The concept of rules in the coach-athlete relationship

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Abstract

This paper presents a study that aimed to explore the rules of the coach-athlete relationship. Using semi-structured interviews, data were obtained from a sample of British athletes (*n* = 15) and an independent sample of British coaches (*n* = 15). Content analysis was employed to analyse the data. Results indicated that athletes' and coaches' perceptions of relationship rules were corresponding. Rules appeared to guide the conduct of the "professional relationship" (e.g., by respecting one another) and the conduct of "business" (e.g., by being prepared to instruct and learn skills). The main functions of relationship rules were to minimise interpersonal conflict (e.g., arguments) and provide rewards (e.g., happiness). It was also evidenced that interpersonal dimensions that define the quality of the coach-athlete relationship served as rules that increased reward and reduced conflict. .

Key words: relationship rules; functional theory of rules; interdependence theory; coaches; athletes

The concept of rules in the coach-athlete relationship

The concept of relationship rules is not new and is viewed as central for human conduct. Anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, sociologists, pedagogists, and psychologists have highlighted that human behaviour is rule-governed. Collett (1977) believed that social interaction rules should be a major concern of social scientists because of their practical utility. He defined rules as, "socially 'correct' or 'proper' ways of behaving…. used to explain people's expectations of others and/or the regularity of their social behaviours on analogy with the moves of a game or some other formally constituted practice" (p. 1). Thus, knowledge and understanding of interpersonal rules can help people conduct their relationships with others more effectively and successfully. In this paper, we explored the rules that govern the coach-athlete relationship. The coach-athlete relationship is at the heart of coaching practice ~~and process~~ (Cote & Gilbert, 2009; Jowett, 2005; Lyle, 2002). Its purpose is to energise, motivate, assure, encourage, satisfy, accommodate, comfort and support (Jowett & Shanmugam, in press). Thus relationships that have positive intent and are purposeful are most powerful, influential and impactful within the context of sport. In purposeful coach-athlete relationships or task-focused relationships the aim is to improve key elements such as physical (skills, techniques, fitness), social (communication, engagement), and psychological (mental skills) in order to advance performance and enable a sense of achievement and excellence to be experienced by both the coach and the athlete (Jowett & Shanmugam, in press). Such purposeful or task-focused relationships can be instrumental and mutually satisfying if coaches and athletes know and understand the rules that guide their interpersonal behaviours (see Jowett, 2008, 2009; Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007; Jowett & Frost, 2007).

Relationship Rules

Argyle and Henderson (1985a) studied extensively the notion of relationship rules within social psychology. They defined a rule as a behaviour that people think or believe

should or should not be performed (cf. Collett, 1977). Argyle and his colleagues have found that some rules generalize across cultures and relationships whereas others are more specific (Argyle, 1986b; Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, Contarello, 1986; Argyle, Henderson, & Furham, 1985; Henderson & Argyle, 1986). For example, Argyle and Henderson (1984) examined friendship rules with British, Italian, Hong Kong, and Japanese participants and found that four of the 43 rules examined were highly endorsed across all four cultures (i.e., "share news of success with the other", "show emotional support", "trust and confide in the other", and "stand up for the other person in their absence"). Moreover, such rules as "don't criticize in public", "keep confidences", "don't be jealous or critical of other relationships", and "respect privacy" were rated as contributing to relationship dissolution when broken among diverse cultures (Argyle & Henderson, 1984).

In another study, Argyle et al. (1985) explored the relationship rules that underline a diverse array of relationship types and the specific rules that cut across these relationships. The relationship types employed in the study included work colleagues, supervisor-subordinate, close friends, siblings, doctor-patient, teacher-pupil, parent-child, and husband-wife. Only nine of the 33 common rules examined were endorsed as general rules of relationships by a total of 180 participants. Amongst the most frequently cited were, "should respect the other's privacy", "should not discuss that which is said in confidence with the other person", "should look the other person in the eye during conversation". For task-focused relationships (e.g., teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, work relations), participants endorsed rules that aimed to regulate the efficient conduct of business (e.g., "should plan and assign work efficiently for work superiors" or "should question the doctor if uncertain for the patient"). Overall, task-focused relationships as opposed to family-focused (e.g., husband-wife, parent-child) , were characterised by a high degree of conflict-regulating rules such as respecting privacy, keeping confidences and refraining from sexual activity in non-marital

relations, with one exception. The teacher-pupil relationship was found to endorse reward-specific rules such as intimacy and exchange (Argyle & Henderson, 1984).

Expanding on the previous research, Henderson and Argyle (1986) examined rule-governed behaviour as it applies to work relationships specifically. They distinguished between work peer and supervisor-subordinate type of relationships on the basis that rewards and conflicts obtained are likely to differ. Whilst there were subtle differences within these types of relationships, the identification of rules highlighted their functional role by enabling common goals to be met. Rules were categorised into maintenance-rules that aimed to avoid conflict by defining behaviours that should *not* occur, and reward-rules that aimed at behaviours that *should* be done. It was suggested that these rules can form the basis for managing working relationships successfully, whilst their violation were likely to cause dissatisfaction (Henderson & Argyle, 1986). They also explained that rules not only would help improve the quality of work relationships but it would also increase job satisfaction and decrease stress.

Whilst research revolving around relationship rules remain scarce, empirical attempts to explore the functions of rules are important to note. Jones and Gallois (1989) hypothesised that marital conflicts are managed well or badly according to a set of rules. Their multi-study revealed that Australian spouses used specific rules to resolve situational-specific conflict. Honeycutt, Woods, and Fontenot (1993) replicated that study employing an American sample of romantic couples. Their results indicated cross-cultural variation and revealed that knowing the rules for managing conflict may facilitate constructive interaction. Relationship rules for conflict resolution were reflective of enhanced relationship quality and satisfying marriages. Correspondingly, Kline and Stafford (2004) have found that relationship rules were associated with the overall quality of marriage including interpersonal trust, liking, and commitment. In a comparative study, Fuhrman, Flannagan and Matamoros (2009) identified that participants always rated their expectations for romantic partners higher than for either

same- or cross-sex friend. They further found that expectations for emotional closeness were always rated higher than expectations for social companionship or relationship positivity. It was concluded that the intensity of behavior expectations (what people prefer to do or not to do within their relationships and their partners) vary as a function of relationship type (Fuhrman et al., 2009).

Baxter's work in this area has also contributed to the knowledge-base. For example, Baxter (1986) studied the types of rules implicated in the dissolution of heterosexual romantic relationships. They discovered the following primary rules as reasons for initiating the break up: obligation to grant autonomy outside the relationship, expectation of similarity, shared time and equity, as well as obligation to be supportive, open, and loyal. Moreover, Baxter, Dun, and Sahlstein (2001) examined rules in the wider social network. They revealed the division of "absolute" versus "conditional" rules whereby the latter set of rules were only applicable if certain conditions were met. It was found that whilst participants endorsed a rule of openness and honesty, they did not reject the opposite rule of discretion. Baxter et al. (2001) concluded that participants have a baseline expectation of specific rules but simultaneously hold rules only enforced under certain circumstances. Collectively, these findings support that while rules can be situational-specific, their main function is to help regulate behaviour. Overall, the work by Argyle and colleagues (Argyle et al., 1985; Henderson & Argyle, 1986) as well as others subsequently (Honeycutt et al., 1993; Baxter et al., 2001) highlights the content, functions, and importance of rules across various types of relationships.

The Present Study

Argyle and his colleagues (e.g., Argyle, 1986a, b; Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981) proposed that people in dyadic relationships meet and satisfy their goals and needs by means of rules. Accordingly, rules are functional because they have the capacity to guide behaviour, regulate conflict, and maintain the quality of the relationship. Furthermore, Argyle et al.

(1986) put forward a 2 x 2 taxonomy of relationship rules grounded in interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The taxonomy illustrates that rules have two key dimensions, namely, "interpersonal-related" and "task-related" both of which contain reward and conflict properties. The *task-related rules* refer to rules that concern the conduct of "business" (e.g., work well together to achieve certain goals), whereas *interpersonal-related rules* refer to rules that concern the conduct of the "relationship" (e.g., trust and respect one another). A basic assumption of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) is that people will not stay in relationships unless the rewards (i.e., positive aspects that lead to positive feelings and experiences) exceed the costs (i.e., negative aspects that prevent the experience of negative feelings and experiences). Whilst acknowledging that some types of relationships are difficult or impossible to leave, for example, parent-child and in some instances coach-athlete relationships, it is possible, in these relationships, to reduce affective closeness, frequency of contact, or level of help and interest. Such behaviours are in turn likely to lead to diminishing rewards (e.g., feeling happy and understood) and to increasing costs (e.g., conflict, disagreements, misunderstandings). Guided by Argyle and colleagues' functional view of relationship rules, we aimed to explore and discover the rules that govern the coach-athlete relationship. We specifically aimed to explore task-related and interpersonal-related rules and discover what rules provide sources of rewards and what rules provide the required control that help minimise conflict and thus maintain good coach-athlete quality relationships. Rules within the context of a two-person relationship function in ways that seeks to enhance and maintain good quality relationships (Argyle, 1986a,b). We felt capturing the quality of the coach-athlete relationship would help us establish a sound understanding of the links between rules and relationships (i.e., the context within which rules develop and function and the manner to which rules influence relationships and vice versa). The 3 Cs model (Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Felton, 2014) was employed to assess the relationship quality or the degree to which the relationship members are *close* (e.g., affective attachments of trust and respect),

committed (e.g., intentions to maintain an interdependent relationship), and *complementary* (e.g., behaviours that are co-operative and affiliative) with one another. The 3 Cs model has been extensively employed in empirical research to examine the correlates of coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Adie & Jowett, 2010; Jowett & Chaundy, 2004; Jowett & Felton, 2013; Lafraniere, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011). In addition, we collected data about coach-athlete communication and conflict in an attempt to establish potential links between relationship quality and relationship rules. The methodological approach was qualitative and data were generated via one-to-one semi-structured interviews with athletes and coaches. The objective of this approach was to explore the relationship quality and discover rules. We relied on the individuals' personal experiences as they possess a wealth of knowledge about the status of their relationships and about what behaviours *should* and *should not* be manifested in the interpersonal exchanges with one another. This approach of self-reflection was deemed capable of capturing athletes' and coaches' accounts about the concept of rules, the application of rules, and the implications of rule-breaking (see Argyle & Henderson, 1985-a) within the coach-athlete relationship.

Method

Participants

A total of 30 British sport participants of which 15 were athletes (n = 7 male; n = 8 female) and 15 were coaches (n = 9 male; n = 6 female) took part in the study. Coaches and athletes were independent from one another and thus they did not form coach-athlete performance dyads. While this was an opportunistic or convenience sample, it represented participants from the target population available at the time and willing to take part. Based on recommendations (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013), 30 coaches and athletes were thought a big enough sample to help reach data saturation and variability. The age of the athletes ranged from 19 to 38 years old (M = 22.13, SD = 4.73) and the coaches from 25 to 48 years old (M = 36.31, SD = 7.30). Individual sports were represented in the athlete and coach

samples including, track and field athletics, badminton, tennis, trampoline, rowing, triathlon, squash, and swimming. The athletes performed at various levels including university (n = 1), regional (n= 7), national (n = 5) and international (n = 2). They reported to have training and competition experience with the designated sport ranging from five years to 20 years (M = 12.5, SD = 3.46). These athletes were coached by male (n = 7) and female (n = 8) coaches and their relationship length with their coach spanned from 6 months to 5 years (M = 2.4, SD = 1.8). The coaches reported that their experience spanned from three years to 15 years (M = 10.15, SD = 7.30). Coaches' achievements included participation in Olympic Games, World Championships (senior and junior levels), World Cups, European and National Championships.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the relevant literature of relationship rules and the research aims set out to be examined in this study. The interview schedule was divided into three main sections containing a total of 53 open-ended questions. Moreover, there were two additional sections: an introductory and a concluding section. The introductory section included demographic information such as name, age, nationality, sport, and performance achievements, as well as questions that aim to establish the profile of the coach-athlete partnership (e.g., "How often do you meet your coach for training?"). The concluding section aimed to round up the issues raised whilst providing a final opportunity to the interviewee to raise any issues that were either never discussed or partially discussed during the interview process.

The first main section of the interview contained 19 open-ended questions that invited interviewees to think of their roles and reflect on the sort of behaviours that should or should not be manifested in training and competition (e.g., "What sort of behaviours should you show during training/competition when you interact with your coach/athlete?") and on implications if inappropriate behaviours were manifested. Section two contained 10 open-

ended questions and probes that aimed to assess the quality of the athletic relationship (e.g., "What does respect mean to you and the relationship you have formed with your coach/athlete?"). Section three contained 14 open-ended questions and dealt with two specific issues of interpersonal conflict (e.g., "What are the main sources of conflict in the coach-athlete relationships?") and communication (e.g., "How do you view the opportunity to communicate with your coach about important issues?"), as well as their implications.

Procedure

Athletes and coaches were approached directly either via personal contact or telephone or email communication and were supplied information about the study, its objectives, and the criteria for participation. For the athletes, inclusion criteria included an age of 18 years or older, regular participation in training and competition, competed at a good standard, and supervised by a qualified coach for at least a 6-month period. The inclusion criteria for coaches were that they were qualified, over the age of 18 years old, they coached regularly and at a relatively high performance level. Upon agreement to participate in the study, a mutually convenient date and place were arranged for the interviews to take place. The interviews were conducted in the Social Psychology for Sport Laboratory and ranged from 1 hour and 10 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes. The study obtained the approval of the ethical advisory committee of the first author's University before the commencement of the data collection.

Data Analysis

The investigators read and reread the interview transcripts before coding began. Content analysis was subsequently employed asit allows the organization of the obtained information in a well-defined coding system (Smith, 2000). Thus, content analysis was used to reduce a large body of qualitative information to a smaller and more manageable form of representation through the use of codes or categories. As in previous qualitative studies of coach-athlete relationships that have been conducted (e.g., Jowett, 2003, 2008), the coding

system employed in this study considered three elements: (a) coding unit defined, (b) categories of classification, and (c) criteria for applying the system. The coding unit defined as a single expressed idea which was articulated in a phrase of one or more sentences. The classification system used included two main categories that represented *task-related rules* and *interpersonal-related rules*. Within each of these two main *a-priori* categories, data were further classified into categories that were more specific. These included subcategories that represented *reward* (i.e., aspects that lead to feeling positive) and *conflict* (i.e., aspects that lead to avoiding feeling negative). The relationship quality was analysed using closeness, commitment and complementarity as its main categories while communication and conflict formed two further separate categories. Altogether these 5 categories depending on their content and meaning were then transposed to the two main two rule-categories and their subcategories. The advantage of the classification system was that these predetermined categories provided a working framework that allowed a comprehensive analysis. Specific criteria for applying the classification system were also drawn; these criteria contained information about how to apply the classification system and included explicit definitions of all the categories. The classification of the data was continuously subjected to scrutiny by both the investigators.

Results

The purpose of the study was to explore task-related and interpersonal-related rules and discover what rules provide sources of rewards and what rules provide the required control that help minimise conflict and thus maintain good quality relationships. In addition, we collected data about the coach-athlete relationship including communication and conflict in an attempt to establish potential links between relationship quality and relationship rules. Both the coach and the athlete data supported the operation of the two main categories of rules: interpersonal-related rules and task-related rules. Moreover, they supported the two further dimensions within each category: providing reward and minimising conflict. It was

evidenced that some of the rules were common among coaches and athletes and some were unique to coaches or athletes. Whilst relationship quality, communication, and conflict seem to cut across the main categories and subcategories of rules.

Interpersonal Rules that Provide Reward

Communication and closeness were characterised by positive expectations for *appropriate behaviour* and seemed to link to the conduct of the relationship and its quality. Communication encompassed mainly verbal and non-verbal interactions (e.g., dialogue, self-disclosure, empathy). For example, athletes said that, "communication and what you say to the coach depends on how strong the relationship is". Communication that was open, honest, and objective was expected by all athletes because, "it makes the relationship smooth and productive…and can help the coach see beyond you as the performance machine" and "if you are communicating well, then I suppose you both really know where you stand. Coach should make sure that he knows that you are in it to do well". Lack of communication was thought to reflect a dysfunctional relationship (e.g., "if you keep it all locked up, then it is not a relationship").

For coaches, communication was encapsulated in aspects of self-disclosure and empathic understanding; these aspects of communication provided an inducement for relationship growth but also met both coaches' and athletes' needs for affiliation and for developing skill and being successful. For example, "It is through communicating with one another that you get a feel of where each other is at and what each needs and wants"; and "It's all about having a relationship in which they feel that you are accessible…they can come to you if they have a problem". Another explained, "if something is not right in their life then I need to know" and "I like to communicate to them like they are friends….you ring me 5 o'clock in the morning if it's important to you that you want to talk to me at 5o'clock in the morning, then it's important to me". Finally, a coach said, "Communication is the number one, you have to be able to communicate with the athlete, the athlete should be able to listen

to the coach…you can't coach what you can't see, hear or feel, you have to be able to pick up on when your athletes are down".

Self-disclosure was especially reflective of the depth of communication some of the coaches in particular had with some of their athletes, "I was close enough for her to be able to tell me about her alcoholic parent…she came and burst into tears ….I've got another [athlete] who is going through the process of divorce…we'll talk and then he'll go home. I don't know if it helps or not, it probably does….I had another [athlete] saying I can't tell my parents but I'm gay". A further example is, "[athlete] was having problems with depression and has discussed this with me. I am happy to sit down and discuss those issues with them…I also encourage them to seek support from experts in such circumstances".

Coaches felt that they should be in a position to understand an athlete's perspective as it helped the relationship and the development of the person as a successful athlete. One coach said, "The longer you have a relationship with an athlete, the closer your bond becomes and the more you know about them; you know more about them than they know about themselves, and they know more about you than you know about yourself". Another coach expressed that, "The coach is usually the person who means the most to them because the coach works with them very closely and knows them the most….it's not just about the conditioning of the body getting to know and understand how the athlete thinks and why they operate in a certain way; you really have to get inside people's heads…it might take a while to get that feel, and they have to become increasingly relaxed and willing to show themselves in a true light so it's all part of the process". Another coach expressed that, "There has to be some understanding of each other…but not many people understand people…if you did I think that is quite a privileged position. If there is quite a good level of understanding then we can support the athlete in many ways". The degree to which the coaches were understood by their athletes and vice versa was transpired by these statement, "They [athletes] tell me they get the message sometimes from the look on my face" and "you only have to see them on

the poolside to know if they have had a good day or a bad day or if they are thinking about something else…that takes time to develop".

Closeness reflected the affective tone of the relationship. All athletes and coaches explained the importance of reciprocal respect, mutual appreciation, and trust as key qualities of good relationships; such qualities appeared to function as motivators that make them to want to maintain the relationship over time. Athletes reported that their respect was expressed by "working hard for them, working hard to improve and get better" and "by accepting and listening what they [coaches] say". They felt that respect is important because "if you both respect each other, then you will both get the best out of each other". Athletes agreed that trust was earned, "If I did not know much about the coach, I would not trust her as much, but I would respect her and come to trust her after awhile. I would see how she works over the first few weeks and then I would decide to trust her or not". The expression of mutual trust was thought to be important in coach-athlete interpersonal exchanges, "the coach needs to trust the swimmer ….you trust that the coach will do anything to help you improve; they know what's best for you" and "whether you take on board what they say it is a matter of trust in them…I show my trust by following his instructions, when he asks me to do something, change a pole, you have to trust that what he says is correct".

Coaches reported, "We trust each other, I think trust is really important and I think they trust that I will do the best for them and I trust them to do what I ask them to do"; "You have to have trust…you have to be close…I am closer with some, it makes it easier for me to motivate them, read them, make them tick"; "By being there for them you show them that they mean something to you; if you treat them as human beings, as a person and you listen to them, I think that shows respect"; "I have to make them believe in me…I have to appear knowledgeable, confident, positive"; "It is important to show them your appreciation either by saying 'well done, that was excellent' or by giving them positive feedback and encouragement". Also, interpersonal liking was referred to as an indicator of affective

closeness that binds the coach and the athlete into a unit “although it is not crucial to like your coach, liking each other can help you work better by taking criticisms for example less personally” and a coach said, “I think you have to like them…it helps if you like them. It is very difficult to coach someone on a regular basis if you don’t like them”. Finally, “If they did not like me, then they would probably go somewhere else”.

The majority of the athletes described their relationship with coach in terms of a good friendship relation, “I am close with my coach, it is more than a teacher-pupil relationship…it is a friendship”. And another said, “I like it to be a friendly and helpful relationship”, “the relationship can become very stressed and strained at times…it is nice to have a laugh and a bit of fun just to show that you are both people and not robots that are programmed to train all the time”. Moreover, all of the athletes agreed that the coach-athlete relationship should be about improving sport performance though it was also noted that striving for improved performance in a close relationship is more rewarding (e.g., “as long as you are performing … and you are happy and enjoy…then I know that this is a good relationship”).

Much like in friendship relations, athletes expressed their appreciation to their coaches by sending them Christmas, Birthday and/or Thank you cards, “He is there to do a job but you have to thank him for making you a better swimmer”. Nonetheless, a couple of the athletes reported that “you are paying him money, so he should be just as interested in you as I am”. In contrast, coaches described the coach-athlete relationship as a family, a marriage, and a work relationship. They explained, “It’s a family so I will do as much for them as I can”; “It [the relationship] is so much like a marriage, I can be half way through cooking dinner at home, and I’ll be on the phone for an hour because someone [athlete] is really upset about something somebody’s done” and “…it is a joint working relationship rather than a school or teacher-pupil relationship. It’s got to be a bit more on an equal level”. Another coach said, “They probably perceive me as a father or uncle figure…little while back maybe I was like an older brother and I would like to have been as part of the peer group…the job we need to do

needs to get close to people - I mean close in a psychological sense really. I think it is terrifically important to be able to have that sort of mentally close relationship".

Interpersonal Rules that Minimise Conflict

This set of rules characterised expectations that could function to minimize or prevent potential interpersonal conflict or interpersonal difficulties more generally. They were underlined by negative expectations for *inappropriate behaviour* and seemed to be linked to the conduct of the relationship and its quality. Throughout the interviews, there was a clear sense that this relationship had a specific purpose with well-defined boundaries. Athletes felt that violation of the boundaries could compromise their roles, position, and status in the relationship and upset others surrounding them (e.g., teammates). For example, they reported that "if coaches and athletes are serious about their sport it should never go beyond the coach-athlete relationship boundaries", "you must not take advantage of the sporting partnership in the way of flirting", and "they should not make sexual references". Just over half of the athletes condemned a romantic involvement with the coach. It was stated, "you should never consider forming a romantic relationship with your athlete, that's a boundary. I would not go there and he would not either". Another athlete said, "coaches should not have personal relationships with their athletes from their team or squad because this undermines their professionalism, image, and influence".

Whilst romantic involvement was considered inappropriate, some athletes also explained that there should be a degree of discretion "the boundaries of the coach-athlete relationship should be flexible and depend on the individuals"; and another expressed that "a romantic relationship depends on whether the rules allow it… they would know whether it is acceptable or not". Nonetheless, all athletes acknowledged that dual role relationships (e.g., athletic and romantic combined) exist but are often difficult to effectively manage and they may be better avoided.

Coaches too explained that crossing the boundaries and a sense of over-familiarity can cause potential conflict in the relationship. For example,

> I occasionally go out for drinks; if they go out, I will….the issue of going out with the swimmers all the time however may have a negative effect…I think over-familiarity is a problem because you then get into a 'what does he know sort of attitude' and I mean it goes without saying that close personal relationships are out of the question….once you set out on that downhill path then it's very difficult to regain the trust in the relationship.

Another coach said that, "The coach-athlete relationship may not be compatible with the development of a romantic relationship, I do not see how they can carry on; there will be conflict of interest". Coaches also referred to different types of abuse such as sexual, physical, and emotional as inappropriate, undesirable, and disastrous for the effective and successful conduct of the relationship.

Task Rules that Provide Reward

This set of rules was underlined by the rewards coaches provided to the athletes ~~and coaches a~~nd revolved around positive expectations for *appropriate behaviour* that linked to the conduct of the business (e.g., completing effectively training sessions and participating successfully in competitions). Personal and interpersonal commitment, as well as high levels of complementary behaviours or co-operation, were considered as indicators of good-working partnerships. Thus, both coaches and athletes were expected to manifest such behaviours as, turning up for training, arriving on time, being well-organised and prepared, working hard, sacrificing, showing patience and perseverance, one leading the other executes and enjoying the process of training and competition. Athletes reported that "for us is turning up and working hard, doing what he says…. for the coach is arriving at the pool first and be fully prepared" and "your coach knows that you are committed to her and your sport by turning up to training on time, you go to training and you are willing to help her out…, if she needs your

help you would offer help" and "he expects people to be working on certain areas….you should show that you are putting in the effort and you are sacrificing things" and "coaches would not invest their time to athletes who are not prepared to try hard". All athletes highlighted that coaches should commit to their athletes and to the goal/s set out to achieve.

Coaches stressed the importance of commitment and co-operation. These were thought to be necessary ingredients of the coaching process. There was a unanimous response by the coaches about the role of total commitment and personal dedication that coaches and athletes needed to exhibit in their exchanges by getting things done and achieving performance goals. Here are some examples of what the coaches said,

> I expect them to be determined, I expect them to work hard, I expect them to get on with their fellow swimmers, I expect focus….They have to be committed to all training sessions; there is little compromise really only if there is illnesses or problems or extreme exams situation….they either commit fully or they swim in the 3rd or 4th squads.

And,

> I run extra sessions after the main sessions…I'm here before the swimmers arrive from 4.45 in the morning, I'm here after the swimmers have gone at 8.15 at night – so it is pretty easy to show you are committed….I expect their level of commitment to be the same as mine which is difficult - so sometimes problems may arise, but in the situation I am in I can't waste time with people who don't want to be here.

Whilst another said,

> As I see it family life is not a business, family life is an arena in which you compromise you know, the world of athletics is not one in which you compromise, if you think you are going to be successful at the highest level, going on a family holiday when you should be at training trips, it's almost like sitting at home

> watching TV when you really ought to be there at the trackside….I think the athletes I work with get the feeling that if they are really committed, they will get that level of commitment from me at least, may be more than that…I respond strongly to their level of commitment.

Other interpersonal behaviours that were considered appropriate and provided rewards, benefits, and a sense of a positive relational atmosphere were associated with coaches' and athletes' complementary roles or roles that helped them work well together. In competitions, athletes expressed that they should take a leading role (e.g., "in competitions I can look after myself", "you don't or can't rely on your coach as much", "you should be quite independent"). Whilst athletes believed that their role in competitions were that of a leader, their coaches' role was thought as mainly supportive. Interestingly, all the athletes felt that coaches should attend athletes' competitions – yet another complementary and supportive behaviour that would signal their coach's commitment. In training, athletes emphasised the authority, direction and leadership of the coach and expressed that coaches' should direct (e.g., "I expect him to tell me what to do") by providing instructions (e.g., "give me points to work on"), feedback (e.g., "analyse good and bad execution of a skill"), show responsiveness (e.g., "co-operate, work together, react appropriately"), give out motivation (e.g., "I want him to make me want to put much more effort; She makes me get the job done"), and support (e.g., "the coach is there to help you achieve what you want; the coach should support or stay in touch with the injured athlete"). Athletes reported that their role in training was that of a "follower". They further expressed their views of their roles in training with such non-dominant and submissive words as "obedience", "compliance" "acceptance", "paying attention" and "listen in". For example, they said, "this year I have done everything he said and things are working well" and "He is there during training, he stands at the back of the court; he makes valid comments and we should use them; it is free advice and we should take it".

Athletes emphasised the importance of interdependence or mutual dependence (e.g., "it is give and take, it connects two people"; "the onus is on you and not just the coach"; "you have to meet them half way"). They also expressed that mutual dependence increases as they become more experienced (e.g., "athlete and coach become more equal in terms of power and control as the relationship and its members grow"). This mutual dependence was characteristic of effective co-operation whereby athletes and coaches meet each other's needs, understand each other's opinions and thoughts, and get on with and attend to one another. It was felt that co-operation was facilitated by shared knowledge and understanding which was the result of open channels of communication (e.g., "coaches should know their athletes…and coaches should apply coaching appropriately to suit the athlete").

From the coaches' point of view, complementarity captured the behavioural interactions as these occurred in the tasks coaches had to accomplish relative to their athletes in the daily training sessions. There was consensus that their main role was that of leading, organising, co-ordinating the procedures and their athletes' main role was that of executing in an environment characterised by responsiveness and affiliation. For example the quotes below capture the general tone of how and why coaches felt they expected to have "the upper hand",

> "I am in charge of them…I tell them what to do and they do it…. I hear my athletes; they have to tell me when they are injured even if it is just a tweak so that I can adjust…we agree to listen to each other…we co-operate; however if athletes try to take over then they don't need me"

Although, it was evident throughout the interviews that coaches expected to lead and "run the show", it was also evident that coaches did not view the athlete as having less authority or power in their interactions. For example, a coach expressed, "the coach should be the dominant person…that doesn't mean that the voice of the athlete doesn't count, it means that I can manage better especially when I work with a lot of athletes at any given

time", some coaches felt that this authoritarian style was subject to the age and maturity of the athletes they trained. It was stated "I am more dictatorial with the younger age group 15, 16…there is a lot of teaching and telling that goes on at that age, whereas with an older 24 or 25 year old there's no that more teaching, what they need at that age is more advising and talking" and "Gradually I try to reach a situation where the combined general knowledge and the experience of my athletes stand alongside my own general experience and knowledge with two heads being better than one in terms of solving any problems". Like the athletes, coaches strongly felt that athletes should have a major leading role especially in competitions, "I think probably with almost all of my athletes I would have the stronger hand in the planning process with regards to training and competition programme and the athlete would have the stronger hand in the sense that it's their legs doing the running".

Subsequently, the majority of the coaches interviewed felt that their dominance or authority was separate to their athletes' autonomous being.

> Athletes need to be able at certain times to say 'I can do this even if my coach isn't there to tell me what to do or support me'. They need to be able to deal with things and know how to deal with these things on their own, be it training or competition or away from the pool.

Some coaches felt that athletes naturally or in a somewhat planned manner should develop the capacity to be autonomous, "You've got to allow them to be independent…get them to analyse a game…it is through this process that they develop confidence in their own abilities"; another said "If they're going to be a successful athlete, they will have to learn to cope with different situations and be responsible. They will enjoy the sport more if they can be independent"; and "The coach-athlete relationship is an enterprise of mutual development and it's a learning experience. I would hope that if an athlete works with me, he would be capable of working independently when needed"; last but not least,

> We can't stand on the blocks and do it for them and swim the race for them; ultimately they have to do it themselves….the whole process creates independence as we ask them to fill in log books; we ask them to monitor what they are doing….athletes' independence allows you to focus more on real details and that's how you get to a higher level of the coach-athlete relationship.

Although coaches were in agreement that athletes should develop their autonomy (e.g., participate in decision making, assume responsibility, being an active agent), they differentiated between autonomy and leadership – emphasising that each has specific roles to play. For example, a coach said "I can't see the position where the athlete is dominant - the coach becomes redundant, however there is a balance shift when certain aspects the athlete might know best whilst others the coach knows best" and another said, "If an athlete was making the decisions and was pulling more…I would have to question my role - the athlete may need a different coach, someone with more experience, knowledge…as a coach you should be the one pulling your athlete up".

Task Rules that Minimise Conflict

This set of rules underlined potential sources of conflict or difficulties that revolved around negative expectations for *inappropriate behaviour* linked to the reciprocal conduct of coaching by each participant. Athletes and coaches referred to poor coaching, lack of commitment and co-operation, as well as irresponsible behaviours (e.g., unfair, rude) as behaviours that can lead to diminished relationship quality, increased interpersonal conflict and eventually dissolution of the athletic partnership. Athletes felt that poor coaching practice undermines the relationship (e.g., "If the coaching is not up to scratch…it is inevitable to disrupt the athlete's training"). Athletes described poor coaching with the following terms: paying too much or too little attention to technical detail, monotonous and repetitive training sessions, and ignoring small steps to improvement. Moreover, athletes reported that coaches

"should not nag, snap, shout and be rude", "should not overwork the athlete", "should not name calling", "should not avoid open dialogue", "should not humiliate", "should not intimidate", "should not embarrass athletes", "should not constantly criticise", "should not be overpowering" and "should not be excessively disciplinarian or submissive".

Correspondingly, athletes listed numerous inappropriate athlete behaviours: "should not ignore the coach", "should not joke around", "should not swear, be rude, and aggressive", "should not doubt the coach", "should not go behind the coach's back blaming him for performance slumps", "should not slag them off behind their back", "should not ignore coaches'authority", and "should not offend the coach". Finally, although athletes agreed that physical contact is appropriate and functional behaviour as long as it is largely related to performance, there was a limit to the physical contact they expected to perceive as appropriate, "if he [coach] starts to touching up then it would be like 'what's going on here', none of that".

For coaches, the negative expectations for *inappropriate behaviour* revolved mainly around behaviours that compromised one's commitment and co-operation. In terms of lack of commitment, coaches said "It does not look good if I lack interest, commitment…or I am sloppy". Correspondingly, "If somebody [athlete] turned around and said to me no I am not going to do that session, then they wouldn't be coached by me – especially when they know that I have their best interest at heart", "If they come to train ill-prepared, I'd rather they turn around and just walk away", "I don't waste my time with people [athlete] who are nonresponsive, less dedicated, whatever their talent maybe", "If they weren't giving 100%...if they did not do what I asked them to do, if they went against my coaching methods and refused to change, then that's the end of the relationship", and "If they cannot give me 100% in a training session, they shouldn't come down". However, one of the coaches also expressed that "overcommitted" athletes may cause concern,

> It's great when they say …, "I want to do more, what can we do about it?"...however, they can get over-committed…you have to tell them not to overdo it….it's all about educating them and getting them understand what you are telling them.

Like athletes, coaches referred to bad-mannered, disrespectful and offensive behaviours that unless confided, they can create conflictual and unpleasant interpersonal situations. For example, "I can't put up with bad-mannered behaviour such as swearing", "I would not accept bad language", "Insulting, swearing are unacceptable and can cause conflict", "They shouldn't mess….if they start not applying themselves…I get fed up…if they are not prepared to live by the expectations of the club then they do not belong here even if they are the best bouncer", "Being irresponsible with what it was set up to do...if they are not responding I would be less inclined to spend time and focus on them as individuals"; "I don't expect them to be late, dishonest, lazy, to lie, cheat, behave badly, disrespectful to officials, and to turn up unprepared…I wouldn't want to associate with them"; "It upsets me and everyone else, if they turn up late; if they start arguing for the sake of arguing…refusal to try…and bad language…dirty kit – men don't wash their kit, women change kit every time they train"; "Arguing, shouting, bullying…I think when a coach says he wants to do one thing and the athlete wants to do another, the relationship would go wrong"; and "There are certainly quite a few athletes who have expressed concerned about Mr. Angry coach, the coach who loses his temper, gets angry, shouts at their athlete; they generally haven't enjoyed that experience and it hasn't been beneficial, it hasn't worked".

Finally, coaches explained that athletes and coaches who misunderstand or mis-apply the framework of authority (dominance) and submission (obedience) by taking up inappropriate roles are destined to fail their relationships. For example, "If they are not listening to or acting on my advice perhaps I shouldn't be there"; "If I am not leading and contributing, I do not think I would be doing my job properly or to the best of my abilities";

"Being in charge of them is important, if you lose this you lose respect and the relationship…you have to come across as a person that knows all the answers to their sport"; and "If they are not obedient then they are not taking on the advice of the coach, and if they are not taking on board the advice of the coach then why is the coach there?". Moreover, one of the coaches said,

> I don't think obedience on its own and independence on its own are good to have…if an athlete is blindly obedient to the coach this may be detrimental to his development, equally if an athlete is completely independent to the coach, he cannot listen and take in advice and instruction. The athlete can be a little bit of both.

And

> I like to see the relationship developing from where the coach is probably somewhere between 80-100% directing the athlete, if the athlete is capable and comfortable with it, to get to 50-50%; though if it ever gets less than 50-50% I start having problems with it.

Discussion

Rules in the context of interpersonal relationships have attracted limited concerted research interest over the years despite their central position for human conduct. The work presented here aimed to explore task-related and interpersonal-related rules within the coach-athlete relationship and discover what rules provide sources of rewards and what rules provide the required control that help minimise conflict. The analysis supports the functional or purposeful nature of relationship rules proposed by Argyle and colleagues. The findings from this study suggest that rules can minimize potential sources of conflict and provide opportunities to increase an exchange of rewards. Overall, an emphasis on enhancing rewards (e.g., learn skills, improve performance, feel happy and satisfied)and on minimising conflicts (e.g., misunderstandings, disagreements) through the application of various rules meant that

the quality of coaching relationships can be maintained and that coaches and athletes can focus on enjoying making progress in their sports. Moreover, it was found that closeness, commitment, and complementarity as well as communication may naturally contain ingredients that serve as rules in themselves.

Rewarding rules (task and interpersonal) were found to associate with creating a positive relational context underlined by strong affective ties (e.g., mutual trust, respect, appreciation), open channels of communication (e.g., conversing, disclosing, understanding), as well as balanced exchanges of interaction where authority and submissiveness as well as mutual dependence were acknowledged. Collectively, these findings support Argyle and Henderson's (1985a) position that rules provide a key feature to understanding the quality of relationships. Moreover, these findings highlight that positive features of relationship quality such as closeness (e.g., respect, trust, liking), commitment (e.g., sticking together over time), and complementarity (e.g., being co-operative, receptive,)can function as rewarding rules that provide incentives that motivate members to stay in their relationships.

The association observed between relationship rules and relationship quality may also have implications for research and practice. For research, the development of a tool that assessses rules within the context of the coach-athlete relationship may further support the generation of knowledge and understanding about the predictive value of rules for optimal performance and relational functioning. For practice, psychology and performance consultants in their assessments of the quality of coaching relationships may be able to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of relationships relative to the rules that are being applied and adhered to. Such assessments may also support the work of consultants in helping members to create a "relationship contract" (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008, p. 206; Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007). A relationship contract that takes into account the individual members (e.g., gender, age, qualifications, personality, ambitions) and the specific

context (e.g., type of sport, performance level) within which the dyad operates is more likely to help both the coach and the athlete ease relationship navigation.

Coaches described the coach-athlete partnership as a family relation and a teacher-pupil relation whereas the majority of the athletes characterised it as a friendship relation (cf. Antonini et al., 2011). Whilst family and friendship relations are likely to endorse similar relationship rules (see Argyle et al., 1985), they represent different relational contexts and as such they are likely to be governed by distinct rules reflecting the specific goals or functions of such relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1985a). In contrast to the friendship relations where "power" is generally symmetrically distributed, the "power" in family relationships is viewed as hierarchically distributed. Subsequently, in family relationships one would expect that behaviour is guided by rules that aim to maintain the hierarchy (e.g., ask for permission before you go out with friends to play). Athletes and more so coaches underlined the importance of coaches maintaining authority, leadership, power, and control (much like parents and teachers do). On the other hand, both coaches and athletes underlined the importance of the athlete being autonomous and mutually dependent (reflecting the notion that the relationship should be much like friendship). Whilst it is possible that this finding represents the idiosyncrasies of the specific sample of participants (e.g., athletes' developmental stage and maturity), it is also possible that the coach-athlete relationship is more complex as it incorporates characteristics and rules that are specific to family and specific to friendship relations. Moreover, our findings corroborate the notion that rules in relationships are situational-specific (see e.g., Baxter et al., 2001), coaches and athletes' leadership may vary depending on whether interactions take place in training versus competition.

Argyle and his colleagues (Argyle et al., 1985; Henderson & Argyle, 1986) found that rules within the context of task-focused relationships (e.g., doctor-patient, superior-subordinate) contained low endorsement of reward-rules (i.e., rules that provide an exchange

of rewards that motivate the members to stay in the relationship) as opposed to conflict-regulating rules (i.e., rules that regulate behaviour to minimise potential conflict that may disrupt the relationship). The exception was the teacher-pupil relationship whereby reward-rules were highly endorsed (Argyle et al., 1985). Coaches' and athletes' reports included many exchange of rewards and such rewards appeared to have been designed to maintain a positive relational coaching environment. For example, closeness (valuing trust, respect, appreciation, liking), commitment (willingness to maintain a close relationship over time), and complementary roles, as well as open channels of communication and self-disclosure. Coach-athlete and teacher-pupil relationships may share a number of similar characteristics and the highly endorsed reward-rules appear to be one of them.

Ginsburg (1988) states that the generation and application of rules occur as part of the socialisation process. The findings of our study suggest that participants have quite clear ideas of the rules that govern their interpersonal relationships. It also became apparent that athletes and coaches' understanding of rules were largely in agreement, supporting the notion of consensus on rules (Cushman & Whiting, 1972). This finding supports the contention that relationship rules are shared cognitions (Henderson & Argyle, 1986). The fact that there is consensus over what key rules govern the coach-athlete relationship may also highlight that is less likely to mistakenly apply a rule. This conjecture needs further investigation. Moreover, it was apparent that the application of both reward and conflict-regulating rules aimed to facilitate the attainment of broader goals (e.g., skill development, performance accomplishment) and the satisfaction of broader needs (e.g., need for intimacy). Thus, such shared-rules are likely to enable both athletes and coaches to meet basic psychological needs (e.g., connectedness, autonomy, competence; Deci &Ryan, 2000) within the sport context and fulfil shared performance goals (e.g., success in the form of an Olympic medal or European title).

The findings also highlighted that rule-breaking has the capacity to lead to undesirable consequences that can disrupt the stability of the relationship. For example, ignoring the boundaries of the coach-athlete relationship by entering into a romantic relationship may lead to distress. Moreover, receiving coaching practices that are unacceptable and inappropriate (e.g., shouting, hitting, favouritising, mistreating) not only would result to interpersonal conflict, disagreements, and misunderstandings but would also lead to serious misconduct and abuse of coaches' "duty of care". Nonetheless, conflict is inevitable in relationships and even the most harmonious and successful relationships may have to experience, for example, disagreements about goals and misunderstandings about their roles (see Jowett, 2003, 2008). Thus, it is possible that if coaches and athletes learn how to apply, maintain, negotiate, develop, change or adopt rules, they will be better equipped to prevent interpersonal difficulties (Baxter, 1986), promote the quality of relationships (Kline & Stafford, 2004), and resolve conflict in relationships (Honeycutt et al., 1993; Jones & Gallois, 1989). Overall, the findings support the notion that relationship rules are functional (Argyle, 1985b; Argyle et al., 1981).

Much of the work conducted by Argyle and colleagues (Argyle & Henderson, 1985-b; Argyle et al., 1985) and others more recently (e.g., Fuhrman et al., 2009) was about examining the universality of relationships rules across diverse types of relationships and cultures. For example, Argyle and Henderson (1985a) listed the following rules as common and important across relationships and cultures: "should respect the other's privacy", "should not discuss that which is said in confidence with the other person", "should not criticise the other person publicly", as well as "should not indulge in sexual activity with the other person", and "should stand up for the other person in their absence". Very similar relationship rules emerged in the responses of the coach and the athlete sample in this study. While this highlights the generality of certain rules across diverse types of relationships, our findings also point to specific rules that may be unique to the coach-athlete relationship. One

example is the rules that govern complementary roles whereby the coach appeared to be a leading, dominant, and authoritative figure and the athlete appeared to be a submissive figure or a follower in training situations; this pattern was evidently reversed in competitive situations.

The limitations of the work presented should be noted and addressed in future research. It is possible that individual difference characteristics (e.g., gender, age, personality, professional qualifications) and situational characteristics (e.g., training vs. competition, individual vs. team sports) independently and in combination affect the content and function of relationship rules relative to what is perceived and experienced as appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal behaviour. For example, previous research studies have shown that many of the gender and age differences are related to intimacy rules (Argyle & Henderson, 1985a; Argyle et al., 1985; see also Baxter, 1986). Argyle and Henderson (1985a) concluded that females endorse such rules as expressing emotions (e.g., fears) and disclosing feelings (e.g., liking) regardless the type of relationship as well as rules about not touching and no sex more strongly than males in non-intimate and working types of relationships specifically. On the other hand, males endorse rules about obedience more than females particularly in sibling and dating relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1985a). Thus, gender differences in the endorsement and application of relationship rules need close attention in future research.

It would also be interesting to examine whether young athletes endorse different rules from those endorsed by older athletes. Such age differences have been found elsewhere (see Argyle & Henderson, 1985a) and touched upon in this study when coaches reported that may need to be more dominant in their approaches with young athletes than older athletes. Relationship duration may be another moderator for the content and function of relationship rules. As individuals develop and mature, their relationship would evolve and hence some

rules may no longer be applicable and would have to be replaced. The role of age and relationship duration can be studied by employing a longitudinal research design.

Another interesting future research direction is to focus the examination on a particular set of rules. For example, the findings of the study presented highlighted the situational-specific nature of rules. For example, the rule of "complementary roles" appears to transform depending on whether the situation wherein athlete behaviours occur is a training session (athlete assumes a "follower" role) or a competition (athlete assumes a "leader" role), while coach behaviours of leadership and dominance occur in varying degrees. Expanding on that notion, it would be practically useful to assess in some detail the content and functions of this set of situational specific rules in a sample of athletes and coaches who participate in diverse types of sport (e.g., team versus individual sports) and levels of sport (e.g., club versus international levels). A synthesis of observational, interview, and survey methods to generate data is likely to provide rich information.

In sum, this study aimed to explore task-related and interpersonal-related rules and discover their functions (rewards versus conflict) as well as potential associations with the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Findings suggest that interpersonal- and task-related rules serve two main functions: (a) regulation of behaviour that may disrupt the maintenance of the relationship (i.e., conflict-minimising rules); (b) provision of rewards that motivate people to stay in the relationship (i.e., reward-providing rules). Moreover, it was found that good quality relationships as defined by closeness, commitment, and complementarity may inherently contain ingredients (e.g., trust, respect, co-operation) that serve as task-related and interpersonal-related rules. Overall, these rules provide the boundary conditions within which athletes and coaches are safe, secure and happy.

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