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The coach-parent relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating: An interpretive description

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of the coach-parent relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating.
Design: Qualitative, interpretive description.
Method: Data were collected using individual semi-structured interviews with 12 mothers of competitive figure skaters and 12 coaches (*M* years of experience = 25). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively using conventional content analysis and constant comparative techniques.
Results: Findings indicated that parents described a range of experiences of the coach-parent relationship, from negative and distant, to positive and enjoyable, while coaches described their experiences as mostly positive and enjoyable but with the potential for the relationship to be challenging and contentious. Participants' descriptions of their experiences clustered around three configurations that represented different views about the nature of the coach-parent relationship, including (a) collaborative, (b) coach-athlete centric, and (c) contractual. These configurations are discussed in light of three prominent themes that characterized the relationship: expertise, communication, and trust.
Conclusions: This study highlights the unique features of the coach-parent relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating, including the different ways that parents and coaches relate with one another, and draws parallels with other relationships in sport. Understanding the coach-parent relationship not only extends the extant literature on interpersonal relationships in sport, but is also important for facilitating positive youth sport environments and youth development in competitive sport.

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships play a central role in youth competitive sport (Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014). How participants in sport interact, communicate, and work together serve important functions in both athletic performance and the overall quality of their experiences. Among the various relationships between participants in youth sport, the coach-athlete relationship has been most frequently studied and cited as the most important relationship in sport (for reviews see Jowett, 2017; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). Comparably, little attention has been granted to sport-specific contexts that shape the nature of other important interpersonal relationships. For example, in early specialization sports (Sport Canada, 2016) athletes engage in high levels of deliberate practice in a single sport from a young age and attain peak performance prior to physical maturation (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2016). The parent-coach relationship in the context of early specialization sport often involves more frequent interactions throughout the sports career given the age of the athlete, particularly in North America. The involvement of parents and coaches, and how they relate and engage together can either facilitate or debilitate parents', coaches', and athletes' experiences in sport, and subsequently influence the psychological development of the child (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Weiss, 2004). In a study by Knight and Holt (2014) an international tennis coach commented that the parent-coach relationship "is without question the single most important and significant aspect of the job … it is the bit that can ultimately decide success and failure" (p. 160). Informed by Hinde's (1976) description of relationships in general, and Poczwardowski, Barott, and Henschen's (2002) conceptual model of the

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coach-athlete relationship, the coach-parent relationship is conceptualized as the recurring activities and interactions between coaches and parents. The relationship typically originates around sport involvement, such as, supporting the child in sport, and therefore the activities and interactions are either directed toward the shared task of supporting the athlete or concerned with relationship and non-sport aspects such as maintaining and building the coach-parent relationship.

In recent years, multiple stories of aggressive and inappropriate parent conduct in youth sport have featured prominently in media outlets across North America. Such portrayals often include images of pushy or irate parents yelling from the stands (e.g., Brunt, 2017; Hite, 2018). Smoll, Cumming, and Smith (2011) highlighted a common sentiment among coaches and sport personnel about the coach-parent relationship, that there is a perception of the potential for *hassle* or persistent problems related to coaches' interactions with parents. A prominent focus within the sport psychology literature has been on assisting coaches with strategies for *managing* or *dealing* more effectively with parents (Geddes, 2007; Hellstedt, 1987; Van Mullem & Cole, 2015; see also special issue in the *International Journal of Coaching Science*, 2011, issue #1). These contributions tend to make broad generalizations, often describing typologies of parents, to help coaches better understand parents (e.g., Hellstedt, 1987; Smoll et al., 2011; Van Mullem & Cole, 2015). Brustad (2011) critiqued the uni-directional nature of such approaches and highlighted the value of empowering parents to have a voice. More recently, parent-centric perspectives (Harwood & Knight, 2016) have sought to promote parenting expertise in youth sport settings, including the ability to foster and maintain healthy relationships with coaches (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Harwood, Knight, Thrower, & Berrow, 2019; Holt & Knight, 2014).

Although the coach-parent relationship has garnered anecdotal attention in the popular press and practice-based sport psychology literature, to date, little empirical consideration has been given to the interpersonal dynamics of this important relationship (Harwood et al., 2019; Knight & Gould, 2016). One of the very few studies that examined both parents' and coaches' perspectives of the relationship showed that they perceive the relationship as generally cooperative, albeit with some irritation, such as coaches having an authoritarian attitude or parents questioning or interfering with coaching decisions (Vanden Auweele, 1999). Although not involving parents and coaches directly, another study by Wylleman, De Knop, Sloore, Vanden Auweele, and Ewing (2002) examined talented youth athletes' interpersonal perceptions of the athletic triad (parent-coach-athlete). In that study, athletes generally perceived the relationships between coaches and parents to be consultative, with parents and coaches behaving in a helpful and supportive way towards each other (Wylleman et al., 2002). Looking to the broader literature on parental involvement in sport indicates the value of engagement between parents and coaches, particularly for athletes' levels of enjoyment, talent development, and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The broader literature also shows that parents and coaches consider their interactions as a source of stress (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Knight & Harwood, 2009). Among the coach-related stressors experienced by parents were a lack of communication and feedback, interest, strategic advice, commitment, respect, understanding, and appreciation (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Similarly, for coaches, parent-related stressors included demands for time, unrealistic expectations and pressure, varying levels of involvement and engagement, lack of respect and trust, and interfering with coaching decisions (Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, & Nalepa, 2016; Knight & Harwood, 2009; Strean, 1995). Additionally, coaches cited direct interactions with parents, such as defensiveness, aggressiveness, or questioning, as sources of stress (Knight & Harwood, 2009).

Balanced against the growing body of literature on parenting in sport and theoretical and narrative position papers discussing the coach-parent relationship, empirical investigations related to the coach-parent dyad have been sparse at best. To date, much of the literature has addressed the coach-parent relationship from a single perspective, with an overemphasis on the coach, and largely neglected the interpersonal nature of the relationship (Brustad, 2011; Harwood et al., 2019; Knight & Gould, 2016; McKenna, 2011; O'Connor, 2011). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to understand the nature of the coach-parent relationship, from both coaches' and parents' perspectives, within an early specialization sport context in Canada. The aim was to overcome speculative and generalized descriptions of parent and coach interactions. This inquiry was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the patterns of how coaches and parents describe the coach-parent relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating? (b) What are the themes that characterize this relationship?

2. Method

2.1. Methodological orientation

Interpretive description (ID; Thorne, 2008; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997) served as the methodological orientation for guiding the study design and data analysis. Originally developed within the discipline of nursing, ID represents an appropriate qualitative methodology for applied disciplines. The focus of ID studies is to illuminate themes and patterns within participants' subjective perceptions in order to provide an integrative description of a phenomenon of practical interest (Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). The foundational underpinnings of ID are guided by naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorne, 2008) and embedded in a constructivist paradigm. It is assumed that multiple and equally valid social realities exist, that knowledge or meaning is created from the interplay between investigator and respondents, and that findings must be grounded in the data (Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004).

2.2. Research context

Canadian competitive figure skating is a sport where the parent-coach relationship often involves frequent contact on a regular basis. In Canada, figure skating clubs are structured both privately and as not-for-profit organizations with a volunteer board of directors, typically made up of parents. In some clubs, coaches are hired directly by parents (and skaters), whereas in others, a club director facilitates a team model of coaching whereby skaters are assigned a managing coach but work with a number of coaches. The team model of coaching has become more common. In some cases, coaches directly bill parents for their services, however, in others, the club director manages payment. In either case, this introduces a transactional component to the coach-parent relationship where parents are consumers of a service provided by the coach. It has been estimated that parents pay approximately $7000 to $10,000 a year, at the lowest competitive level (Schneider Farris, 2019), and upwards of $35,000 a year at elite levels (Mulhere, 2018), for lessons, ice time, music, choreography, equipment, and competitions/travel. Conversely, coaches are professionals whose livelihoods depend on the satisfaction of their clients – skaters and their parents. The longevity of the relationship varies but in some cases an athlete may work with the same coach for 10–15 years. Furthermore, given that figure skating is an early specialization sport, athletes train upwards of 20 h/week from as young as 9 or 10 years old (Skate Canada, 2010). In such cases, the parent is entrusting their child to the care of another adult whose influence will have important consequences, not only for the athlete's development, but also well-being. This process of shifting responsibility from parent to coach is documented in other sport contexts such as English football academies (e.g., Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Thus, regular communication and contact between parent and coach is vital for the care and development of the

youth athlete.

2.3. Sampling and participants

Ethics approval was obtained from the first author's institutional review board prior to the study commencing. Club directors and presidents from primarily competitive stream clubs in Western Canada were contacted and agreed to circulate an information letter to coaches and parents. General inclusion criterion for participants was current or past involvement (min. one year) as a coach or parent in the competitive stream of figure skating. Interested participants were invited to contact the researcher directly. Purposeful sampling was used with the aim of selecting participants from a variety of skating clubs. All participants were briefed about the purpose and nature of the study and were asked questions about general demographic and sport specific information to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. Twenty-four participants were recruited in total. Written consent was obtained from each participant before starting data collection. Parents received a $20 gift card and coaches received $100 cash, comparable to their professional wage, as an honorarium.

The rationale for the sample was grounded in the research questions, previous research, and considerations of feasibility (Thorne, 2008). Given the research questions, a balance was sought between ensuring enough participants to describe commonalities and variations while also allowing analysis and comparison of individual, contextualized accounts (Thorne et al., 2004). Moreover, sample sizes in ID studies vary, with most ranging "between 5 and 30 participants" (Thorne, 2008, p. 94). Taken together, it was concluded that gathering in-depth data from 12 parents and 12 coaches would provide a range of perspectives and experiences for generating knowledge about the coach-parent relationship (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The sample consisted of 12 mothers and 12 coaches from eight figure skating clubs. Mothers, ranged in age from 35 to 59 years (M = 46 years), and had a son (n = 3) or daughter (n = 9), currently (n = 11) or formerly (n = 1) involved in the competitive stream of figure skating. Nine mothers were employed part- or full-time and three were not employed or were homemakers. Nine mothers were involved in competitive sport themselves, competing provincially or at the university level, with three mothers competing and formerly coaching in figure skating. Two mothers had no personal experience in sport. The average age of their son or daughter currently involved in skating ranged from 11 to 20 (M = 14) years and their shared involvement in the sport ranged from 5 to 14 (M = 9) years. One of the mothers had a daughter who was formerly involved in skating, from when she was 9–18 years old; at the time of the study, the daughter was 35 years old. Skaters competed in singles or ice dance and all levels of the competitive stream were represented from pre-juvenile to junior. Parents had worked with their current managing coach for an average of 4 years (ranged from 6 months to 9 years), and their son or daughter was coached by a team of coaches (M = 4).

The coach sample was comprised of seven males and five females who ranged in age from 31 to 63 years (M = 47 years). Coaches were on average Level 3 certified through the Canadian National Coaching Certification Program and Skate Canada and had been involved in coaching for an average of 25 years (range was 11–42 years). Half of the coaches had a post-secondary degree, four had a high school diploma, and two had some post-secondary coursework. Coaches were not employed elsewhere and most (n = 8) had no plans of changing careers. Coaches worked with an average of 27 skaters (range was 15–50). Although the researchers were aware that some coach and parent participants worked together, dyads were not part of the study design and therefore the dyadic relationships were not considered during data analysis.

2.4. Research team

The research team consisted of one doctoral student, two masters students, and three senior researchers. The lead author was a doctoral student in counselling psychology who had a background in competitive figure skating, as a skater, as a coach, and currently as a sport psychology practitioner. The lead author's background provided motivation for the study and influenced the data collection and analysis process. For example, rapport building was facilitated by shared experiences. Understandably, this background also influenced interpretations of the data. To safeguard against selective interpretations, initial analyses were conducted in pairs and cross-group analyses as a research team to ensure multiple and diverse perspectives of the data. The second and third authors were graduate student research assistants with training and experience in qualitative data analysis; neither of them had personal experiences in competitive sport. The fourth author was a researcher and practitioner in sport and exercise psychology. The fifth and sixth authors engaged in the cross-group analyses and assisted with decision making related to the presentation of the findings. The fifth author had a background in competitive dance which provided a frame of reference for understanding the sport culture of figure skating. The sixth author had over 40 years of experience in qualitative research. All authors were familiar with the philosophical underpinnings of ID research and careful attention was given throughout the study design, data collection, and analyses to ensure consistency with the constructivist paradigm.

2.5. Data construction: collection

A semi-structured interview guide was designed for coaches and parents based on previous studies examining the coach-athlete relationship (Poczwardowski, Barott, & Peregoy, 2002) and parental involvement in youth sport (Knight & Holt, 2014). The interview guides were similar except for word changes to reflect the context for coaches and parents. Consideration was given to types of questions and sequencing. Overall, questions fell under five different topics, (a) relationships, (b) typical interactions, (c) performance and development, (d) retrospection, and (e) closing the interview. Following Patton's (2002) suggestions for sequencing interview questions, the interview guide began with descriptive and experience-based questions. The aim was to engage the participant with straightforward questions to ease into the interview and to encourage the participant to talk descriptively. Questions such as "How did you get involved in coaching? How did your son/daughter get involved in skating?" served this purpose. The interview guide progressed with different types of questions including behaviour questions, contrast probes, narrative questions, role-play questions, and opinion questions. See Table 1 for sample interview questions.

The initial interview guide was piloted first with a coach and then a parent. Following the pilot interview the coach indicated that they were unclear whether to respond to questions based on their experiences working with parents of recreational or competitive skaters. As a result, minor revisions were made to the wording of questions to specify the focus on parents of competitive skaters. The pilot coach interview was not included as data in the study. No changes were made following the pilot parent interview. The first author conducted all interviews in-person at the training center or in-person at a location convenient for the participant. Only one interview took place as a video call. Following each interview, the interviewer documented personal reflections from the interview that were re-visited during analysis. Parent interviews were on average 68 min (range was 52 min–93 min) and coach interviews were on average 78 min (range was 48 min–104 min).

2.6. Data construction: analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by a

Table 1
Sample interview questions.

1. **Relationships**
   - Before you began coaching/Before your son/daughter got involved in competitive skating, what were some assumptions you had about working with parents/coaches? *(Descriptive/experience-based question)*
   - Can you tell me what it has been like working with different parents/coaches throughout your coaching career/throughout your son/daughter's involvement in skating? *(Descriptive/experience-based question)*
   - Is there a particular relationship that is standing out to you as you share with me? Can you tell me the story of that relationship, from the start until now? *(Narrative question)*
2. **Typical Interactions**
   - What does a typical week, even last week or this week, look like in terms of interacting with parents/coaches? *(Behaviour question)*
   - What is the difference between interacting with parents/coach(es) (a) at training and competition, and (b) practices/competitions and casual/private interactions *(Contrast probe)*
   - Suppose I was a new coach/parent and I asked you what I should do to get along with the coach/parent really well, what would you tell me? *(Role play question)*
3. **Performance & Development**
   - What role, if any, does your relationship with parents/coaches play in the skaters training and performance? *(Opinion question)*
   - In what way, if any, do you see your relationship with the coach/parent influencing the development of the youth/skater in general (beyond skating)? *(Opinion question)*
4. **Retrospection**
   - Can you tell me the story of your most negative experience working with a parent/coach? *(Narrative question)*
   - Can you tell me the story of your most enjoyable or positive experience working with a parent/coach? *(Narrative question)*
5. **Closing the Interview**
   - If you were a researcher interested in this topic, what kind of questions would you ask your informants/participants? *(Discovering question)*

transcriptionist, and checked for accuracy by a member of the research team before beginning analysis. Participants received a copy of their transcript and were invited to make corrections and additions in line with the topics covered in the interview. No participant requested changes. Data were stored and managed during analysis using QSR NVivo11 software. The analytic techniques guiding this inquiry were reflective memos, conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), constant comparative analysis (Boeije, 2002; Thorne, 2000, 2008), and concept mapping (Hunt, 2009). Analysis proceeded inductively with two researchers per interview, the interviewer conducted analyses on all 24 transcripts and worked with a graduate research assistant who each analysed 12 transcripts. Coach transcripts were analysed first, involving within-case and cross-case analyses, followed by the parent transcripts, and then cross-group analyses.

Analyses began with immersion in the data, reading and rereading transcripts closely, and writing a synopsis of each interview to maintain the whole of participants' stories and to not pre-maturely code or classify (Thorne et al., 1997). To further assist with this, reflective memos, created after each interview and while checking the data for completeness, were referenced. Next, each interview was coded on a line-by-line basis by two researchers, separately, with the aim of knowing the data intimately (Thorne, 2008). The two researchers met after each interview was analysed to review and discuss codes. The purpose of this initial coding was to organize the data generally and "to use structure as a means to elaborate meaning" (p. 147, Thorne, 2008). During the meeting, the inductively derived code list (a separate code list was created for coaches and parents) was refined and the within-case constant comparative analysis (Boeije, 2002) was completed. Consistent with the philosophical tenets of the study, the purpose of working in pairs was to ensure thoroughness and multiple perspectives on the data, as opposed to inter-rater reliability (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Thorne, 2008). After each interview had been analysed, earlier transcripts were re-visited with the final code list.

Two cross case analyses were then conducted, one for the parent interviews and another for the coach interviews, with three researchers and involved concept mapping (Hunt, 2009) as a way of describing relationships between codes. The process of concept mapping was a "creative exercise" (Hunt, 2009, p. 1288) that involved informal sketching to imagine possibilities and to facilitate discussion. During this exercise, the parent, athlete, coach (PAC) triangle was drawn on a whiteboard and served as a helpful heuristic for mapping the observed similarities and differences in participants descriptions of the relationship. Main themes were then synthesized for coaches and parents.

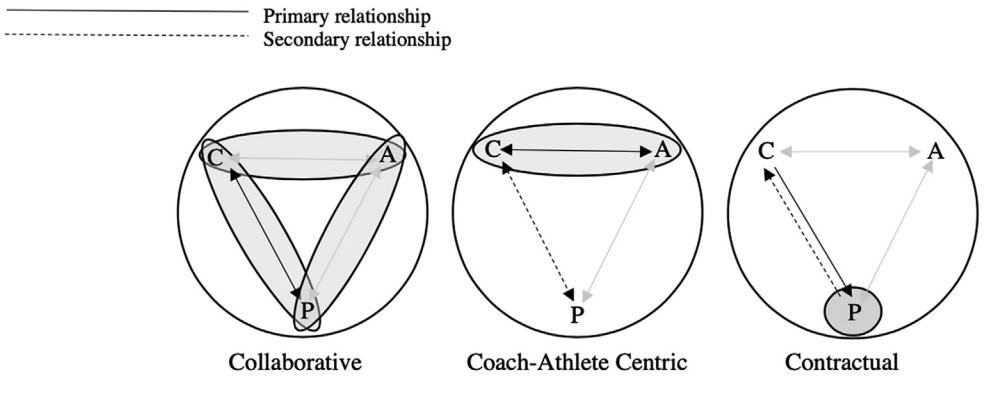
The final step involved a cross-group analysis (Boeije, 2002), with the research team, to interpret the patterns of similarities and differences in how coaches and parents described the relationship, and to identify the themes that characterized the relationship. We chose the PAC triangles to represent the similarities and differences in how coaches and parents described the coach-parent relationship. After much deliberation and discussion among the research team about what to call the triangles we reached a consensus that they were *configurations*. Three configurations were chosen to represent the data. Most participants (n = 21) were easily situated within one of the three configurations based on their descriptions of their experiences. For those participants that were not as readily situated (n = 3), the research team engaged in dialogue until consensus was reached about which configuration best captured the participant's descriptions. We then turned to the themes identified in the cross-case analyses to highlight characteristics of the relationship for coaches and parents. The aim of the cross-group analyses was to present an overarching conceptual understanding or thematic summary of the coach-parent relationship in line with the a priori research questions (Thorne, 2008). An audit trail was maintained that documented the evolution of analytic thinking and the three researchers involved in the detailed analyses kept journals with reflective memos to facilitate reflexivity and to assist with managing preconceptions (Thorne, 2008).

2.7. Research rigor

Considerations of quality involved several procedures, as specified by Thorne (2008), for interpretive description. First, care was taken in the design and presentation of this study to ensure *epistemological integrity*. That is, that decisions about data collection, analysis, and interpretation flowed logically from the research questions and philosophical underpinnings of interpretive description research. Second, *representative credibility* was addressed by sampling multiple parents and coaches involved in different skating clubs in Western Canada. To ensure the findings were consistent with sampling, analyses of the coach and parent interviews were conducted separately before the cross-group analyses, and the collective findings were presented in a way that attended to coaches' and parents' individual descriptions of their experiences. Third, *analytic logic* was made explicit by keeping an audit trail for transparency of decisions made throughout the study. In addition, using thick description in the presentation of results grounded interpretations in the verbatim data and illustrated analytic thinking. Finally, the trustworthiness of interpretations or *interpretive authority* was maintained through the use of researcher journals by the interviewer and research assistants in order to facilitate reflexivity and enable movement beyond existing knowledge, initial biases, and experiences. In addition, pairs of researchers were used during initial analyses and the research team was involved in broad analytic discussions as interpretations of the data were developed.

3. Results

The detailed analyses revealed that participants had a range of experiences of the coach-parent relationship. Parents described their experiences of the relationship varying from negative and distant (n = 4) to positive and enjoyable (n = 8), while coaches described their experiences as mostly positive and enjoyable (n = 12), but with the potential for the relationship to be challenging and contentious (n = 12).



	Collaborative	Coach-Athlete Centric	Contractual
Views on Expertise	· Parent expertise recognized & welcomed · Coach is expert on skating	· Coach is expert · Parent in background, monitors from a distance	· Coach is expert & service provider · Parent hired coach as professional
Communication	· Frequent & personable · Fluidity re: logistics · Parent & coach initiated	· Minimal & as needed · Coach prefers through athlete · Parent-initiated	· Coach initiated · Meeting needs of client, customer service
Trust	· Technical & interpersonal trust	· High technical trust · Varying interpersonal trust	· Technical & interpersonal trust

Fig. 1. Configurations and characteristics of the coach-parent relationship.

Participants' descriptions of their experiences clustered around three configurations of the coach-parent relationship, in relation to the athlete, as shown in Figure 1: (a) collaborative, emphasizing an equal, collaborative relationship between parent and coach; (b) coach-athlete centric, emphasizing the coach-athlete relationship as primary and the coach-parent relationship as secondary; and (c) contractual, emphasizing coaching as a business with the coach-parent relationship prioritized. In the following section, we describe each configuration in light of three themes that characterized the relationship across configurations, but manifested in different ways. Themes included views on coach and parent *expertise* (i.e., who has control and input into the training process); the when, what, and how of *communication* (i.e., frequency, content, and processes related to the exchange of information), and *trust* which included interpersonal and technical trust. Although most participants spoke about positive experiences of the coach-parent relationship, they also shared experiences of when it was not going well. All participants relayed stories about having points of tension or disagreement in the coach-parent relationship, which arose when there were different views about the nature of the relationship, expertise, communication, or trust. In some cases, disagreement or conflict between parents and coaches contributed to a break down in the relationship. We did not observe differences in conflict or relationship break down across the three configurations; therefore, we provide a general description after the configurations. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of participants.

3.1. Collaborative configuration

Six coaches (Cathy, Zack, Kion, Dorothy, Ruth, and Courtney) and six parents (Anne, Lucy, Petra, Sue, Sarah, and Tina) emphasized a collaborative relationship between coach and parent. Both parents and coaches viewed parents as having an active and important role in the athlete's involvement and development in skating. Parents described themselves as involved in their child's skating and working as a team with the coach and athlete. As Sue shared, "I always feel like it's a team thing. I don't feel like it's just him and her, I feel like it's really the three of us." Coaches viewed parents as an important and crucial part of skater development, and therefore, were invested in their relationships with parents. As coach Kion noted, "because these kids are so young, if you don't have that assistance from a parent, I can almost put my hand on my heart and say that you're not going to produce that athlete, not to their true potential." Coaches and parents in this configuration spoke about working collaboratively not only for the development of the skater, but also the well-being of the child.

The differences in *expertise* of parents and coaches were acknowledged and welcomed. Coaches were recognized as the professional and the expert of the technical and tactical aspects of skating and parents recognized as the expert about their child. One parent, Tina, explained it as follows, "no one side can have more power than the other." Working collaboratively, however, meant there was a giving and receiving of input from each other about their respective domains of expertise. Coaches were generally open to parent input into skating when it related to information that was unique to the child or broader training decisions, but input about technical matters was seldom welcomed. An important part of working collaboratively for coaches was parent education from the 'learning to skate' level (i.e., CanSkate), as Kion explained, "I take the parents in right from out of CanSkate … I teach them … so that they understand that they can actually be a benefit to the development of their kid."

Coaches Zack, Kion, and Courtney described themselves as "co-parents" or "pseudo parents." They shared that they are aware of the influence they have in the skater's life. Coaches noted examples where they advised parents about parenting matters such as school, discipline, or lifestyle choices. One coach, Courtney, explained, "I had a girl who wasn't doing well at school, and I said to the mom, 'pull back some skating until she pulls up her socks'." On the receiving end, Sue shared about her coach, "he was coaching me too, 'how much is she sleeping? What is she eating? … get her into these habits'." Coaches, however, were cautious of overstepping the bounds of the parents' expertise. As Kion noted, "I can never say to people how to be a parent." Parents, on the other hand, spoke about the importance of respecting the coaches' expertise but shared that they also tried to educate themselves about the sport so they were aware of what was happening. Petra shared that she and her son learned that they needed to take responsibility for skating because coaches make mistakes. She said, "we changed from 'oh the coach knows everything, is almighty,' to we need to make sure that, not stepping on their toes, but also just looking out for ourselves." In addition to educating themselves, parents described that with time they became more assertive and took the initiative with coaches, asking for what they needed or thought was important in relation to their child's

skating. One parent, Anne, shared that in the beginning she would go along with whatever the coach asked, but realized that she could "speak [her] mind and give [her] opinion."

Communication was described as frequent, particularly around logistics, and initiated by both parents and coaches. Being personable was a central feature of communication. Coach Zack commented, "if they sense … that you really care … they can see you as a coach, but as well as a person, and … in that case, it's much easier." When asked about typical interactions with her coach Anne described, "we talk about family, life … I talk to her about stuff that [daughter] has done at school sometimes and funny things that have happened, so we'll have little conversations." Openness and approachability were also important features of communication and working collaboratively. Two parents, Anne and Petra, suggested to other parents to not be afraid of asking the coach questions. As Petra advised, "let them do their job, that's why you hired them, and if you have questions, instead of … sabotaging them or going behind their back, ask them, because there are certain reasons." Coaches, in turn, spoke about being available to parents, as Cathy explained, "I hear a lot of parents, you know, say that the coach isn't approachable, that they just don't have enough time to talk, and that just causes a lot of problems." Parents and coaches were clear that they did not socialize with one another outside of skating, however, of the configurations, they were more likely to be friends after the athlete's skating career was over.

Technical and interpersonal *trust* were both present in this configuration. Although it was important for coaches to be trusted technically as the expert, they recognized that they needed to foster interpersonal trust with parents first. Strategies for developing interpersonal trust included being honest, personable, and showing their care for the athlete. For example, coach Dorothy described, "they trust that … we're there in her best interest always and that really is the point." Parents also spoke about the importance of trusting that the coach is acting in the best interest of their child, as Petra shared, "the most positive thing is just knowing that [coach] knows what is best, he's going to do what's best." Thus, for parents, interpersonal trust was closely linked with technical trust. The importance of trusting parents was also discussed by coaches.

3.2. Coach-athlete centric configuration

Four coaches (Ken, James, Brad, and Roger) and five parents (Janine, Lindsay, Tracy, Gina, and Rhonda) emphasized the coach-athlete relationship as the primary focus in the parent-athlete-coach (PAC) triad. In this configuration, both parent and coach viewed the coach as the expert and decision maker about skating, engaged primarily with the athlete, and with the parent operating in the background. For parents, it was important to respect what was between the coach and the athlete. Parents and coaches, however, differed in their views of the parents' role. Coaches viewed the role of the parent as a provider of logistical support for the athlete, but overall, hands off and not important in skating development and performance. Parents, on the other hand, described the PAC triad as working as a team, albeit with themselves subsumed.

The boundaries between coach and parent *expertise* were clearly delineated. Coaches managed all aspects of skating. There was a shared value among coaches and parents of letting the coach do their job and respecting their expertise. For parents, Janine, Gina, and Rhonda, respecting the coach's expertise meant being mindful of their limited understanding of the sport, both in their interactions with the coach as well as with their son or daughter. Janine, for instance, viewed her "hands off" approach as a positive influence in her daughter's training: "it's easier for her to just … she only hears one side, she only hears them, she doesn't hear me … which is why I intentionally don't talk to them about stuff that I have no knowledge about really." Parents Lindsay and Tracy, former skaters and coaches themselves, drew on their past experience to empathize with the coaches and reiterated the importance of respecting the coaches' expertise. Likewise, coaches were cautious of overstepping parents' expertise. Coaches in this configuration were not as concerned with non-sport domains such as school, friends, or family life. Instead, if they thought factors outside of skating were influencing training they enlisted the support of the parent. For example, one coach, James, described, "if I think a kid is … struggling on the ice where I think the parent could be involved, I wouldn't hesitate to say … and they can step in." Parents, on the other hand, asserted their expertise sparingly. They described situations where they were more involved, such as managing logistics around injuries, stepping in when they thought the coach's behaviour was not developmentally appropriate, or facilitating the coach-athlete relationship by helping the coach better understand their child.

Communication was described as minimal and as needed. Parents expressed that they try to keep communication channels clear and be respectful of coaches' time, recognizing that they are busy professionals. As Tracy, one of the parents, explained, "you … have to know the boundaries of when, where, how, why, because, that open line of communication is given out of respect … and it can be shut down pretty quick." Parents Janine, Gina, and Rhonda spoke about tailoring their approach to communication based on their observation of coaches' preferences. Gina shared, "I had to learn how each of them worked and how I could get what I wanted out of them in a quick time." While it was important to respect the channel of communication between the parent and coach, for Gina, she was also cautious of being so involved with the coach that it would negatively affect her daughter and her daughter's training. She commented, "I didn't want her to go on [the ice] that hour to train knowing that there was some weird expectation from the parent or the coach that we talked about behind her back or even in front of her." She further added, "if [daughter] felt comfortable and knew that I wasn't going to report back to the coach, the coach wasn't going to report back to me … then she could train freely."

Coaches described keeping communication with parents to a minimum and centered on skating related topics. As Coach Roger noted, "I don't want to create any issues later so I'm not going to have … a 10-min conversation about something that's not pertinent to the skating, because I don't want to keep having that in the future." The coaches spoke about being clear and upfront with skating related information, and being on top of communication so they were initiating and informing before parents had any issues or questions. Coaches described various strategies they used to mitigate frequent interactions with parents such as communicating primarily through the athlete (Roger, Ken, James, and Brad). Coaches were firm that they did not socialize with parents, and of the configurations, they were less likely to be personable in their interactions with parents. For Ken, he commented about the vulnerability he feels as a coach where parents and athletes can "walk whenever," referring to the possibility that they can choose to leave for a different coach or quit the sport at any time. As Ken explained, "it's been a learning process … as to how much I open myself up … it's a designed approach where you have to seem approachable, …but … these people owe nothing to you and they could hurt you very badly." Parents agreed that they did not socialize with coaches. Some parents (Rhonda and Lindsay), however, wished for more personable communication from the coaches. Lindsay recounted a conversation when she told her coach how hurt she felt that the coach did not tell her she was pregnant, she said to the coach, "I was really upset that you didn't come to me, and tell me. Like you spend … 20 h a week with my daughter … more hours in a week than I do, and I really thought we had a better relationship." Being personable was connected to trust for parents.

Technical *trust* was high and linked closely with respect for the coaches' expertise, while interpersonal trust varied. Coaches spoke about the importance of parents trusting their decisions or training plan. There was an expectation of technical trust from the beginning. Coaches noted that they thought their past success producing high level skaters "automatically earned respect" (James). Coaches did not speak

about trusting parents. Parents, on the other hand, were cautious about questioning their coaches, but noted that technical trust developed over time and was linked with interpersonal trust. As one parent, Janine, shared, "I'm seeing … it's a plan … there's definite reasons for their actions, and I think in the beginning, I didn't know. And I didn't question it, but I didn't know why."

3.3. Contractual configuration

For two coaches (Brayden and Holly) and one parent (Lucy), the parent-coach relationship was contractual. That is, coaching is a business where the parent is the client and the coach's role is to serve the needs of the parent. It is a parent-centric and service-oriented model. Coach Holly explained, "if I'm the service provider, everything I'm doing is providing value for others … how can I serve you?" From the parents' perspective, the parent pays the bills and therefore should be able to have a say about what they want. Lucy, for example, expressed frustration about feeling sidelined by her former coach, "it's my money, I'm paying you $60 an hour … for like twenty grand a year for this sport, you would think I could get what I want."

The coaches were not vying for *expertise* with parents, they considered themselves the "hired professional" (Holly) and as a result they were the expert. It was important for the coach to have control over training decisions and plans and to oversee everything so the parent does not have to worry. As Brayden noted, "I run it as a business, I run it as this is how as your manager I'll take care of that, and this is why the strategy works." The coaches empathized with the challenges of being a parent, in general, such as juggling kids' schedules, work commitments, and family health, and spoke about tailoring their approach to the specific needs of the parent and child. For example, Holly shared about one parent who had 11 children. She explained how she does not expect the mother to have time to assist with getting her daughter's dress made. She said, "I never bother her with, 'can you get the costume?' I'll never do that, I'll email her, just so you know, we're working on this, this is the plan, this will be handled." Coaches viewed the parent as part of the support system and responsible for relaying information about the athlete that would be important for the coach to know.

Being available, personable, honest, and providing feedback were important features of *communication* for the parent and coaches. Lucy, for instance, expected regular communication and coach responsiveness. When comparing her former and new coach she said, "I've found that in communicating, as busy as [new coach] is, she always gets back to me, whereas you can send an email to [former coach] and he'll never get back to you." One of the coaches, Brayden, described communication as a constant flow and something he does not put boundaries around, he said, "this is a 24/7 business … and if you want to win that's what this is." It was also important that parents felt comfortable approaching the coach and asking questions, whether in person at the rink or through text, email, or phone. The coaches spoke about being honest and direct in their communication with parents, this included being upfront with parents about their coaching strategy and giving honest feedback about the athlete's progress. On the receiving end, Lucy spoke about wanting honest feedback as a parent. When describing her current coach, she expressed, "she can phrase things in a way that you can receive them, even if they are hard to hear." Although Lucy did not have expectations for socializing with coaches beyond skating functions, the coaches were open to socializing with parents if it was "strategic" (Brayden) for their business.

Trust was considered reciprocal; coaches expected parents to trust their expertise, and in turn, they focused on developing interpersonal and technical trust with parents by providing a valuable service so their clients would continue to work with them. Open communication and honesty were closely tied to interpersonal trust. Lucy recalled a moment with her new coach where she gained interpersonal trust, she said the coach told her, "I don't feel comfortable taking your money if this child is not going to take the corrections," she continued, "and right there, I had major respect for her." Coach Holly also explained, "if I think that a parent doesn't think I have their kid's best interest that's really hard, and so I just have to communicate with the parent." The presence of both technical and interpersonal trust was important for these participants.

3.4. Conflict and coach-parent relationship break down

All participants (across the three configurations) shared stories about having points of tension or disagreement in the coach-parent relationship. When there was misalignment in the configuration between parent and coach, either having different views about the nature of the relationship, expertise, or communication, conflict arose. Some participants shared about incidences that they were able to overlook or address and move on from, while others shared about ongoing disputes that they were currently working through. For example, for parents, points of tension related to the coaches being perceived as impersonal, a lack of transparency and feedback about training decisions, coaches overstepping the parents' role, or coaches' negative interactions with the athlete. Coaches, on the other hand, spoke about parents not following through on their responsibilities, requesting more time than the coach was able or willing to provide, overstepping coach expertise, or negative interactions with the child. Participants described multiple strategies for addressing and working through conflicts, such as, waiting 24 h before acting, raising concerns in a light-hearted way, addressing concerns in-person, putting concerns in writing, or involving the club director or president. In some cases, participants made the relationship work, despite the configuration being out of balance, for example, because of geography or due to the caliber of the coach or athlete. This was the case for Sarah, a parent who recently moved across the country so her 16-year-old son could train with a high-performance coach. Sarah wanted a collaborative relationship. She shared that she felt "sidelined" by the coach and described her disappointment with the lack of communication, feedback, and openness to her input. She said, "it's hard, it's almost like you're losing that control, and that was really hard for all of us, as a family, because now it's like they communicate through the kid, not through us."

When agreement or resolution could not be negotiated the parent-coach relationship broke down, leading to a coach deciding to no longer work with a parent and athlete, or parents choosing to no longer work with a coach, resulting in switching coaches and/or clubs. For seven parents and 12 coaches, disagreement or conflict with a coach or parent led to a relationship break down. For example, Lucy, had recently switched coaches and clubs due to ongoing conflict with her daughter's former coach. She shared about her disappointment with the coach's lack of professionalism, availability to meet with her, feedback, and care for her daughter. She recounted one of her last meetings with the coach where she said the coach "dumped" her and her daughter, "I felt like I was a kid being called into the principal's office … I said … 'you're scolding me … but I'm a client … I put a lot of money … into this … you should be … asking me, how can I keep your business'?"

Coaches and parents spoke about the personal impact of conflict and relationship break down, and the potential effect it had on the athlete. As parent Sarah expressed, "I am unbelievably stressed … our home life is disrupted … it encompasses everything, every ounce, every pore is wrapped in this whole situation, so it affects everybody." Parents noted that they tried to leave the athlete out of the conflict and that they were mindful of what they communicated in front of them. Coaches also tried to separate conflict with a parent from the athlete; however, they expressed that they found it difficult. When recounting how conflict with a skater's father affected his desire to coach the skater, James shared, "I just feel like it's already defeated before I start … because of the dad … I actually don't want to coach her anymore." Coaches varied in the extent that previous negative experiences with parents affected them and how these experiences shaped their current approach to working with parents. For some coaches, the potential for the relationship to be

burdensome led them to keep parents at a distance, in line with the coach-athlete centric configuration. As one coach, James, explained, "I find I do my job effectively if I don't have to deal with the parent as much." Whereas, for other coaches, they acknowledged the uncertainty of the relationship, a "healthy paranoia" as Brayden described it, but also spoke about the uniqueness of each parent, and how they try to find ways to work with all parents. This was more consistent with the collaborative and contractual configurations.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to understand the nature of the parent-coach relationship, from both parents' and coaches' perspectives, in an early specialization sport context. The findings revealed important aspects of the nature of the relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating. First, although participants had a range of experiences, including negative and conflictual interactions, the majority of parents and coaches described relationships that were positive and enjoyable. Second, participants differed in the manner in which they described the nature of the relationship. Participants' descriptions clustered around three different configurations, which included *collaborative*, *coach-athlete centric,* and *contractual*. Third, salient characteristics of the relationship included views on expertise, communication, and trust, which manifested in different ways across the configurations.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Vanden Auweele, 1999), the coach-parent relationship was described by participants as generally positive, albeit, with times of conflict or animosity. Similar to studies on parent- and coach-related stressors, participants reported the presence of conflict and stress related to one another (i.e., due to lack of trust or communication; e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Knight & Harwood, 2009). However, this study extends the literature by showing that even though conflictual interactions are present between parents and coaches, they are only one aspect of the relationship. By focusing on the coach-parent relationship explicitly, as opposed to stressors or parent involvement in sport more generally, the study highlighted that there is more to the relationship than problems and hassles. Rather, these findings show that parents and coaches work together to further athlete development, and relate with one another in positive, and at times, enjoyable ways.

The findings also show that the coach-parent relationship is experienced differently by coaches and parents. The three configurations offer descriptors for understanding the subtle dynamics and differences within the relationship. For coaches, the configurations illuminated aspects of their coaching philosophies (Carless & Douglas, 2011), that is, their beliefs and values, related to working with parents that have formed throughout their coaching careers. These findings have both similarities and differences with existing relational models in sport, such as the coach-athlete dyad (e.g., Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002). The collaborative configuration, for example, shared the task of not only skater development, but also development of athlete well-being. This finding has similarities with Knight and Holt's (2013) study that found parents in youth tennis looked for coaches who would not only develop their child technically, but as a person as well. In addition, parents and coaches were also invested in maintaining and building their relationship. Most notable was the personable and mutual nature of the relationship. Both parents and coaches were respectful of one another's expertise, often complementing each other's actions, and were intentional about engaging personally and showing care in the PAC triad. The collaborative configuration most closely resembles high interdependence as reflected in the 3 + 1Cs model (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), with high levels of trust and respect (i.e., closeness), a desire to work together and remain committed to the relationship (i.e., commitment), and responsive, friendly, and cooperative behaviours (i.e., complementarity). In this configuration, however, the parent is more than a social network member who supports the coach-athlete dyad (e.g., Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). Rather, the parent is viewed as an important part of the team. As such, these coaches were more willing than coaches in the coach-athlete centric configuration to adapt their approaches to work collaboratively with parents. This finding suggests notions of relational coaching (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), which highlights that interpersonal connection (i.e., trust, respect, and commitment to work together toward one goal) between the coach and athlete is central for effective and successful coaching, could be extended to include interpersonal relationships with parents in certain sport contexts.

In contrast, the coach-athlete centric configuration, was predominantly task-oriented, emphasizing skater development and the coach-athlete relationship. Compared to the collaborative configuration, participants were less concerned with activities and interactions that fostered or maintained the coach-parent relationship, and there was minimal emphasis on interpersonal trust and personable interactions. Aspects of the coach-athlete centric configuration align with Clarke and Harwood's (2014) investigation of parents' experiences in English youth football academies where coaches were described as solely responsible for player development. Parents shared that communication from coach to parent was limited and that they were expected to relinquish control for player development to the coach and to refrain from interfering with or questioning coaches' decisions (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). The findings from this study, however, expand on the power dynamics parents encountered with coaches (Clarke & Harwood, 2014) by highlighting differences related to parent and coach expertise, and by detailing both coaches' and parents' perspectives of the relationship when the coach-athlete relationship is prioritized. In addition, although there are similarities with previous research showing parents are an important part of the social network for the coach-athlete relationship, such as facilitating a working relationship between coach and athlete and managing logistics (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), the findings highlight the distinct relationship features between the parent and coach, even when the coach-athlete relationship is foregrounded. That is, with high technical trust, communication as needed, and mutual respect for the time and expertise of the other, parents and coaches worked cooperatively, albeit, with less emphasis on their relationship. These findings suggest that interdependence may not be as central in the coach-parent relationship as has been shown in the coach-athlete dyad (e.g., Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). Finally, the contractual configuration was both task and relationship-oriented, in the service of business relations and customer service. In this case, the parent-coach relationship was understood as transactional from the beginning, which underscores the unique features of youth sport contexts where coaches are paid professionals.

Moreover, although not a defining feature of the nature of the parent-coach relationship, the findings support the literature on relational science, that conflict is a natural and inevitable part of all dyadic relationships (e.g., Hinde, 1997). This study provides preliminary insight about the interpersonal nature of conflict between coaches and parents. Consistent with the nature of conflict described in the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2018), conflict between parents and coaches arose when there was perceived disagreement, for example, about views on expertise, opinions about the relationship, needs, or resources (i.e., time). Participants' descriptions of conflict experienced in the relationship showed variations in frequency, duration, and intensity. Some instances of conflict involved isolated events while others were re-occurring or ongoing. Further, conflict was described negatively and participants highlighted consequences of conflict similar to research on coach-athlete dyads; for example, increased stress and emotional turmoil (e.g., Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013), inhibited coaching effectiveness (e.g., Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002), and negative influences on the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). In some cases, the inability to resolve conflict led to relationship termination. This was particularly the case when parents and coaches disagreed about the nature of their relationship.

Balanced against the insights provided by the study, limitations should also be acknowledged. First, only mothers were involved in the study. It is possible that the sample was representative of the gender of the primary parent involved in Canadian competitive figure skating, however, some coaches also spoke about their experiences interacting with fathers. It is unclear whether fathers would have described similar or different experiences of the coach-parent relationship. Second, intact dyads were not sampled. Most coaches and parents in this study were not working with each other, therefore, conclusions specific to dyadic interactions and relationship experiences could not be made. Finally, the findings were interpreted in light of the PAC triad, however, only the parent and coach perspectives were represented.

It is recommended, therefore, that future research designs aim to include father's perspectives in the sample and move beyond individual levels of analysis. Future studies would benefit from focusing on the parent-coach dyad, using for example, dyadic interviewing (e.g., Clarke, Harwood, & Cushion, 2016) or contextual action theory for understanding joint actions and processes (e.g., Wall et al., 2016, in press). Further, triangulating data with athlete perspectives would help deepen understandings not only of the coach-parent relationship, but the reciprocal and bi-directional processes involved in the parent-athlete-coach triad. Additionally, this study sets the stage for further research about the nature of the coach-parent relationship. Possible directions include systematically exploring the positive (i.e., growth-promoting) aspects of the relationship or examining antecedents (i.e., gender, experience, or culture) and outcomes (i.e., relationship satisfaction or athlete performance) of the collaborative, coach-athlete centric, and contractual configurations. There are opportunities to conduct similar work in different countries and other early specialization sport contexts. In addition, exploring the applicability of the 3 + 1Cs model (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) for the parent-coach relationship may be useful.

This study underscores the relevance of the parent-coach relationship in Canadian competitive figure skating and offers practical implications for sport psychology consultants, coach educators, coaches, and parents. As a supplement to existing coaching strategies (e.g., Smoll et al., 2011) and sport parenting exemplars (e.g., Gould et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2015), the findings describe different ways that parents and coaches relate to one another. It is not a one-size fits all nor is there a right or wrong way of engaging in this particular relationship. These findings encourage self-awareness and reflection, and offer parents and coaches three configurations that they can situate themselves within. What is important is knowing one's needs and preferences for the relationship, taking into consideration the athlete's perspective and needs, and the goodness of fit within the PAC triad. Furthermore, recognizing that conflict is an inherent part of the relationship, equipping parents and coaches with skills for relationship ruptures and repairs is needed. Borrowing from the coach-athlete literature, there are a number of maintenance and resolution strategies that are applicable to the parent-coach relationship. These include, clarifying expectations, maintaining openness, and adapting to the other's preferences (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Additional potential strategies include addressing conflict early and directly, focusing on the conflict issue, working at the problem collaboratively with active listening, empathy, and tactful delivery of messages, using a mediator if needed (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

Declarations of interest

None.

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