

RUNNING HEAD: Maintaining coach-athlete relationships

Linking maintenance strategies to the quality of coach-athlete relationships

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Abstract

This study investigated associations between the use of maintenance strategies and relationship quality within coach-athlete dyads. A total of 251 participants (146 athletes and 105 coaches) were administered the Coach-Athlete Relationship Maintenance Questionnaire (CARM-Q) to measure the use of conflict management, openness, motivational, preventative, assurance, support, and social network strategies and the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) to measure closeness, commitment, and complementarity. The use of openness and social networks strategies were found to be associated with closeness. The use of motivational and support strategies were linked with commitment. Complementarity was associated with the use of the preventative strategy. Conflict management and assurance were found to play more significant roles for coaches than athletes. The implications of these findings are considered along with some suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Coach-athlete, relationship quality, maintenance, man management

Linking maintenance strategies to the quality of coach-athlete relationships

A growing body of recent research has highlighted the importance of having an effective coach-athlete partnership (e.g., Jowett, & Cockerill, 2003; Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Trzaskoma-Bicserdy, Bogнар, Revesz & Geczi, 2007). Positive associations have been found between relationship quality and satisfaction (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004), team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), physical self-concept (Jowett, 2008), and subjective performance (Rhind & Jowett, in press). A key question, therefore, is what strategies can be used to maintain relationship quality such that coaches and athletes can benefit from these outcomes. Some potential strategies were highlighted within recent qualitative research by Rhind and Jowett (2010), but there remains a need to empirically investigate whether any statistical association can be established and to assess whether these strategies perform different roles for coaches and athletes. These are the questions which will be addressed by the present study.

Dindia and Canary (1993, p. 163) described relational maintenance as "...the strategies used to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition." Such strategies may include spending time together, discussing expectations or supporting a partner through difficult times. Canary and Stafford (1994) argued that maintenance strategies enable the continuation of interpersonal relationships through their enhancement, preventing their decline, and facilitating their repair and re-establishment. Canary and Stafford (1992) suggested that these strategies also "affect the nature of the relationship" (p. 9).

Subsequent research into romantic, marital, and familial relationships has supported this view by demonstrating strong links between relationship maintenance and

relationship quality. Associations were found with the affective elements, such as love (e.g., I love my partner) and trust (e.g., I trust my partner; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, Dainton & Haas, 2000), the behavioral elements, such as affinity seeking (e.g., demonstrates liking) and control mutuality (e.g., the interaction is characterized by reciprocity; Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Canary & Stafford, 1992), and the cognitive elements, such as commitment to interpersonal relationships (e.g., I cannot imagine ending our relationship; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford et al, 2000). These initial studies of relationship maintenance focused on dating or married couples (e.g., Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). However, more recently, the principles and concepts of relationship maintenance have been applied to parent-child relationships (Punyan-Carter, 2006) and friendships (Bippus, & Rollin, 2003). Based on this evidence, there is merit in studying whether such associations exist within other dyads, such as the coach-athlete relationship.

The coach-athlete relationship has been defined as "...the situation in which coaches' and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are mutually and causally interconnected" (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004, p. 245). In line with this definition, Jowett (2005, 2007) developed the 3+1C conceptualization of the coach-athlete relationship. This conceptualization incorporates the constructs of closeness (the affective element: e.g., respect, trust, and liking), commitment (the cognitive element: e.g., the members' intentions to maintain the relationship), and complementarity (the behavioral element: e.g., co-operative and corresponding behaviors of affiliation). Closeness, Commitment and Complementarity are known as the 3Cs.

The “+1” element of this conceptualization is co-orientation, referring to the degree to which the athlete’s and the coach’s perceptions are interconnected. It contains two perspectives, the first of which is the direct perspective. This reflects how one person feels, thinks, and behaves towards the other (e.g., ‘I trust my coach/athlete’). It also includes the meta-perspective which is reflected in how the athlete or the coach perceives the other feels, thinks, and behaves (Jowett, 2009; e.g., ‘My coach/athlete trusts me’).

Closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation are thus combined to create a conceptualization of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Jowett and Poczwardowski (2007) suggested that relationship quality is associated with a number of intrapersonal (e.g., performance), interpersonal (e.g., satisfaction with the relationship) and group (e.g., cohesion) related outcomes. Jowett and Poczwardowski (2007) also theorized that relationship quality is governed by the interpersonal communication between the coach and athlete. Part of these communications will concern the use of maintenance strategies.

In the first study to directly investigate maintenance strategies in the coach-athlete relationship, Rhind and Jowett (2010) interviewed 6 coaches and 6 athletes from a range of competitive levels and sports. Participants were invited to think about times when they were close, committed, complementary, or co-oriented with their coach/athlete and to talk about the strategies employed to develop and maintain such a relational situation. Based on this interview data, the Coach-Athlete Relationship Maintenance Questionnaire (CARM-Q; Rhind & Jowett, in review) was developed to measure the use of 7 relationship maintenance strategies: Conflict management, openness, motivational, preventative, assurance, support and social networks.

These seven relationship strategies form the COMPASS model of relationship maintenance in coach-athlete dyads (acronym of the first letters of the relationship maintenance strategies, Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Overall, the COMPASS model suggests that the use of these strategies helps to maintain the quality of a coach-athlete relationship.

The present study

Relationship maintenance strategies within interpersonal relationships have been shown to have positive associations with the affective, cognitive and behavioural elements of relationship quality. Thus, the first aim of the present research was to investigate whether such associations are salient within the coach-athlete relationship. The second aim of the research was to assess whether there are significant differences between these associations for coaches and athletes. In other words, analyses will be conducted in order to determine whether one can predict relationship quality based on the use of maintenance strategies. It is acknowledged that the reverse of this association may also be possible in which relationship quality predicts the use of maintenance strategies. However, the approach employed in this research replicates that used in previous research to ensure that a comparison of findings is possible (e.g., Stafford, et al., 2000). It also affords an assessment of the central notion within Rhind and Jowett's (2010) COMPASS model that the use of these strategies maintains relationship quality.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 251 respondents took part in this study (49% were males and 51% were females). Of these 42% were coaches (M age = 37.71, SD = 10.05)

and 58% were athletes (M age = 19.82, SD = 3.08). Participants were recruited from a wide range of individual sports (e.g., athletics, golf, and swimming) and team sports (e.g., football, netball, and rowing), as well as a range of competitive levels: recreational (2.0%), university (23.8%), club (25.4%), regional (23.8%), national (16.4%), and international (8.6%). Participants were involved in their primary sport for a mean of 7.78 years (SD = 4.46). The average length of their relationship with their current coach or athlete was 2.57 years (SD = 2.37), with the mean number of hours being spent with this person in training each week being 4.57 hours (SD = 3.65).

Instruments

Coach-Athlete Relationship Maintenance Questionnaire (CARM-Q; Rhind & Jowett, in review). The CARM-Q contains 28 items that measure the use of seven relationship maintenance strategies: conflict management (e.g., I am understanding during disagreements), openness (e.g., I am open about my feelings), motivational (e.g., I show that I am motivated to work hard with my coach/athlete), preventative (e.g., I tell my coach/athlete what I expect from him/her), assurance (e.g., I show my coach/athlete that s/he can count on me), support (e.g., I give my coach/athlete support when things are not going well), and social networks (e.g., I like to spend time with our mutual friends). Respondents indicated their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree'.

Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (long version CART-Q; Rhind & Jowett, in press). The long version of the original CART-Q measures the quality of the relationship and contains 29 items from coaches and athletes' direct and meta-perspectives. All items begin with the prefix 'During training...' to emphasize that the questionnaire is focused

on the respondent's relationship with their coach/athlete as this evolves in the sport field. The long and direct perspective version of the CART-Q is comprised of 7 items that measure closeness (e.g., I care about my coach/athlete), 10 items that measure commitment (e.g., I am committed to maintaining a close partnership with my coach/athlete) and 12 items that measure complementarity (e.g., I am organized).

Finally, the meta-perspective of the quality of the coach-athlete relationship was assessed with the long version of the CART-Q (see Rhind & Jowett, in press). This had very similar items to the direct perspective version with the only difference being that they were re-worded to ask the respondent to think about how their coach/athlete feels, thinks, and behaves. The meta perspective of the long CART-Q therefore measures meta closeness (e.g., My coach/athlete cares about me), meta commitment (e.g., My coach/athlete is committed to maintaining a close partnership with me), and meta complementarity (e.g., My coach/athlete is organized). Again respondents indicated their agreement with the items on a 7 point scale from 1 'strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree' for all sub-scales.

The final section contained demographic information regarding the respondent (i.e., age, gender, primary sport, and the length of time that they have been involved with that sport), as well as their coach-athlete relationship (i.e., coach/athlete gender, highest level of participation, the length of the relationship, and the amount of time that they spend training each week with their coach/athlete).

Procedure

A range of recruitment methods was employed. Firstly, National organizations, such as National Governing Bodies (NGBs), from a wide range of sports were contacted

via e-mail and/or telephone to invite them to participate in the present study through providing access to coaches and athletes. Secondly, clubs, groups, and societies were approached via their head coach/manager. Finally, participants were recruited on an individual level through attending sporting events, courses, and training sessions. Potential participants were provided with a questionnaire either by e-mail, post or through face-to-face contact. Moreover, potential participants were reassured that any information they provided would remain confidential at all times. They were also made aware that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University's ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

Means and standard deviations were calculated to provide descriptive statistics for the sample. Correlations and multiple regressions were also computed to assess the associations between the use of maintenance strategies (i.e., conflict management, openness, motivational, preventative, assurance, support and social networks) and perceptions of relationship quality (i.e., direct and meta perspectives of the 3Cs).

Results

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the whole sample of the CARM-Q sub-scales and their correlations with the sub-scales of the long CART-Q. In terms of the first research aim, each of the CARM-Q sub-scales was significantly correlated with at least 2 of the CART-Q sub-scales. This indicates that the use of maintenance strategies is associated with relationship quality.

insert Table 1 around here

The second aim of the research was to investigate differences based on a participant's role. Six multiple regression analyses were conducted with the independent variables being the seven sub-scales of the CARM-Q and the dependent variables being the six sub-scales of the long CART-Qs. These regressions were first conducted using the coach data and then for the athlete data to enable a comparison. The maintenance strategies were entered as the independent variables as this has been the approach adopted in previous research (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, et al., 2000). Adopting this approach would facilitate comparisons between the findings of the present research and those of previous related studies.

The CARM-Q sub-scales were able to predict a significant amount of the variance in all of the long CART-Q's sub-scales for both coaches and athletes. The beta coefficients for all of the regression analyses are shown in Table 2.

insert Table 2 around here

The CARM-Q could account for 76.8% of the variance in direct closeness for coaches ($F = 50.82, p < .01$) and 41.6% for athletes ($F = 13.12, p < .01$). Both openness and social networks were significant predictors of direct closeness for coaches and athletes. Motivational strategies were only found to play a significant role for athletes whilst support was a significant negative predictor for coaches. Conflict management, preventative and assurance strategies were not significant predictors of direct closeness.

For meta closeness, the maintenance strategies could predict 62.6% of the variance for coaches ($F = 23.21, p < .01$) and 52.2% for athletes ($F = 19.54, p < .01$).

Again openness and social networks were significant predictors for coaches and athletes. Furthermore, preventative strategies had a significant negative weight for coaches and athletes. This indicates that lower levels of meta closeness were associated with a greater use of the preventative strategy. The use of the motivational strategy was only a significant predictor for coaches. Conflict management, assurance and support were not significant predictors.

In terms of direct commitment, 94.9% of the variance was predicted for coaches ($F = 259.58, p < .01$) and 73.1% for athletes ($F = 48.86, p < .01$). Motivational and support strategies were both significant predictors of direct commitment for coaches and athletes. For coaches, the use of the assurance strategy was a positive predictor whilst the openness and social network strategies were both significant negative predictors. Conflict management and preventative strategies were not significant.

For meta commitment, 75.2% of the variance was predicted for coaches ($F = 41.99, p < .01$) and 72.5% for athletes ($F = 46.67, p < .01$). As with direct commitment, motivational and support strategies were both significant predictors of meta commitment for coaches and athletes. Similarly, assurance (positive) and social networks (negative) were both significant predictors for coaches. Furthermore, conflict management was a significant negative predictor for coaches. The use of openness and preventative strategies did not predict meta commitment.

In relation to direct complementarity, the use of maintenance strategies predicted 89.5% of the variance for coaches ($F = 117.88, p < .01$) and 39.9% for athletes ($F = 11.94, p < .01$). The preventative strategy was a significant positive predictor and support was a significant negative predictor of direct complementarity for both coaches and

athletes. The motivational strategy represents an interesting finding as it was a significant positive predictor for athletes but a significant negative predictor for coaches. Openness was only significant for athletes whilst assurance was only significant for coaches. Furthermore, for coaches, both conflict management and social networks were significant negative predictors indicating that they are used more when a coach perceives lower levels of direct complementarity within the relationship.

The CARM-Q could also account for 67.8% of the variance in meta complementarity for coaches ($F = 29.13, p < .01$) and 40.5% for athletes ($F = 7.20, p < .01$). Similar to the findings regarding direct complementarity, the preventative strategy was a significant positive predictor and support was a significant negative predictor of meta complementarity for both coaches and athletes. The motivational strategy was again a significant positive predictor for athletes but a significant negative predictor for coaches. For coaches, conflict management and assurance were significant positive predictors whilst openness and social networks were significant negative predictors

Discussion

The first aim of the present research was to investigate whether there are associations between the use of maintenance strategies and the quality of coach-athlete relationships. At a descriptive level, the sub-scales of the CARM-Q and the sub-scales of the CART-Q were significantly correlated. The subsequent regression analyses also demonstrated that the use of maintenance strategies can account for relatively high levels of the variance in closeness, commitment and complementarity for both coaches and athletes. Together these findings provide empirical support for the central notion of Rhind and Jowett's (2010) COMPASS model through demonstrating that coaches' and

athletes' use of maintenance strategies is associated with their perceptions of relationship quality. These findings also support previous research with dyadic relationships which have highlighted associations between the use of maintenance strategies and the affective (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992), cognitive (e.g., Stafford, et al., 2000) and behavioural (e.g., Bell, et al., 1997) aspects of relationship quality.

The second aim of the study was to investigate whether there are significant differences in these associations for coaches and athletes. The role played by each of the seven maintenance strategies will now be considered. Conflict management significantly predicted coaches' perceptions of direct and meta complementarity. This means that coaches who use higher levels of conflict management are more likely to perceive higher levels of complementarity within the relationship. Through showing understanding and patience during disagreements, a coach can help to maintain an effective partnership with each one athlete in the team or squad, as this partnership pertains to behavioural interactions that aim to work well in an affiliative and responsive environment. For coaches, conflict management was also a negative predictor of meta commitment. In other words, coaches who perceive their athletes to lack commitment are more likely to use conflict management strategies. For athletes, the use of conflict management did not predict their perceptions of relationship quality. It may be that managing conflict is more central to the role of the coach in maintaining effective relationships that lack the necessary commitment on the part of the athlete.

Openness predicted perceptions of direct and meta closeness for both coaches and athletes. This emphasizes the importance of having open lines of communication for maintaining the affective aspect of the relationship especially on the part of the athlete.

For coaches, the use of openness was found to negatively predict direct commitment and meta complementarity. This indicates that openness may be viewed as less important for coaches who are committed to a relationship and for coaches who believe they have cooperative athletes. Although it is unclear why coaches may view openness in that way, it is possible that this finding is reflective of two aspects. First, coaches who are committed to their athletes may have already established a great deal of knowledge and understanding through open channels of communication about their athletes and therefore openness may be viewed as a less important strategy to use to maintain the relationship. It is possible that as the relationship grows and matures, exchanges of information and communication becomes less frequent. Second, a number of influential personal and situational factors may have confounded this finding. For example, coaches experience and qualifications as well as the type of sport and level of performance or competition may have a role to play in how coaches choose to communicate with their athletes. For athletes, openness predicted direct complementarity. This suggests that athletes are more open when the relational environment in which they interact with their coaches is friendly, responsive and relaxed.

Motivational strategies clearly play a strong role in maintaining direct and meta-commitment for both coaches and athletes. This would be expected as taking steps to show one's motivation and to motivate one's sporting partner are likely to impact both members' commitment to the relationship. In terms of closeness, motivation predicted coaches' meta-perceptions and athletes' direct perceptions. Interesting findings were revealed in terms of complementarity. For coaches, the use of motivational strategies negatively predicted direct and meta-complementarity. This suggests that coaches use

these strategies more when they perceive lower levels of complementarity. Thus, when the interactions lack a degree of responsiveness and easiness, coaches are likely to use strategies that aim to motivate, encourage and support the athlete. In contrast, athletes' use of motivational strategies predicted their perceptions of direct complementarity. Thus, athletes who view their coaches as co-operative are likely to use motivational strategies as a way to further reinforce an existing positive environment.

Preventative strategies appear to be used by coaches and athletes to maintain direct and meta complementarity. Through discussing expectations, and when they are not met, it seems that an effective working partnership (e.g., positive and co-operative interactions) can be maintained. Preventative strategies negatively predicted meta closeness for coaches and athletes. Use of the preventative strategy may depend on the state of the relationship. It is possible that they are used when one does not feel affectively close to one's sporting partner or when one's partner is viewed as not feeling closeness within the relationship. It is also possible that when one feels that there is mutual trust, respect and appreciation for example, there is no need to use preventative strategies. Overall, this finding supports previous qualitative research which has highlighted the importance of discussing expectations within elite sport (e.g., Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), especially if the relationship lacks affective closeness.

The assurance strategy appears to be more strongly associated with coaches' perceptions of relationship quality. Assurance positively predicted coaches' direct and meta perceptions of both commitment and complementarity. Therefore, coaches, who assured their athlete that they would be there for them should the need arise, reported that both them and their athlete were more committed and complementary. In contrast, the use

of the assurance strategy did not predict athletes' perceptions of relationship quality. As with conflict management, it may be that assurance is more central to the role of a coach than an athlete.

Support clearly plays an important role in maintaining direct and meta perceptions of commitment for coaches and athletes. Giving support during difficult times appears to be associated with one's commitment to the relationship as well as one's perceptions of one's sporting partner's commitment. Support was also found to predict perceptions of complementarity. However, this time support was a negative predictor. This may indicate that lower levels of complementarity are associated with a greater use of support strategies. However, it may be that in cases where complementarity is already high, there is no need for the use of support. Some differences were found in terms of closeness. Athletes were found to give more support when they perceived their coach to feel close to them. This finding may reflect athletes' tendency to help their coaches when they view that their coach likes, trusts and respects them. In contrast, coaches give more support when they view themselves as having lower levels of closeness or when they perceive that their athlete feels close to them. . This finding further highlights the important role played by support identified within previous research (e.g., Rees, 2007).

The use of the social network strategy was associated with direct and meta perceptions of closeness. Thus, coaches and athletes who socialize together are likely to have an affectively closer relationship. Further significant associations were found in relation to coaches with social networks negatively predicting perceptions of direct commitment and complementarity. Coaches seemed to use the social network strategy more when they were less committed and complementary within the relationship. So

when they cannot form an interdependent relationship in the form of commitment and complementarity, they may let others within their network to help build relationships that may impact their relationship with their athlete. Moreover, it is likely that this finding is much more prevalent at lower levels of performance (recreational and university) than higher levels of performance (national and international).

This study opens up many potential avenues for future research. The factors which influence the use of maintenance strategies and the quality of a coach-athlete relationship require investigation. For instance, the role of individual factors (e.g., gender, age, experience), relational factors (e.g., gender composition of the dyad, length of the relationship) and situational factors (e.g., type of sport, culture, level of competition) merit consideration. There is also scope to investigate other possible correlates of maintenance strategies such as group cohesion, performance and athlete satisfaction. A further way in which the present research can be built upon will be to develop, implement and evaluate an intervention which promotes the use of these strategies. One could then determine whether such strategies can be taught and if the quality of coach-athlete relationships can be enhanced as a result. Finally, there is great scope for more longitudinal research to assess the temporal relationship between the use of maintenance strategies and perceptions of relationship quality. This would facilitate an understanding of whether the use of these strategies enhances relationship quality or whether relationship quality actually influences the use of these strategies. Indeed, it may be that a cyclical relationship is evident.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations of the present research. Firstly, the measures used only assess how a coach or athlete is feeling, thinking and behaving at the

time that they complete the questionnaires. Perceptions of relationship quality and the use of maintenance strategies are likely to change over time. This ensures that it may be interesting to collect data over a number of time points to gain a more representative impression of the relationship. Secondly, the method used relied upon self-report measures. Coaches' and athletes' perceptions of their use of these strategies may not accurately reflect how they actually behave within the relationship. Other techniques, such as observational methods, may provide a different view of the relationship. Finally, the coaches and athletes were independent in this study and were not asked about the strategies used by their sporting partner. Future research will likely benefit from developing a meta-perspective version of the CARM-Q and through replicating the present study with coach-athlete dyads.

All of the key stakeholders of the coach-athlete relationship can potentially benefit from the findings of this research. Coaches and athletes can be better informed of the importance of using strategies to maintain the quality of their sporting relationship such that they can benefit from the associated positive outcomes. Sport psychologists can also use the CARM-Q along side the CART-Q when working with dyads to gain a useful insight into the relationship. Such information could help to inform the identification of any areas of strength or weakness which in turn will guide the selection and implementation of an intervention. In broader terms, national governing bodies and sport clubs can be made aware of the strategies within the COMPASS model and the role that they play. As a result they can take steps to promote the use of these strategies amongst their coaches and athletes. Finally, this study benefits researchers working in this field through further supporting the COMPASS MODEL and the use of the CARM-Q, both of

which now represent useful tools for conducting further research in this area. In summary, this is the first study which has empirically demonstrated an association between the use of maintenance strategies and relationship quality within sport. Through this, these findings can contribute to the drive towards establishing and sustaining effective, successful and satisfying sporting partnerships.

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