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Social Networks in Sport: Parental Influence on the Coach-Athlete Relationship

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The study aims to explore the nature of influences that parents exert on the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship. A conceptual model was proposed as a guiding framework for the study. The proposed model incorporates Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, and Willets' (2002) notion of social networks and Jowett and Cockerill's (2002) conceptualization of coach-athlete relationships. Fifteen participants from five coach-athlete-parent triads were interviewed, and content analysis revealed that athletes' parents (a "psychologically significant" network member) provided a range of information, opportunities, and extensive emotional support, all of which influenced the quality of the coach-athlete relationship as defined by closeness, commitment, and complementarity. Results are discussed based on previous relevant research along with recommendations for future research directions and practical applications.

Csiksentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997) have highlighted that young people's persistence in developing talent in music, art, or sport is linked to their immediate social environment. Within the youth sport context, coaches, parents, siblings, peers, and officials form a multifaceted and complex social network, which influences the experiences young athletes gain from participating in sport (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad & Partridge, 2002; Côté, 1999; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Research has shown that the time and effort that young athletes are able to devote to training and competition is dependent on material and emotional support provided particularly by parents and coaches (Bloom, 1985; Brustad, 1993; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Although research has consistently shown that the coach-athlete-parent triad forms an important system that determines athletes' sport experiences, it is unknown precisely how parents can and do influence

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the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, its development, maintenance, and dissolution. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to explore the nature of influences that parents exert on the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship. To that end, the following discussion proposes a conceptual framework that provides an empirical foundation for studying the interconnections between social networks (parents) and relationships in sport (coach-athlete relationship).

Sprecher, Felmler, Orbuch, and Willetts (2002) developed a social network model on the premise that dyadic relationships originate, mature, and are sustained within a larger social network. Research evidence that has led to the model development supports that “third parties” or network members (e.g., parents, siblings, friends) can emerge as robust predictors of relationship quality (e.g., Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Burger & Milardo, 1995; Sprecher & Felmler, 1992). Julien and Markman (1991) examined the perceptions of 87 married couples regarding the effects of social networks on their marital adjustment. Results indicated that confiding to a large number of social network members (“outsiders”) is associated with low marital adjustment (i.e., reduces attachment between partners, maintains conflict) because it allows for too many influences. Nonetheless, it was argued that social network members could have positive effects on couples (e.g., provide an adaptive strategy for better coping in the face of separation). Rogler and Procidano (1986) examined whether social networks to which spouses belong influences the segregation of marital-role activities. Their study included 100 spouse pairs and 100 of their adult married children. The findings revealed that women were more likely than men to be influenced by relatives than from network members outside the family domain. It was concluded that women’s constant mutual exchange of support and aid with their family network members makes them rely more on them than their spouses for key roles (e.g., child care, household labor, and leisure time). An earlier study by Johnson and Milardo (1984) examined network interference in dyadic relationships in a sample of 750 university students. The study revealed that when individuals become involved in intimate relationships, a withdrawal is observed from the relationship members’ network of family relations and friends. It was further found that when relationship members regress socially from their networks, a state of social anxiety among the network is induced, which often provides motivation to interfere with the relationship members (dyad). It was suggested that the processes of withdrawal and interference are closely and reciprocally linked. Other research findings have revealed that perceived network support from parents and friends for dyadic relationships, such as romantic and marital, is associated with emotional attachment (closeness), expectation that the relationship will continue (commitment), and satisfaction with the relationship (see e.g., Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher & Felmler, 1992). The research presented above supports that network involvement and relationship quality are interrelated; consequently, Sprecher et al.’s (2002) attempt to integrate these domains is justified.

Sprecher et al.’s (2002) model was introduced as a model that studies influences of social networks on intimate relationships. In the context of sport, the dyadic coach-athlete relationship is viewed as central and involves similar characteristics like these found in (a) marital relationships, such as affection, intimacy and commitment; (b) friendships, such as trust, honesty and tolerance; and (c) work relations, such as instructional support, sharing news, and respecting privacy (Jowett, 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Moreover, the coach-athlete relationship originates, matures, and is sustained within a larger social network of

parents and friends (e.g., Brustad & Partridge, 2002; Weiss & Smith, 2002). For the purpose of this study, a modified version of Sprecher et al.'s (2002) model was used to depict the relationship quality as it pertains to coaches and athletes and basic social network properties (processes and attributes) as it pertains to athletes' parents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 presents the main components of the modified model (a) athletes' and coaches' social network members, (b) major processes¹ of social networks, and (c) the coach-athlete relationship quality. First, athletes' social network members

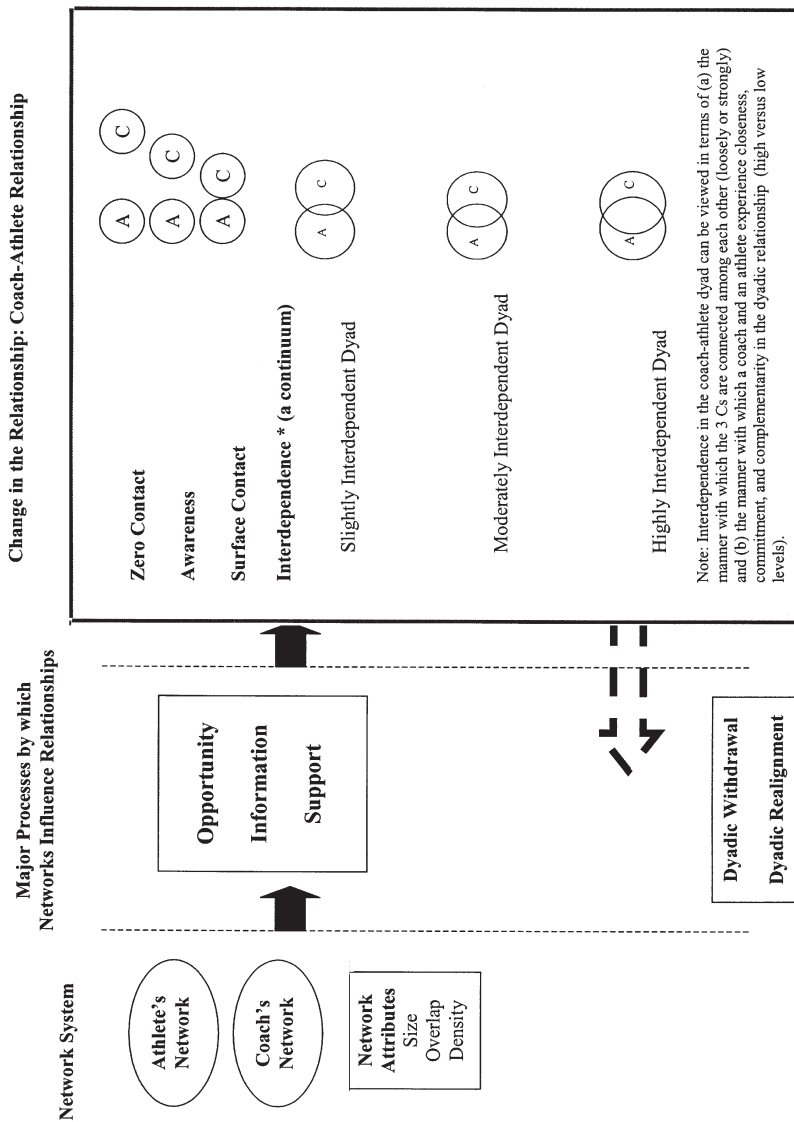


Figure 1. Social network processes and the dyadic coach-athlete relationship model (adapted from Sprecher et al., 2002). Key: A = athlete; C = coach.

include mothers, fathers, siblings, relatives, friends, peers, club, and school or work staff, among others. Coaches' social network members include persons like those mentioned for athletes but also some other persons such as spouses. These social network members can be viewed from two different standpoints: (a) the psychological network, which refers to these members whom an athlete or coach perceive as significant and (b) the interactive network, which refers to these members with whom an athlete or coach simply interacts on a regular basis (cf. Surra & Milardo, 1991). Generally, parents of young athletes have been viewed as significant persons and role models in athletes' sporting lives (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Csiksentmihalyi et al., 1997).

Social networks can be further described in terms of three attributes: size, overlap, and density. Size refers to the number of members included in the network. Although the size can be quantitatively defined in terms of number of individuals, it is important to always consider whether these individuals reside in the psychological or interactive network. Overlap refers to the degree to which coaches and athletes share the same social network members. For example, coaches' and athletes' shared social network contains members of the athletic team, or in the case where the coach is the parent of the athlete, the coach's and the athlete's immediate family reflects their shared network. Density or interconnectedness refers to the degree to which the athlete's network members have ties with each other separate from the ties to the athlete. An athlete's school and sport peers may be highly connected, separate from their ties to the athlete.

Second, at the heart of the model lie three major processes or components by which social network members (e.g., parents) affect the relationship quality: (a) opportunity, (b) information, and (c) support. Opportunity refers to the situations or possibilities that the social network provides the dyad with the opportunity to initially meet and establish a relationship (e.g., the parent arranges for the child to visit the sport club and meet with the coach). The social network is also capable of creating such opportunities that permit the relationship (e.g., coach-athlete) to grow and develop beyond that initial encounter. For example, parents provide transport to various training and competition grounds and cover competition fees and other expenses incurred from their children's sport participation. Information refers to the various types of information that social network members provide dyads. For example, parents supply the child with advice, information, suggestions, and recommendations for developing and maintaining an effective relationship with the coach (e.g., give a "thank you" or birthday card to the coach, respect the coach). Moreover, parents can be a source of information for the coach (e.g., inform the coach that the child/athlete has got an imminent school exam). Lastly, support refers to the ways by which a social network member supports the dyadic relationship—support could be simply by way of approval of the relationship or by providing socioemotional assistance (e.g., encouragement, understanding, appreciation) to the dyad or the individual dyadic member. For example, parents provide encouragement to the child/athlete and appreciation to the coach.

Third, relationship quality of the coach-athlete dyad has been defined here in terms of three interpersonal constructs: closeness, commitment, and complementarity (3 Cs; Jowett, *in press*; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). The 3 Cs conceptualization emphasizes social interdependence at the core of the coach-athlete relationship. Interdependence in the coach-athlete relationship can be viewed in terms of (a) the manner that a coach's and an athlete's closeness, commitment, and

complementarity are connected among each other (loosely or strongly) and (b) the manner with which a coach and an athlete experience closeness, commitment, and complementarity (high versus low levels).² Briefly, closeness represents the affective and personal character of a coach-athlete relationship and is reflected in a coach's and an athlete's mutual trust and respect. Commitment reflects a coach's and an athlete's intention to maintain the relationship and/or maximize its effectiveness. Complementarity describes a coach's and an athlete's interpersonal behaviors of reciprocity and affiliation, such as their responsiveness and easiness during training. The 3 Cs model has been utilized in qualitative research to examine the content of the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000) and in quantitative research to examine the correlates of the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Jowett & Chaundy, 2004; Jowett & Don Carolis, 2003).

The integrated model proposed here illuminates that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, as defined by the 3 Cs, is affected by the processes and attributes of social networks (see Figure 1 solid arrows). For example, parents can, through the opportunities they provide, affect their child's readiness to begin sport and work with a specific coach who is thought to be more appropriate than another. Thus, parents are capable of initiating interactions between their child and an appropriate coach, hence leading to the development of a coach-athlete relationship. Parents can also influence the degree to which the child/athlete gains respect and trust for the coach, adopts a cooperative, friendly, and responsive attitude toward the coach, as well as developing a sense of commitment for the coach and the sport in general. Overall, parents are instrumental in helping to arrange opportunities, providing positive information, and expressing support for the developing coach-athlete relationship (reflected in the increased levels of interdependence in terms of the 3 Cs child/athletes and their coaches experience with the passage of time). Nevertheless, parents can also have a negative influence. For example, if parents are not satisfied with the coach-athlete relationship, they may develop strategies (e.g., negative feedback, search for a new coach, change of sport club) that do not permit the development of strong, secure, and long-lasting coach-athlete bonds (this may be reflected in low levels of interdependence in terms of the 3 Cs). Ultimately, such negative parental involvement is likely to encourage the discontinuation rather than continuation of the coach-athlete partnership, especially when the child is young and more dependent on the parent. Evidently, parents can be instrumental in the formation, development, stability, and indeed the dissolution of the coach-athlete relationship especially in youth sport.

As the coach-athlete relationship advances (or deteriorates) in interdependence and athletes grow out of their parents' authority and control, their networks may change in response (see Figure 1 dotted arrow). Consequently, as the coach and the athlete become more interdependent (e.g., closer and more committed), they may withdraw from their networks (e.g., parents) to focus on each other. This phenomenon has been termed dyadic withdrawal (Huston & Burgess, 1979; Slater, 1963; Sprecher et al., 2002). Developmental psychology in sport has indeed suggested that as athletes move to more specialized sport participation, coaches become a major source of influence while parents move into the background, playing a less direct role in their child's sport (Monsaas, 1985; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). In a similar vein, coaches may withdraw from the rest of the team, and even their own family, in an attempt to invest a concentrated time in developing the athlete or certain athletes or the team as a whole. Dyadic realignment is another phenomenon

that may occur. According to Sprecher et al. (2002), dyadic relationships experience an increase in network overlap as their relationship progresses. Thus as the coach-athlete dyad grows, (a) it interacts (the coach and the athlete together) with close family members, (b) it forms mutual friendships, and (c) it subsequently withdraws from less important friends. Thus, it is possible that the athlete gets to know the coach's wife and children and the coach gets to know the athlete's parents better. The result is realignment in their close social networks.

In sum, this study proposes that the coach-athlete-parent triad is studied from a social network approach. A modified version of Sprecher et al.'s (2002) model of social networks provides an empirical foundation for exploring the nature of influences that parents exert on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the main objective of the investigation is to explore the content of the major processes of opportunity, information, and support by which athletes' most significant and implicated parental social network member potentially affects the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship (as defined by the 3 Cs) in a sample of female adolescent Greek-Cypriot swimmers.

Method

Participants

A total of fifteen Greek-Cypriot participants were recruited (5 coach-athlete-parent triads) all of which were nationals of the Republic of Cyprus and spoke Greek as their mother tongue. The athletes were females with a mean age of 16.2 years ($SD = +0.83$). The athletes were involved in swimming and had been participating for an average of 6.6 years ($SD = +2.3$). Athletes were competing at national level in their age group and had represented Cyprus at least once at international competitions. The athletes had each been with their current coaches for an average of 5.4 years ($SD = +3.28$). Coaches were male and the mean age was 37.4 years ($SD = +5.12$). Coaches had been coaching swimming for an average of 11.8 years ($SD = +5.26$). Three parents were mothers and two were fathers; their average age was 43.2 years ($SD = +4.26$). The choice to investigate female sport performers is based on research that suggests that perceived approval from a female's social network for her dyadic relationship is a significant predictor of the stability and appropriateness of the relationship (e.g., Rogler & Procidano, 1986; Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992; Sprecher & Felmler, 1992). Moreover, limited research suggests that female sport performers develop stronger or more intense coach-athlete relationships in terms of the 3 Cs (Jowett & Don Carolis, 2003).

Interview Schedule

An interview schedule (see Appendix A) containing 15 open-ended questions was developed to explore the content of the hypothesized processes by which parents are likely to influence the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationships. Athletes' most significant and implicated parent (i.e., a member of athletes' psychological social network) was interviewed to discern the content of (a) opportunities (5 questions, e.g., What sort of opportunities have you provided your child with to start and continue his/her sport participation?); (b) information (5 questions, e.g., What kind of sport-related information are you likely to supply your child?); and

(c) support (5 questions, e.g., How do you generally support your child's efforts to improve in his/her sport?).

The interview schedule developed for the coach and the athlete (see Appendix B) focused on discerning (a) the quality of their relationship in terms of the 3 Cs (i.e., their mutual or interdependent levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity) and (b) the experiences coaches and athletes have had regarding the influences athletes' parents exerted on their relationship. The former was examined through 9 open-ended questions that were developed to examine the three basic relational dimensions of closeness (3 questions, e.g., In what ways, are feelings of trust and respect a factor for an effective coach-athlete relationship?), commitment (3 questions, e.g., In what ways, is it important for you to be committed to your coach/athlete?), and complementarity (3 questions, e.g., How do you approach your coach/athlete during a training session?). Six further questions were included to examine athletes' and coaches' perceptions in relation to how they felt parents influenced their mutual levels of closeness (e.g., In what ways, has your parent/athlete's parent affected the level of trust and respect you have experienced for one another?), commitment (e.g., In what ways, has your parent/athlete's parent involvement contributed to you feeling committed to your athlete/coach and sport in general?), and complementarity (e.g., How do you think your parent/athlete's parent has facilitated or hindered your levels of cooperation?). A brief introductory section was included in each interview schedule to obtain demographical data and establish rapport.

Procedures

Telephone interviews were conducted by the second author. Telephone interviews are rare in sport and exercise psychology research; nonetheless, they have been used in qualitative research designs to eliminate travel time and costs (see e.g., Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2003). Although it has been acknowledged that telephone interviews lack nonverbal communication and visual cues, they do offer access to distinct populations that would otherwise, due to practical obstacles, be impossible (Miller, 1995). Moreover, researchers have found that telephone-collected data is not distinctly different neither in quality nor quantity when compared to face-to-face collected data (e.g., Sweet, 2002). In this study, telephone interviews were viewed as an advantage because anecdotally and empirically, it is known that teenagers communicate habitually by phone (Reich & Earls, 1990).

Prior to conducting the telephone interviews, the second author traveled to the Republic of Cyprus to recruit and meet with potential participants. These meetings served as a means of raising potential participants' interest for the study, explaining the aims and discussing the requirements of the study, developing rapport, assuring confidentiality, and obtaining informed consent. Participants were then contacted by telephone to confirm dates and times for the interviews. Athletes were interviewed first; this allowed the identification of the parent that the athlete perceived to be the most significant in their sport. Subsequently, the parent was interviewed followed by the athlete's coach. It was endeavored to complete interviews back-to-back for each one triad so as to inhibit consultations between the triad members. Interviews were on average an hour long. The study was approved by the University's Ethical Committee.

Trustworthiness (credibility and integrity) of the data collection was ensured as follows: The interviewer was well trained in qualitative research

including telephone interview techniques and hence had the capacity to conduct the interviews satisfactorily. The interviewer was a Greek-Cypriot allowing her to naturally establish affiliation and acceptance with the interviewees and also had the opportunity to meet on a personal basis at least once with the interviewees before the interviews. Furthermore, all participants were assured of confidentiality while informed consent was obtained. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, a coding system was used in all documentation produced. Numbers were assigned to the triads (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and the letters A, C, and P were assigned to the athletes, coaches, and parents, respectively. Finally, copies of the full transcriptions were made available to all participants, and they were asked to report back if any inaccuracies were noted.

Data Analysis

All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and were then translated into English by the second author, who is fluent in both languages. Back translations were employed in instances where it was felt difficult to convey the original meaning. A total of 188 pages of single-spaced interview transcriptions were produced. The obtained data were content analyzed (Weber, 1990) in order to systematically organize and explore the meaning conveyed by the participants. The analytical process involved categorization of themes and interpretation of coders.

The categorization of themes aimed to classify the raw data units into the *a priori* general categories that best matched the content of the interview statements (i.e., sentence or phrase unit). The general categories included the three main relational properties that define the coach-athlete relationship (closeness, commitment, and complementarity) and the three main processes by which parents influence the coach-athlete relationship (opportunity, information, and support). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that this method of establishing a “start list” of codes prior to reading the data is a useful way of beginning to code. This coding approach, where the data was simplified and reduced into the predetermined categories, aimed to identify a simple conceptual schema (Krippendorff, 1980). Further coding was subsequently employed within the general categories to expand and tease out the data. For example, the investigators aimed to identify within and across each general category common themes, patterns, and actions. This has been viewed as “data complication” because it allows different levels of interpretations and creative thinking with the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Overall, this process involved moving from managing and organizing data to interpreting them (e.g., How and what aspects of parental “opportunities” influence the quality of the coach-athlete relationship in terms of commitment?). Such analytical thinking played a central role in the generation of ideas.

Five random samples were selected to calculate intercoder reliability (i.e., the degree to which the two investigators’ coding was consistent or in agreement). Intra-coder reliability (i.e., the code-recode agreement of single investigators) was estimated by recoding the five random samples approximately eight weeks after the initial coding. (During the interim period these samples were not studied.) The consistency in the data categorization was based on calculations of intercoder and intracoder reliability coefficients. All coding reliability checks were over .80 (Neuendorf, 2002).

Results

The presentation of results concentrates on (a) parents' perceptions in describing the content of the influences they exert on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship in terms of opportunity, information, and support and (b) athletes' and coaches' perceptions in describing the quality of their coach-athlete relationship in terms of the 3 Cs and the manner to which parental influences affect the quality of their relationship.

Influences of Parents on the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Opportunity. The influence of parents included parent-coach initial and subsequent contacts (e.g., frequent communications) and tangible opportunities. The opportunities the parents offered aimed at locating an appropriate coach and helping to establish a basis for an effective working relationship between their child and the chosen coach. Parents also created opportunities that aimed at maintaining frequent communications with the coach about numerous topics such as their child's progress, the effectiveness of the coach-athlete partnership, and sport in general. Although parents viewed competitive sport as demanding, strenuous, and often stressful for their children, they reported that frequent coach-parent consultations (formal and informal) assisted them in establishing a clearer direction for their children's sport development. Subsequently, confidence relevant to what their children were trying to achieve through sport helped them ease the burden of competitive sport.

Parents also suggested that coaches could play a central role in creating opportunities that enhance their active involvement in their children's sport. A parent expressed,

We want to be informed, she is our child and we have a big part to play in this . . . we want to give the girls the opportunities we didn't have . . . as an athlete she needs a good coach . . . if we are going to give her the opportunities she needs to achieve, then we need to work with the coach. (P1)

Two parents reported that they were not always in accord with the coach of their child. They explained that they did not approve the coaches' practices and they were considering alternative coaches. However, the majority of the parents discussed that the opportunities to change coaches were limited and problematic due to long bureaucratic processes (e.g., "As far as I know you enroll at a club and you are pretty much stuck with the coach that is there" [P4]). On the other hand, cultural constraints or societal expectations limited the opportunities parents could offer relevant to continuing of sport involvement. For example a parent stated, "I think if there was an option for her to study [at University level] in Cyprus and carry on swimming with him she would very much like it . . . but we realize the chances of that" (P1).

Finally, tangible opportunities included the financial responsibility parents had to fulfill; parents reported that they had to affluently offer financial support to the child in order to pursue the sport of swimming. This financial investment ranged from expenses relating to swimming kit, coaching, and club fees to competition fees and transport. All parents talked about the traveling to and from the training and competition grounds. For instance a parent said, "We always get her what

she needs, equipment and stuff, memberships to gyms, she needs all these if she is going to give it her best shot, and there is only so much that the coach can do” (P3). Overall, the parents agreed that the opportunities they provide can make a difference in how their child/athlete interacts, relates, and communicates with her coach and in turn performs in her sport.

Information. The influence of the parents in terms of the information they provide to their child/athlete and the coach included both specific or practical information (e.g., preparing for competitions, progress of other swimmers in the club) and general information (e.g., nutrition, rest patterns, social relations). In terms of general information, a parent said “we talk a lot about all sorts, but I always talk to her about her nutrition, on the advice of the coach of course . . . make sure she is resting things like that” (P2). Moreover, parents reported to be instrumental in helping resolve conflicts and frustrations that occasionally arose between the coach and the child/athlete. For example, a parent explained that in such instances he encourages his daughter to analyze and interpret the disagreements experienced with her coach in a more objective light.

In terms of practical information, parents appeared to provide coaches with information about what the athlete does during nontraining times, whether the athlete gets enough rest or not, and how the athlete responds to the scheduled training. For example, a parent said,

I know my [daughter] and I can tell him [coach] how to deal with her, if I think she isn't eating properly or sleeping or there is something concerning her. . . . I would need to inform him [coach] of that . . . [the coach then] can act accordingly to deal with the situation. (P1)

Parents expressed that the exchange and processing of general and practical information enhanced athletes' performance, satisfaction, the quality of coaching, and, as a result, the effectiveness of the coach-athlete relationship. Parents generally felt that in that way they helped the coach and the child/athlete work things out more effectively.

Two parents stated that their discord with the coach led them to express themselves negatively. More specifically, these parents appeared to voice their opinions about the coach without much consideration of their child's own views and evaluations. In particular, a parent felt frustrated because the coach did not always consider her input:

It's annoying to tell you the truth . . . they [coaches] expect us to do everything but they [coaches] don't take the time to explain things to us . . . we know he [coach] is the expert but that's exactly why we need him to explain things to us, because we are not experts. (P4)

Support. The influence of the parents in terms of the support they provide to their child and the coach, which was the most prevalent process, included emotional and general support. While general support included statements that indicated parental support without specifying its precise nature (e.g., “I give her all the support that she needs” [P1]), emotional support included statements of encouragement, empathy, appreciation, and approval. All parents referred to the

importance of emotional support: that parents should always be available to their children and ready to provide unconditional love and regard (e.g., “We are always there at competitions to congratulate her and console her” [P3]). Parents were very enthusiastic to provide emotional reinforcement and encouragement to their children and at the same time were eager to empathize and understand the coaches’ contribution, directly or indirectly, in anyway possible.

Negative aspects of support also emerged from the analysis, suggesting that while a spontaneous expression of joy and excitement at a child’s achievement was viewed as encouraging and supportive, an equally spontaneous expression of disappointment was viewed as stressful and upsetting. Parents reported that at times it was difficult to conceal their feelings and emotions regarding their children’s performance. While parents seemed to remember those times that they felt disappointed with their children’s performance, they were unaware of how their own disappointment and expressions of it could affect their child’s sport experiences, the coach’s roles, and the coach-athlete partnership.

Dyadic Withdrawal and Dyadic Realignment

Both the dyadic withdrawal and dyadic realignment phenomena emerged from the interviews with the parents. Dyadic withdrawal was reflected in parents’ perceptions of the increased levels of interdependence that the coach-athlete relationship started to experience over time. For example, a parent expressed that “it’s hard to know what to do . . . sometimes it feels that the two of them have their own little club . . . she doesn’t listen to us the same way she listens to him [the coach]” (P4). Parents explained that their children spent less time with them as they started to be more involved in the sport, gained more experience, and became more senior members in the team. Moreover, parents felt less influential and “their presence slipped in the background,” but despite this, they expressed a continued interest in their child’s more advanced sport participation. The following response illustrates this: “Especially when the kids seem to be wanting more independence from us the parents but seem to be getting more attached to the coach, we want to continue to be involved, it keeps us in touch” (P1).

Dyadic realignment was reflected in the increasingly stronger coach-athlete partnership, coupled with the athletes’ newly expanded network of friends that comprised primarily by other swimmers and coaches in the club. Spending more time on the sporting grounds permitted the creation of new friendships. While the sport social network increased, the social network athletes had developed at school appeared to dissipate. A parent stated that “She [athlete] doesn’t really hang out as much with her school friends as she does with her athlete friends” (P3).

The Quality of the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Closeness. Closeness included both positive and negative themes. Positive themes of closeness included mutual respect, love, care, like, belief and trust, while negative themes included dislike, disrespect, restrain, anger, disconnection, and disappointment. Both coaches and athletes portrayed their relationships as intensely emotional. Belief in one another was prominent, highlighting its importance in developing and maintaining harmonious and stable coach-athlete relationships. For example, a coach and an athlete stated respectively, “I do believe she [athlete] has a lot of potential” (C1) and “The coach has to believe in the athlete”(A2). The majority of athletes viewed their coach as a mentor or as a father figure and similarly,

some coaches viewed the athletes as their own daughters. The feeling of respect toward one another and in particular from coaches toward athletes, as perceived and expressed by the athletes, was prevalent during the interviews, suggesting that this is a compelling property under closeness. In cases where there was a sense of distance and animosity between the coach and the athlete, lack of respect was at the heart of the problem. The following quotes illustrate the reciprocal impact of respect: "I don't have a lot of respect for him [coach] and I think that's because I don't think he has a lot of respect for me" (A2).

Coaches discussed the impact of parents. A coach reported that when parents become overly emotional ("overly supportive," "overexcited"), he tends to distance himself somehow from the parent and the swimmer for fear of conflict that could compromise his professionalism. He further stated, "it is important that parents don't doubt us, at least in front of the kids, if they doubt us it will rub off on the kids as well" (C4). Another coach said, "Parents have a lot of power and can cause a lot of problems . . . and it's hard to be relaxed around their kid, in case the kid doesn't like something or they disapprove" (C2).

While athletes were positive about their parents' influence (e.g., "Dad never lets me miss a session, he sometimes has to lie to his boss about meetings running late when we are stuck in traffic on our way to the pool" [A3]), two athletes referred to parents' interference and the degree of distraction that their parents have caused in the expression and experience of interpersonal feelings between them and their coaches. They explained that their parents had always been less supportive and consistently critical of their coach, making them question their own feelings toward their coach. As one athlete put it, "I used to hate it when they started going on and on about the coach. . . . I know I wasn't performing very well but I was really enjoying being part of the team" (A2).

Commitment. Commitment included both positive and negative themes. Positive themes included dedication, sacrifice, and satisfaction, and negative themes included coach alternatives, indifference, and dissatisfaction. All coaches and athletes emphasized the importance of commitment as a valued determinant for effective athletic relationships that last over time. Both coaches and athletes viewed sacrifice as an important property of interpersonal commitment. Young athletes reported that they had to sacrifice other activities (e.g., music lessons) and friendships outside sport among others. A combination of sacrifice and satisfaction was perceived as a measure of coaches' and athletes' commitment. For example, "He has done a lot for me over the years . . . I try my best for him [coach] . . . The hard work has accumulated in qualifying for the Balkans making us both feel very satisfied with the progress" (A5).

Lack of commitment was associated with terminating the athletic relationship. For example, athletes and coaches reported that "I don't know how committed he [coach] is to me . . . I don't know how much longer I will keep swimming for" (A2). Athletes reported that the low number of coaches in Cyprus was a double-edge sword in that their commitment was magnified to that one coach even when the relationship could not be maintained (e.g., due to lack of satisfaction, dedication); the opportunity to terminate one relationship and form a new coach-athlete partnership was not available. Moreover, it was expressed that school graduation typically signals the end of the coach-athlete relationship and sport involvement. The following quote demonstrates this: "I think the potential is there but the reality is that we probably only have another few years and that's it. It's the typical Cyprus story" (C2).

Coaches talked about the significance of parents providing the required and necessary opportunities (e.g., transport, financial backing) to foster commitment. Coaches explained that such opportunities could affect athletes' commitment to the coach and coach's commitment to the athlete. As one coach explained, "if they don't bring her to the training session how am I going to coach her. . . . If I don't see her every day how am I going to get to know her as an athlete and a person" (C5). Nonetheless, coaches and athletes pointed out that although parents have a lot of influence, if it is not used in the right way, it can break the coach-athlete partnership: "I would rather not swim than worry what mum would say and that we will have an argument" (A5).

Complementarity. Complementarity included both positive and negative themes. Positive themes included roles, tasks, adaptability, and instrumental support, and negative themes included antagonism and ineffective support. One coach and two athletes reported negative, noncomplementary, behavioral interactions. For example, these were expressed as follows: "It really gets to me when he treats me like a kid or patronizes me. . . . We don't work well together anymore. . . . I don't think embarrassing an athlete because they don't do as you say is okay" (A2) and "I think it sometimes falls on deaf ears. . . . When I ask her to do things, she always moans and complains . . . (C2).

The roles and tasks employed revealed that coaches assume an authoritarian approach, which involved a disciplined and a well-organized training environment, while maintaining a friendly attitude. On poolside, the coach led the proceedings and the athlete accepted and responded by carrying out the instructions. These complementary interpersonal behaviors were captured by the following statements: "I am the coach, she is the athlete . . . athletes have to know who is in charge. . . . The coach is the motivator. . . . Generally I am authoritative but outside of training I am more relaxed" (C4).

Coaches' ability to adapt to various situations was explained by both athletes and coaches. For example, coaches described how their behavior changed in accordance with the situation and/or the behavior, mood, and psychological state of the athlete: "If I can maintain a relaxed and friendly approach and still get the job done then I will, but if the athlete isn't focusing or isn't working to a standard I expect, then I will have to change things" (C1) and "Different things work for different athletes, and coaches have to know that and be able and willing to make sure what they do is specific to the athlete" (A3). Athletes acknowledged that coaches' capacity to adapt their coaching to the demands of the situation or the psychological state of the athlete is a skill that more experienced coaches are more likely to possess.

The majority of coaches acknowledged the importance of athletes' parents in terms of the input they provide to them:

Parents are a valuable source of information. As a coach I only see the athletes for a few hours. After that the athlete is at home. . . . Parents can tell you how the athlete is reacting to training. They can tell you things that the athlete might not want to tell you or know how to tell you. (C3)

Coaches welcomed the insight they can gain into the athletes' psychological and physical state by the athletes' parents. This information was viewed as instrumental in enabling them to adapt their coaching style (e.g., whether they

needed to be firm or go easy on the athlete). Nonetheless, coaches also suggested that “Kids copy parents, if the kid sees the parents aren’t very respectful or cooperative with the coach then they start to think it’s ok for them to behave in a similar, rather unacceptable way with their coach” (C2).

Discussion

Utilizing a modified version of Sprecher et al.’s (2002) model of social networks, the three primary processes of parental influence on the coach-athlete relationship were explored. First, our results revealed that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship as reported by the majority of the coaches and the athletes, was highly interdependent. The highly interdependent nature of the relationship was reflected in the high degree of closeness (trust, respect, belief), commitment (dedication, sacrifice, satisfaction), and complementarity (cooperation, supportive roles, complementary tasks) that both the coach and the athlete experienced. Nonetheless, two athletes (A2 & A4) did express low levels of coach-athlete interdependence.

In terms of parents’ perceptions relevant to the opportunities they provided, it became apparent that parents socialized their child into swimming and identified a good swimming club and a good coach. Parents’ primary concern was to locate a coach who would effectively manage their child’s sporting development. This finding is consistent with research that shows the primary effects that parents have on socializing their children into sport (Brustad, 1993; Greendorfer, 2002). Moreover, the opportunities created by parents (e.g., frequent contacts with the coach, tangible opportunities such as transport, financial backing) enabled them to affect positively the developing coach-athlete relationship. Coaches ascertained that the opportunities parents provided their child could play a central role in fostering the child/athlete’s commitment to the coach and to the sport in general.

The opportunities parents provided were somewhat restricted by bureaucratic (e.g., long club transfer processes), organizational (e.g., fewer coaches), and societal or cultural (e.g., at the age of 18 young athletes terminate sport participation in order to continue higher education abroad) issues, all of which appeared to damage the relationships between the coach-athlete-parent triad. Although this finding underlines the power of sport organizations, culture, and society in shaping people’s expectations and experiences, overall it was evident that the parents of this study provided the sort of opportunities that would help their child enjoy their journey into becoming a competent swimmer. This type of parental involvement where energy is directed toward providing young children with a sense of positive emotions, challenges, and safety has been found to be an important determinant in increasing young persons’ chances to refine their talents (e.g., Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997).

Parents also provided information to the child/athlete regarding nutrition and rest patterns, as well as information regarding the progress of other swimmers in the club and the schedule of upcoming competitions. Parents supplied information to the coach too. Such information included issues regarding their child’s responsiveness to training, their activities outside sport, and their general well-being. Coaches, in turn, reported incorporating this valued information into their coaching. Both leadership (Chelladurai, 1993) and relationship (Jowett, 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003) approaches have referred to coaches’ capacity to adapt to the situation and the needs of the athlete. Such capacity appears to influence coaches’ and athletes’

level of complementarity in the relationship (e.g., cooperation and the manner to which one responds to another). Thus, coaches' complementary behaviors with their young athletes may in part lie in parents' provision of relevant information (e.g., young athlete's mood states, rest, and eating patterns). Smith and Smoll (1996) have recommended that regular meetings between coaches and parents create open lines of communication enabling an uninhibited flow of information exchange. In light of these findings, coaches' and parents' interactions could help coaches to deal effectively with the young athlete and make parents feel content that they are fulfilling a child-rearing obligation.

Parental support appears to have an undeniable influence on the athlete and on the coach-athlete relationship. Indeed, research has consistently indicated that children and teenagers who perceive more parental support experience greater positive affect from their sport participation (e.g., Brustad, 1988; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988). From a competence motivation perspective (Harter, 1978), parental support, encouragement, and reinforcement provide a platform from which young athletes internalize a sense of competence, control, and intrinsic motivation. In turn, such positive psychosocial responses from the athletes may affect how they interact, communicate, cooperate, and relate with their coaches. Our results suggest that positive reactions from parents are associated with greater levels of interdependence between the coach and the athlete, particularly as it pertains to the emotional tone of the relationship (i.e., closeness).

The findings also revealed that there is a balance to be maintained regarding the degree and nature of influences parents exert on their child and coach. In this study, coaches who perceived parents to be over-involved or over-supportive and athletes who perceived their parents to essentially interfere appear to elicit negative interpersonal feelings and a sense of distancing in the coach-athlete dyad. Indeed, Weiss (1974) has suggested that negative emotions are experienced when social provisions such as opportunities, information, and support are not obtained and managed appropriately. Coaches' and athletes' accounts suggest that parental influences can become excessive and could be perceived as pressure, resulting in negative emotions. Previous research has indicated that excessive parental pressure is related to children's competitive anxiety and attrition from sport (Hellstedt, 1988; Lee & MacLean, 1997; Van Yperen, 1995).

From an interdependence perspective, Kelley and Thibaut (1978) stated that the additional person (in this case the parent of the athlete) in a dyadic relationship (coach-athlete) "epitomizes the social context in which the dyads exist" (p. 243). This statement if transferred into the coach-athlete-parent triad proposes that parents can considerably affect the coach-athlete relationship (its quality and levels of interdependence) through the opportunities, information, and support that they offer. Correspondingly, parents may have the power to make or break the athletic relationship, particularly during the early years of sport participation, where their provisions and assistance are likely to be needed the most.

Although parental influence is a fundamental contributing factor to young athletes' physical and psychosocial development, it gradually changes and diminishes as the athlete grows, matures, and develops (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The reported dyadic withdrawal and dyadic realignment processes are in line with this shift. The dyadic withdrawal evidenced in the parents' interviews suggests that athletes move toward a different type and level of connectedness with the parent, while their associations with the coach

become stronger. Our findings further suggest that during this transitional phase, parents feel isolated and distant from their child's sport participation. This process may involve a conscious renegotiation of interdependence between the parent and the athlete; one would expect this transitional phase to commence when the athlete moves into adolescence or when commitment to their chosen sport is increased, leading to an increased attachment to the coach (e.g., Monsaas, 1985).

Dyadic realignment was also evidenced and reflected in athletes' efforts to develop a social network, which is more in line with their increased interest in sport (e.g., developing friendships with other swimmers and coaches in the club). Athletes may consciously restrict their social interactions within the sport context as a way of enhancing their positive affective experiences (e.g., fulfilling their needs of companionship by means of sharing common interests with other swimmers).

It is important to note that the findings of this study are limited to the sport context, culture, and people to which it studied. Thus, future research is warranted with diverse cultural contexts. Research has shown that the dynamics of family (parent-child relationships) and social relations outside the family are different in individualism (e.g., British, North America) and collectivism (e.g., China, Cyprus) cultures (Triandis, 1995). Thus, the influences parents exert on the coach-athlete dyad may be somewhat different, depending on the culture. Also the sport context, such as individual versus team sports and recreational versus competitive youth sport, may substantially determine the influences parents as well as other network members exert on the coach-athlete dyad. For example, parents of highly talented young athletes who participate at national performance levels may (or wish to) exert more influence on the relationship the child/athlete and the coach develop than on parents of young athletes who simply participate in sport for recreational reasons. Moreover, parents may be more influential on their daughters than on their sons. Research in contexts outside sport has shown that females were more likely than males to be influenced by family network members (e.g., Rogler & Procidano, 1986; Sprecher & Felmler, 1992).

Our study investigated a single social network member whose apparent "psychological significance" was likely to yield strong influences on the coach-athlete dyad; however, because social networks involve a high level of complexity, it is recommended that future research studies investigate simultaneously various social network members (e.g., mother and father) and the connections among them (e.g., mother-father relationship) in relation to the influences they exert on the coach-athlete relationship. It is possible that although children may perceive their parents' contributions differently, mothers' and fathers' contributions may have significant impact onto the young child's relationship with coach and sporting experience more generally. Furthermore, including more members from the family (i.e., parents and siblings) and athletes' friends may help us unravel the multifaceted sources of influences. Another direction is to consider the coaches' network, for example, how coaches' partners (e.g., husband/wife) affect the manner to which coaches operate, communicate, and relate with members of their athletic team. It would also be interesting to examine how, when, and why athletes' and coaches' social networks overlap and interconnect. Finally, such research questions as how the social network of athletes (and coaches) can change as a result of changes in the coach-athlete dyad (e.g., dyadic withdrawal versus dyadic realignment) and what is the role of networks in the dissolution of the coach-athlete relationship are worthy of attention.

In terms of applied issues, the findings suggest that parents may be more influential if they have the capacity to share more information, provide more opportunities to their child and coach, and become aware of the various struggles in the parent-child relational transitions. It is recommended that national governing sport bodies and sport clubs help parents through workshops, seminars, and other forums understand their roles and responsibilities toward the young athlete (and coaches). Sport organizations are working hard to provide high quality coaching for every youngster, but clearly they cannot do it alone. Research shows time after time that young athletes need their parents in order to reach their potential; therefore, parents need to take an active role in their sporting development. Thus, sport organizations by setting up a “parent’s guide of sport involvement” not only acknowledge that parental involvement is crucial in improving young children’s achievement in sport but also assist them toward that goal.

This exploratory study highlights the importance of social networks in influencing the dyadic coach-athlete relationship in youth sport. It is thus important to continue this line of investigation by concentrating on further uncovering the linkages between the social environment and the internal dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship.

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Authors' Notes

¹Sprecher et al. (2002) use the term “processes” to describe the major influences that social networks exert on close dyads. The major processes or influences include opportunities, information, and support. In this study, the emphasis is placed not on examining the mechanisms (as the term “processes” may imply) by which opportunities, information, and support affect the coach-athlete relationship, but on unravelling their substance and content and describing their possible interrelations with the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

²For an in-depth treatment of the notion of interdependence in the coach-athlete relationship, the reader is also referred to Jowett (in press).

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Appendix A
Parent Interviews (Translated from Greek)
Influences of Social Network Members (Parents)
on the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Opportunities

1. Why did you wish your young child to start swimming?
2. What sort of opportunities have you provided to your child in starting and continuing his/her sport participation?
3. In what ways has the organization of the sport enabled or hampered the opportunities you could have possibly provided to your young child?
4. What were the main reasons that determined your decision to select that coach over another for your young child?
5. What do you think is the impact of the opportunities you have provided in determining the developing partnership between your child and his/her coach?

Information

6. How frequently and about what sort of topics do you usually talk with your child and coach?
7. What kind of sport-related information are you likely to supply your child?
8. How well does your child accept your opinion, advise about issues related to her sport?
9. What sort of issues are you less likely to talk about with your child?
10. What do you think is the impact of the information you have provided in determining the developing partnership between your child and his/her coach?

Support

11. How do you generally support your child's efforts to improve in his/her sport?
12. In what ways have you been supportive of the coach's efforts?
13. How do you experience the relationship between the three of you (coach-athlete-parent) in terms of the goals you have set? Do you sometimes pull in different directions or do you feel that you are congruent? Please explain.
14. Have you ever felt inadequate to provide the support needed? Can you please elaborate?
15. What do you think is the impact of the support you have provided in determining the developing partnership between your child and his/her coach?

Appendix B
Coach/Athlete Interviews (Translated from Greek)
Influences of Social Network Members (parents)
on the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Closeness

1. In what ways are feelings of trust and respect a factor of an effective coach-athlete relationship?
2. How have these kinds of feelings been a part of the relationship you have established with your athlete/coach?
3. What situations/circumstances would bring about negative feelings that may harm the relationship and cause you concern? Have you had experience of this? Please explain.

Commitment

4. In what ways is it important to you to be committed to your coach/athlete?
5. What aspects have contributed to committing to your coach/athlete and sport over the years?
6. How would you feel if the current coach-athlete relationship was to be terminated?

Complementarity

7. How do you approach your coach/athlete during a training session?
8. How responsive do you feel to your coach/athlete's requests (instructions, desires)?
9. Has the level of your cooperation ever been challenged and for what reason(s)?

Perceived Parental Influences

Closeness

10. In what ways has your parent/athlete's parent affected the level of trust and respect you have experienced for one another?
11. In your opinion, how can parents become a distraction in developing trust and respect in the coach-athlete relationship?

Commitment

12. In what ways has your parent's/athlete's parent involvement contributed to you feeling committed to your athlete/coach and sport more generally?
13. What circumstances might make you feel that your parent's/athlete's parent commitment is overbearing? Have you ever experienced this? Please explain.

Complementarity

14. How do you think your parent/athlete's parent views the coaching style employed?
15. How do you think your parent/athlete's parent has facilitated or hindered your levels of cooperation?