fluctuating stressors may tell us more about the facilitation (e.g., Friesen et al., 2013; Tamminen et al., 2016), moderation, and mediation of IC. As little is known about how IC is nurtured or

neglected in relation to the assorted circumstances of sport, future research should investigate how a flux in scenarios (e.g., during the competitive season vs. out of season) and context (e.g., in training vs. during a match) may influence IC. The potential of research on IC is vast and many avenues for future work exist.

To conclude, IC has wide-reaching implications for individuals, relationships (i.e., positive relationship growth), and other psychological constructs (e.g., psychological well-being), as illustrated by Folkman (2009) over a decade ago. This comprehensive review has highlighted a range of antecedents and facilitators, mediators and moderators, and outcomes of IC in sport. The findings wield considerable implications for future research and practice. For instance, knowledge of antecedents, facilitators, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of IC can help to inform those who are seeking to enhance and understand IC among various individuals in sport. The review provides a foundational definition of IC to help progress literature in a lucid manner. By developing literature on IC in sport, researchers will pave the way for understanding how IC is facilitated, the individuals involved, and what constitutes IC in sport. This systematic review offers a vantage point from which composed and coordinated action can be taken.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chloe J. Woodhead: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Faye F. Didymus:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology. **Alexandra J. Potts:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Supervision, Validation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102631>.

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