

Relationship Dynamics and Dimensions of Support for Figure Skaters and Significant Others: Implications for Schooling

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Research pertaining to support given to figure skaters is sparse despite the gruelling and demanding nature of the sport in terms of performance, training, economic and familial pressures (Kestnbaum, 2003). This qualitative study explored perceptions of parents and coaches regarding the types of support they provide, and the perceptions of athletes (figure skaters) regarding the support they receive. A total of 10 figure skaters of international level, 7 parents, and 10 coaches from ice centres across the United Kingdom participated. An interview schedule prompting athletes', parents' and coaches' responses about their perceptions of support was used. An important finding was the rate of attendance in school by elite skaters. Three out of the 10 interviewed had stopped attending school with 1 having no intention of returning. Conversations with other skaters revealed an additional 3 non-attendees in order to focus on their skating full-time. Furthermore, skaters who were in school were expected to take time off school during international and national competitions, receiving their homework assignments through "homework buddies". Adolescence appears to be a source of negative emotions in the relationships formed between all members. Coaches' and parents' opportunities to provide diverse information and advice to skaters appear to be valuable in developing self-determined and confident sport performers. However, discrepancies are apparent in the perceptions of parents and coaches as to the type of support and involvement they provide.

At the recommendation of the National Ice Centre (NIC) in Nottingham, an investigation into the relationships between the elite figure skater, their parents and coaches was carried out as they are seen to be pivotal to the success and enjoyment of the skater. Subsequent literature searches revealed a sparsity in research concerned with figure skating even though the sport is one of the most intense and committed in terms of training and pressures; pressures not only in performance and training, but educational, familial and economic as well (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993).

With the parent still being the significant other in the skater's life, their input into the skater's life is vital. Whilst there is an abundance of research on the role of parents on the development of children, there is only emerging literature about the role parents play on the psychological factors involved in youth sports with the development of the family systems model (Hellstedt, 1995). It is therefore important to conduct an investigation into the types of support provided by the parents and coaches along with the skaters' perceptions of this support. The present study carries out such a study with a view to addressing the issue of human rights and parental involvement in the long hours required for training in elite youth figure skating (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003) with respect to the inevitable "trade-off" for education.

Figure skating

Figure skating, along with gymnastics, shares the highest percentage of television coverage during the past decade as its popularity as a spectator sport has grown (Kestnbaum, 2003). Both sports depict young, lithe bodies that perform seemingly miraculous feats with a gracefulness that captivates viewers, particularly women. As the cameras focus on the elite performer onto the rink skating round, to when he or she walks off the ice into the arms of his or her coach, little information is given to expand public knowledge of the skater's life of how they rose to elite status.

Along with gymnasts, elite figure skaters train on average for eight hours a day, every day, with perhaps, one day off per week. Training to reach elite level can start with children as young as 4 years old with elite status being reached in the teenage years for females and a few years later for males (Ryan, 1996). Education would be administered at the ice rink if provided or in the form of private tuition, or in some cases, missed out entirely due to lack of time or financial resources. Pressure to perform well is highlighted if the financial investments into figure skating were to be taken into account. Costs of on-ice coaches, off-ice coaches for strength and flexibility, a choreographer, costumes, skating blades, competition fees, and travelling expenses make figure skating one of the most expensive sports similar to gymnastics compared to sports such as tennis, cricket or hockey (Kirk et al., 1997).

Due to this intense training regime, the relationship between the coach and athlete is especially vital to the athlete's performance and other areas of life, for example education and family as the coach has a great influence on the athlete.

Significant others

The coach-athlete relationship

The most recent development in the area of coach-athlete (c-a) relationships is that of Jowett and Meek (2000) in their research on the coach-athlete dyad which emphasises Kelley et al.'s (1983) definition that an interpersonal relationship is the situation in which two people's emotions, thoughts and behaviours are interconnected. Jowett and Meek state that this dyad is interdependent and that the main goal is to produce a combined outcome of an improved and high performance. Following on from previous research, it is emphasised that due to the interpersonal nature of this relationship between the coach and the athlete, the quality of this relationship would have a great impact on the possible consequences for both the athlete and the coach, for example performance, self-worth, motivation and enjoyment.

A series of qualitative and quantitative studies were conducted giving rise to the constructs of "Closeness, Commitment and Complementarity" to reflect the relational aspects of emotions, cognitions and behaviour respectively (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). From these constructs, a schematic representation of the c-a relationship was constructed to illustrate its interpersonal nature (figure 1) and were further defined based on themes in Social Psychology on relationships.

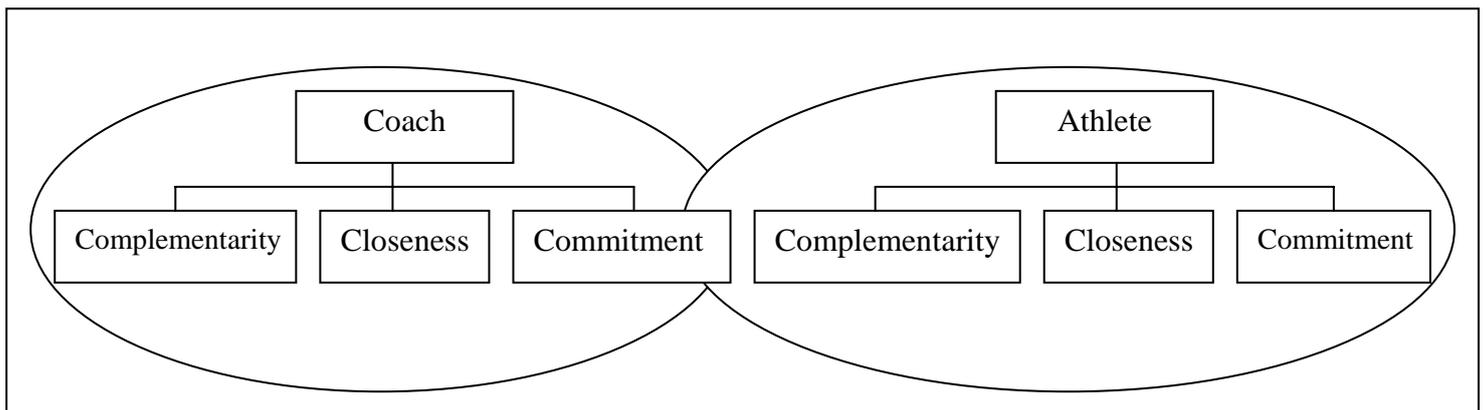


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the coach-athlete relationship (Taken from Jowett, 2002).

"Closeness" refers to the emotional aspect in the dyad and is reflected by feelings such as "liking" or "similarity" (Jowett, 2002). Argyle (1994) associated "liking" with the ability to disclose and exchange information freely, and therefore in the sporting context, the coach and athlete should be able to communicate freely if there is perceived closeness by both members. "Trust", the term used to indicate the confidence that one individual has in another, also facilitates self-disclosure which in turn leads to effective problem solving as each person's needs and concerns are raised, otherwise the lack of trust negatively affects performance (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery & Peterson, 1999). Jowett and Ntoumanis (in press) also included "respect" as another representative of "Closeness" as "respect" indicates acceptance in the relationship of an individual's position in the dyad (Jowett, 2002).

"Commitment" is the intention of an individual to maintain an interpersonal relationship (Rosenblatt, 1977) and therefore reflects the relational aspect of "cognitions". Thus, in the coach-athlete relationship, commitment is the coach's and athlete's intent to maintain their relationship as a working partnership. From this definition, indications of commitment would include accommodations made by either side to counteract any negative impacts made on the relationship by the other party. If these accommodations were not made then the partnership would collapse, negating the "maintenance" aspect of commitment (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik & Lipkus, 1991).

The final, behavioural aspect of interpersonal relationships is denoted by “Complementarity” (Kiesler, 1997). Built from the traditional meaning of the term “to complement”, the coach and athlete would demonstrate complementarity when they complement each other. For example, the coach teaches and the athlete learns or when both are friendly towards each other. Hence, there is reciprocity and correspondence between the two people in the dyad (Kiesler, 1997) and if this occurs, then the relationship will progress in a positive manner (Jowett, 2002).

As two or more members are involved in any given dyad, they would also be able to form perceptions of how the other member views the relationship as well. These two perspectives were based on the relational analysis developed by Laing, Phillipson and Lee (1996) and were named the “direct perspective” and “meta-perspective” to signify an individual’s own perspective and an individual’s perception of another member’s perspective. To exemplify this, the statement made by an athlete, “I like my coach” is the direct perspective of the athlete whereas the statement “My coach likes me” is the meta-perspective of the athlete as it is an assumption of the coach’s emotions. Figure 2 provides a schematic of these perspectives based on Kenny and Acitelli’s (2001) paradigm to measure the effects of bias and accuracy of perceptions simultaneously.

Accuracy of perceptions needs to be accurate for the athlete and coach to feel secure in the dyad. If the athlete were to feel that the coach is not emotionally close or not committed to the relationship, the athlete might seek greater support from elsewhere, for example his or her family and be less satisfied with the coach-athlete relationship. Effort, performance and enjoyment towards the sport might also deteriorate as a result.

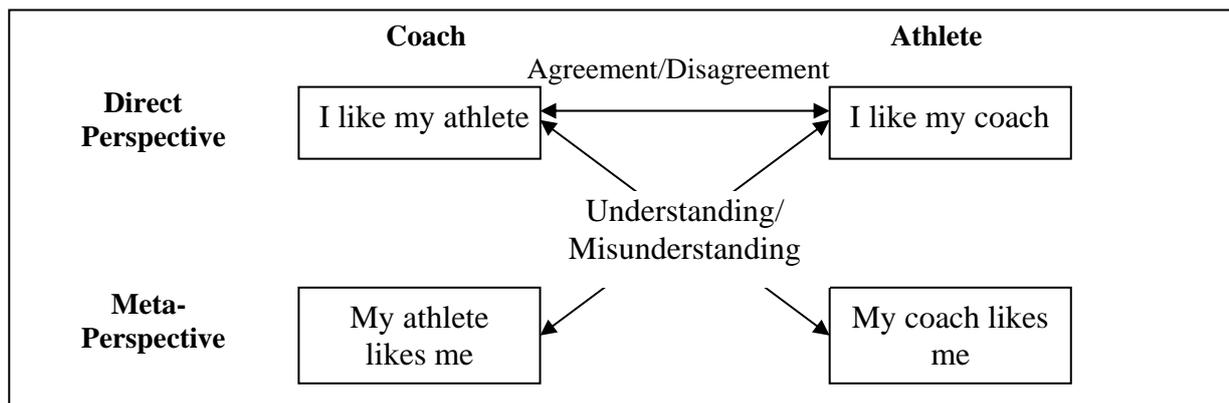


Figure 2. Direct and meta-perspectives of the coach and athlete (cited in Jowett, 2002).

Family dynamics

“The family provides the primary social environment where the athlete can develop an identity, self-esteem and the motivation for athletic success” (Hellstedt, 1995, p.117). The term “significant other” was first coined by Sullivan (1947) who was exploring the socialisation of children. The original use of the term “significant others” was primarily restricted to parents as it was believed that they were the essential people in training and influencing the child. Nowadays the use of the term has generalised to include all others who are believed to have an impact on one’s life, for example, siblings, partners, teachers and coaches (Webster & Sobieszek, 1974).

Previous research on coaching behaviours has led to an emergence of interest in the role of significant others in children’s psychosocial development in sport (Black & Weiss, 1992). Subsequent studies have shown that it is the parents who have the greatest impact due to a combination of the great amount of time spent between parent and child and the necessary high level of parental involvement with their child’s sport (Brustad, 1996; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1985). Examples of such studies include Power and Woolger’s (1994) which demonstrated that parental support was positively correlated with children’s enjoyment and enthusiasm in swimming. Even at Olympic level, athletes who are more successful in their event reported greater levels of family support than those who were less successful, that is, those who failed to perform up to performance predictions and reported more conflict and communication problems (Gould, et al., 1999).

A developmental perspective

Whilst parents are the major influence on introducing a child to sport (Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978), the shift towards the coach is apparent in adolescent years (Higginson, 1985). Athletes progress through a series of changes to different factors in their career as time progresses. Working on the premise that a family is an interacting social system which undergoes constantly changing developmental processes, Hellstedt (1995) assembled the family systems model to assist in assessing the “structural health and developmental maturity” (Hellstedt, 1995, p. 123) of the athlete family. Three distinct phases of development were set out beginning with the “early years”, proposed to last from the age of 4 to 12, through to the “middle years” (ages 13 to 18) and ending with the “later years” (ages 19 to late 20s), each one characterised by differing levels of parental support and differing emphasis on sport (table 1).

Table 1. Summary of developmental events in a family systems model (Hellstedt, 1995).

| Developmental Stage | Emphasis On Sport | Characteristics of Parental Support | Potential difficulties |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Early years (4 to 12 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Playfulness• Fun• Family involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early instruction• Finding appropriate coaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very little |
| Middle years (13 to 18 years) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development of sport specialisation• Commitment to greater training & competition | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transportation• Structure practice time & competitions• Secure best possible coaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conflicts between parents & coaches as transition is negotiated• Frequent changes of coach |
| Later years (19 to late 20s) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Full level of commitment to training and competition | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emotional support from stress of training & competition | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parental isolation due to lower levels of needed support |

Based on the research above, and data whereby the athletic achievements of athletes in varying sports were mapped, Wylleman (2001) related the transitions of athletic proficiency to the ages at which they were obtained on average. Taking more factors into account other than age, a transitional model was proposed. Athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic changes were charted on a model and were reflected in four layers (figure 3).

The top layer represents the stages and transitions athletes face in their athletic development including the transition out of their sport at elite level even though there might still be continuation in the sport by other means, for example coaching, or show events. The second layer reflects the stages occurring at the psychological level. Two developmental tasks have been purported to take place at childhood and adolescence – being psychologically ready for competition and developing a self-identity respectively. The third layer includes shifts that occur in who the athlete considers to be their ‘significant other’ with the most influential group cited at the top of the list. This psychosocial level is based upon conceptual frameworks related to the development of the athletic family (Hellstedt, 1987) and on empirical data on athletes’ interpersonal relationships (Price & Weiss, 2000). The lowest layer describes the typical academic transitions that one goes through and is depicted to show how all aspects of an athlete’s life relate to each other.

Given that changes occur at the psychosocial level during the athletic development of an athlete, it can be presumed that the support given to the athlete will differ as the most significant person in the athlete’s life at one stage will be different from the next. Research needs to be conducted to investigate whether this change affects an athlete’s educational decisions at the critical points of his or her life, that is, whether a coach would place more emphasis on the sporting career and neglect education and whether a parent would advocate education as the first priority.

Taken together, there is a significant role played by the family in an athlete’s sporting life. However, to date, little research has located this in the context of other key relationships in an athlete’s life, such as that between coach and athlete. Of particular interest would be how the c-a relationship correlates with the

parent's role. The present study seeks to address this important consideration by including the athletes' perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship, the parent-athlete relationship and the parent-coach relationship. Moreover, the present study also examines these issues with a view to identifying the key educational implications of a rigorous training regime with particular focus on school attendance and educational participation.

| AGE | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 | 35 | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|----|---------------------------|----|---------------------|----|--|--|
| Athletic Level | Initiation | | Development | | Mastery/Perfection | | Discontinuation | |
| Psychological Level | Childhood | | Adolescence | | Adulthood | | | |
| Psychosocial Level | Parents Siblings Peers | | Peers Coach Parents | | Partner Coach | | Family (Coach) | |
| Academic/ Vocational Level | Primary education | | Secondary education | | Higher education | | Vocational training Professional occupation | |

Figure 3. A developmental model of transitions in sport. (taken from Lavallee, Kremer, Moran & Williams, 2004, p.221).

The coach-athlete-parent triangle

Hellstedt (1987) developed a simple model to represent the interpersonal relationships between the athlete, parent and coach, the athletic triangle (Smoll, 1986). It was purported that a two-person interpersonal relationship system is unstable and that only a third person can stabilise any conflict between two individuals to neutralise the over-involvement of two people with each other. An 'involvement continuum' to "under-involved - moderately involved – over-involved" to categorise the amount of involvement parents have in their child's sport (figure 4).

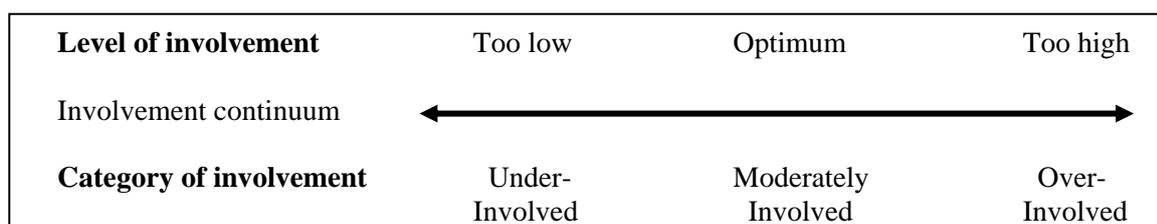


Figure 4. Diagrammatic representation of the involvement continuum proposed by Hellstedt (1978).

Certain characteristics classify parents into one of the three categories. According to Carter and McGoldrick (1980), the boundaries of involvement affect parents and their children in three main areas: financial, functional and emotional. Hence, under-involved parents have a relative lack of involvement in all three areas and over-involved parents are excessively involved in all three areas and tend to have a need that is satisfied through their child's participation in sport. The optimum level of parental commitment is delineated by the moderately-involved parent who guides their child with their decisions but also allows him or her to have a significant involvement in the process. Table 2 summarises examples of parental behaviour in each category.

Since all three players have a significant role to play in this sport, it is important for the parent to recognise his or her own level of involvement and that the coach and the athlete perceives the parent's involvement to be satisfactory as well. If a parent is under-involved, the athlete will not receive adequate support to pursue a skating career at an elite level, whilst over-involvement can suffocate the athlete and undermine the coach's role if the parent takes over that role as well. Therefore, the nature of the coach-athlete-parent triangle will be studied in this investigation to determine whether a "healthy" relationship is established between all members.

Table 2. Characteristics of under-involved, moderately-involved and over-involved parents in their child's Sport (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980).

| Involvement Level | Area Affected | Examples of Parental Behaviour |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Under – involved | Emotional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little emotional support before training/competitions • Lack of enthusiasm at achievements • Minimal interest in conferences with coach about child's improvement in sport |
| | Functional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few volunteer activities, e.g. driving child to competitions/training • Lack of attendance at events • No help in setting goals or giving advice |
| | Financial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal financial investment in equipment/coaching fees, • Emphasis that the child should make their own contribution as it is their own sport |
| Moderately – involved | Emotional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive at events • Pride at achievements but emphasising the importance of effort at events • Interest in conferences with coach about child's development in the sport |
| | Functional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer and support sporting organisation • Firm parental direction • Flexible to allow child's own decision making contributions • Entrust coaching staff to their child's skill development. |
| | Financial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support participation without being excessive • Ask child to contribute a small portion of the cost if possible |
| Over – involved | Emotional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own self-esteem is dependent on child's achievements • Emphasise the winning aspect of sport. • Feelings between the child and parent are somewhat dependent on performance at training/competitions. • Expression of frustration/joy at sidelines to child or to officials/coach • Express disappointment if goals are not met |
| | Functional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive activity involvement e.g. always driving athlete to events/training sessions • Set unrealistic goals without involving their child in the process • "Coach" the child in skill development |
| | Financial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive financial involvement e.g. contributing all costs and buying "the best" equipment in the hope of aiding performance. |

Other Educational Considerations

In addition to key relationship considerations, there are some more direct educational considerations that arise from the demanding training and performance requirements of figure skating. The ages at which figure skaters are subjected to their most rigorous and gruelling training and performance regimes coincide with the critical high school years. Figure skating, similar to gymnastics, is a relatively 'young' sport (Ryan, 1996) in that the ages at the athletic level occur in the midst of athletes' high school years. This raises an important question: at a stage where training would be at its most demanding, do athletes have to make a sacrifice of education or hours spent in training or do they manage to balance the two? This is a focus of the present investigation.

Indeed, the mastery/perfection stage of a figure skater's career overlaps with the period of adolescence. Adolescence is characteristic of physical and psychological changes (Greif & Ulman, 1982). Potential psychological changes could be reflected in confidence levels with early maturers tending to be more poised in social settings with late maturers feeling socially inadequate and inferior, increased moodiness and restlessness (Buchanan, Eccles & Becker, 1992). Changes in parent-child relationships often occur in that adolescents begin to have the desire to become more independent, become less close and are more likely to experience conflicts with their parents, especially with their mothers (Steinberg, 1988) but who would continue to be the significant other of the elite adolescent skater. Would the skater then allow their parents to give firm parental direction as to structuring time and priorities in school and skating? This too is a focus of the present investigation.

Summary and the present study

Although the issue of interpersonal relationships is often paramount to an athlete's success, and is increasingly salient with younger athletes, research on relationships has been biased towards the coach-athlete relationship, comprising 54% of 70 references on relationships, 18% on parent-athlete relationships and only 8% on parent-coach relationships (Wylleman, 2001) even though poor interactions between these groups have been identified in previous research (Hellstedt, 1987).

Due to the complexity of athlete-coach-parent interactions, it is necessary to form a basis of knowledge on the status of the parent-coach-athlete relationship in elite figure skaters and to assess the support given to the athlete by the parent and the perceptions of this support by the other two players in the athletic triangle (Smoll, 1986): the coach and the skater. Simply, it is important to ask the question of how the coach-parent-athlete relationship affects the athlete, how the provided support aids the athlete in his or her sport and influences the relations between the key figures and whether the athlete is able to establish a successful balance between his/her education and skating career.

Based on the background literature, it is postulated that (a) the younger the athlete, the greater the perception of support provided by the parents with regard to their figure skating, in the form of financial, emotional or in other forms specified by the skater, (b) instability in the athletic triangle will be more marked in adolescent skaters than in other age groups as there will be issues of power (Jowett & Meek, under review) and (c) the higher the level of the skater, the greater the sacrifice made in education.

Methodology

A descriptive and exploratory approach based on a qualitative methodology was used to explore fully the issues into the athletic triangle.

Participants

Ten athletes, 7 parents, and 10 coaches agreed to participate in this study. Participation rate was 100% for athletes, 91% for parents and coaches. The participants were selected on the criteria that they were the parent, or coach of one skater who had competed in at least one National Championship event at Novice to Senior level. The skaters needed to have competed in at least one National Championship event to be deemed an "elite figure skater" and is still currently competing.

Ten athletes were interviewed. All were based at the National Ice Centre (NIC) in Nottingham. Four were female, 6 were male, with a mean age of 16.30 (SD = 3.37) years and their ages ranged from 13 to 23 years. One skater had previously competed in the Junior World Championships and another competed in the Senior World Championships. All skaters had competed in International skating competitions apart from the Novice skater.

Seven parents of the athletes who skated at the NIC were interviewed. There were 6 mothers, and 1 father. Their ages ranged from 41 to 52 years with a mean age of 47.71 (SD = 4.54) years. Five parents had only 1 child competing at the current time. The remaining two parents had 2 children competing but at different levels. One was a single father who lived away from his child. In contrast, the 6 mothers were married but one mother lived separately from their family to avoid commuting.

The 10 coaches interviewed were based at rinks in Nottingham (N = 3), Blackburn (N=1), Chelmsford (N=1), Slough, (N=1), Aberdeen (N=1), Dundee (N=1), and Edinburgh (N = 2). The 8 female coaches and 2 male coaches had a mean age of 36.50 (SD = 9.94) years with an age range from 19 to 51 years. All had coached for at least 10 years except for 1 coach having only 1 year of experience. Out of the 10 coaches, one had skaters who lodged with her.

Instruments

Interview questions

An interview schedule that prompted athletes', parents' and coaches' responses to questions about their interpersonal relationship with each other was used. This interview guide was prepared to make sure that similar information was obtained from a number of people by covering the same material. Thus a general conversational style was used during the interview but the focus on particular topic areas was pre-determined. Instead, their interview schedule comprised of three major sections, with each section pertaining to the background of their coach-athlete relationship (5 questions; e.g. "What is your relationship like with your coach, what sort of things about the relationship do you like/dislike?"), the relationship and support of their parents (5 questions; e.g. "What is the relationship with your parents like?") and the impact of the parents on the coach-athlete relationship (5 questions; e.g. "What sort of things does your mother/father talk about with your coach?").

A similar schedule was constructed for the parents, but leaving out aspects of the coach-athlete relationship and only addressing the parents' perceptions of their relationship and support of their child (6 questions; e.g. "What is the relationship with your son/daughter like?"), the involvement of other family members in their child's figure skating (5 questions; e.g. "How many people in the family support your son/daughter in his/her figure skating?"), the parent-coach relationship (6 questions; e.g. "Do you talk to your son/daughter's coach?") and their influence on the coach-athlete relationship (1 question; "Have you ever given any advice to your son/daughter to help him/her relate better to his/her coach? What kind of advice?"). Some introductory questions were used as an ice breaker and addressed their views about their child's coach and the facilities at the Ice Centre (e.g. "What do you think about your son/daughter's coach?" and "What do you think about the facilities at the Ice Centre?").

The interview with the coaches began with two short questions about the background of the coach-athlete relationship (e.g. "What is your relationship like with your athletes in general?") with the main body covering the 3 main Cs of closeness (4 questions; e.g. "How do you develop trust, commitment and respect in your relationship with your athletes?"), co-orientation (5 questions "How well do you think you know/understand your athletes?"), and complementarity (8 questions, e.g. "How do you like your athletes to work with you?") as well as the coach-parent relationship (5 questions; e.g. "Are you happy to talk to your athlete's parents?").

All three interview schedules included a brief introduction in which demographic details were obtained (e.g. age, years in figure skating, years in coaching, level of skating of son/daughter) to allow the participants time to feel more comfortable speaking in front of a dictaphone and to establish some more rapport with them. Before giving the main body of questions, different instructions were given to the athletes, parents and coaches as to how the questions should be answered. To the athletes, they were instructed to think about their present, main coach who was teaching them, when answering questions. This was necessary as all the elite skaters have several coaches for technical instruction on ice, choreography, off-

ice coaches for flexibility, core strength and conditioning. To the parents, if they had more than one child competing in figure skating, then all the questions were answered concerning both children. The coaches were instructed to think about their athletes in general and not any one particular athlete when discussing their relationship with the athletes unless instructed to do so. Elaboration and clarification probes were used when necessary if the answers given were very brief or the researcher felt they needed expansion to obtain better understanding.

Field notes

Field notes were kept during the visits to the NIC to form accounts of “what is being experienced, observed, quotations from the people observed” in a qualitative study (Patton, 1990, p. 242.). They included notes of documentary data (i.e. notices on the notice board outside the ice rink, relevant brochures and leaflets in the NIC about its organisational structure) as well as observational notes. Only experiences that were significant were recorded, and therefore the general demeanour of the athletes interviewed was not noted. These field notes were then used later in conjunction with the results from the content analysis to form conclusions that will be discussed in the latter section of this investigation.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from Loughborough University's Ethical Advisory Committee to carry out the investigation at the NIC. As soon as rapport with the informant was established by numerous visits to the ice centre and consent was obtained from them, skaters' parents if participants were under 18 years of age, and coaches' interviews were conducted. Before the interview began, participants received explanations of the purpose of the study and were asked if they understood the instructions. The interviews were conducted whenever participants had enough spare time to last for the duration of an interview (approximately 30 – 60 minutes) and this took place in a quiet corner of the cafeteria or by the rink side away from other people. Interview questions varied slightly with the flow of discussion in terms of order and wording. They were audio-taped with the participants' consent and were later transcribed *verbatim*. To guarantee anonymity, only the letters A, P and C for athlete, coach and parent with the numbers 1 – 10 were used to identify each participant interviewed.

Field notes were taken at discretion during breaks in between interviews, before and after observing sessions on the ice and during lunch periods in which parents, coaches and skaters gathered around the same cafeteria to take their lunch. If only brief notes were kept, opportunities for their expansion took place at the end of the day when there was a greater time allowance.

Data analysis

Data analysis began only after all interviews had taken place, transcribed and checked. The basic unit of analysis was a quote taken from the transcriptions of the interviews. Each quote was “a statement made by the subject which was self-definable and self-delimiting in the expression of a single, recognizable aspect of the subject's experience” (Cloonan, 1971, p. 117, cited in Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989). The transcribed interviews were analysed by the main researcher using both inductive and deductive processes of reasoning. These themes emerged from clustering the raw data quotes around underlying uniformities by comparing and contrasting each quote with all other quotes, grouping those with similar meaning and separating those with different meanings. This analytical process was flexible so that the categories and sub-categories could be modified and refined until a satisfactory list was established and exhausted from all of the data (Tesch, 1990).

Coder interpretations

A second researcher who had been working with the same group of figure skaters checked that the levels of abstraction accurately represented the raw data units. Employing triangulation method of verifying data increases its validity (Patton, 1990), 10 pages of transcript from each group of participants was provided to the second researcher to categorise into the themes that had been previously defined. The author categorised the identical transcript samples and the 2 versions were compared for the level of agreement for each category. There was an average percentage agreement of 93% with a breakdown of the agreement percentages of the categories and sub-categories. Published research has tended to regard as satisfactory percentage of agreement, or category present agreement, of approximately 85% or more (Smith, Feld, & Franz, 1992).

Results

Results from athletes

To summarise the findings from the content analyses of the athletes' transcripts, it can be concluded that this sample of athletes generally has a positive c-a relationship with age playing a large role in predicting athletes' perceptions of relationships with their parents and coaches.

No differences were found as to whether male and female skaters perceived their father or mother to be their significant other with respect to motivating them in their sport, in contrast to evidence found by Colley, Eglinton and Elliot (1992). The results revealed that 90% of the athletes perceived their mother to be the main parent involved, giving the relevant support required for figure skating, and tending to adhere to the traditional view of maternal and paternal roles with the father earning the money to fund the skating. In terms of informational support, the majority of males (83%) perceived an absence of this support from their parents compared to a minority of females (25%) and may be related to the older ages of the male sample, requiring less support from their parents in this domain (Bloom, 1985). All of the athletes acknowledged the emotional support provided in line with the characteristics of parental support (table 1) given in Hellstedt's (1995) family systems model at the athlete is engaged in full commitment to the sport though at a younger age.

However, teenage elite skaters demonstrated some discontent with their relationship with their parent, shown by one adolescent remarking that contact is not needed between her coach and parent because *"I'm old enough myself now to know what I've got to correct and everything"*. Two other adolescent skaters commented that their mother *"nags"* or remarked that they were unhappy with the amount of recognition they receive for their efforts *"sometimes she doesn't [praise me]"*. This supports previous literature that stipulates the need for parental support in tangible and social terms, conflicts with the growing independence that marks adolescence (Steinberg, 1988) and that changes in mood would also be reflected in increasing negative feelings about their significant others (Buchanan et al., 1992).

One other gender difference appeared in their perceptions of the c-a relationship and the desired characteristics of the c-a relationship. Females viewed complementarity as the most salient aspect of the c-a relationship whilst males favoured closeness, in line with Jowett and Don Carolis (2003) findings that only female athletes' complementarity predicted satisfaction. When asked about their desired c-a relationship characteristics, this difference disappears, with 100% of males and females citing a theme relating to closeness and a marked decrease in issues of co-orientation or complementarity. It can only be assumed that the reason for this might be because these themes are so salient in their present relationships, that the females have developed an expectancy for them to be present and does not mention them.

With respect to education, three out of the 10 skaters interviewed had stopped attending school with one skater having no intention of returning even though he was aged 14. Conversations with other skaters revealed an additional 3 non-attendees in order to focus on their skating full-time. Further questioning as to what their future career would be if they did not attend school, all replied that they would become skating coaches. Furthermore, skaters who were in school were expected to take time off school during international and national competitions, receiving their homework assignments through *"homework buddies"*.

Results from parents

Overall, parents appear to provide the necessary support to their children in order for them to participate in figure skating at an elite level, making sacrifices to bring them to the rink and fund all aspects, e.g. costumes, and coaching fees. Parents' views about what parents should and should not do in their support for their child support Hellstedt's (1987) continuum of the level of parental involvement. Comments about under and over-involved parents cited were in correspondence with characteristics of parental behaviour cited by Carter and McGoldrick (1980). For example, on the subject of under-involvement, one parent said, *"I don't think parents should be under-involved at all because figure skating is a sport which does need a lot of support because it is so costly because it is so time consuming. You need to always take them to the rink, take them to competitions and be there for them, showing that you support them by watching them"* covering all three aspects of financial, functional and emotional examples of under-involved parental behaviour.

Support is seen to vary with age group correlating with the findings from the interviews with athletes. Parents of older children tended to give less transportational support as they are either approaching or are currently in the later years of the family systems model (Hellstedt, 1995). Parents of younger children mentioned education as a concern due to the number of hours spent training. One father mentioned that he persuaded his son to start attending school again at age 13 after dropping out on reaching secondary school level. Other mothers mentioned that they maintained rigorous standards on homework, checking to see that it was completed properly before attending training the next morning.

A leading example of the application of the developmental model of transitions (Wylleman, 2001) comes from a comment made by P2 pertaining to the forms of familial support for his son EH. According to the model, EH, at age 14, should look to his coach and parents for the first sources of support. However, since his parents have separated EH looks to his brother for support, which is noticed by his father on saying, *"I think it's at home he's at, like a shoulder to lean on really"*, "he", being EH's brother.

Results from coaches

The c-a relationship as perceived by the coach can be conceptualised into the 3Cs + 1 model (Jowett, 2002) as demonstrated by the emergence of closeness, complementarity, commitment and co-orientation. Inter-relationships between these constructs are also apparent as illustrated by coaches' responses to the question, *"If there happens to be a lack of mutual-liking between you and your athletes, in what other ways can you enhance the relationship?"* in line with previous literature (Jowett, 2003). Half the coaches mentioned communication as a means to resolve any difficulties, a theme from the construct of co-orientation, *"I think you have to be honest with yourself, sit down and be honest, and you know just say, "Tell me exactly what you think" and "I'll tell you exactly what I think" and I've seen that happen as well you know I've seen relationships going downhill and then started building them up again from there"*, demonstrating self-disclosure and the exchange of information. Twenty percent of coaches cite "professionalism" as a method of overcoming a lack of closeness initially, a theme in the construct of complementarity. However, "closeness" appears to be a vital element in the c-a relationship according to coaches as 70% recommend referring the athlete if a lack of closeness remains after trying other ways of enhancing the relationship with half of these coaches adamant that a c-a relationship wouldn't work at all without mutual liking.

The subject of teenage years is also raised by half the coaches at some stage in the interview, mentioning well documented teenage behaviours of rebellion, and general moodiness (Buchanan, et al., 1992) *"I've had trouble this week... (grimaces). You tend to find, between the ages of 13 – 16 and sometimes a bit older, they go through that stage that every teenager goes through."*

With respect to the relationships formed between the coach and the parent, it is apparent that although communication exists between them, coaches have negative views about parents' behaviours, with 100% citing some aspect of the parent's role in their child's skating that they disagree with, either being pushy or coaching their own child. Thus, the coaches perceive the parent to be over-involved in the areas of emotional and functional roles in accordance with Carter and McGoldrick's (1980) characteristics of over-involved parents (table 2). Specifically, parents "coach" the child in skill development and have also been known to approach judges after the scoring of a competition *"I've got a few like...they wanna ask about judges' results, you know they're like, "I wanna speak to the judges"*. There are times when you talk to them, and if they talk to them, they feel like... but sometimes you upset them". The "ideal" parental role corresponds with the "moderately-involved" parent which sets out the ideal level of support a parent should provide their child in their sport (Hellstedt, 1987).

For each of the groups of participants, a summary of the pertinent issues found from the analyses has been given. The next section integrates these summaries to establish links between all three players in the athletic triangle in order to identify areas of discrepancy and agreement to guide potential practical solutions.

Discussion

Discrepancies in dyads

Vanden Auweele and Wylleman's (1993) statement that each partnership in the athletic triangle calls for further investigation is a relevant claim to this study since poor interactions between each dyad have been identified. Whilst coaches clearly have negative feelings about the behaviour of parents, parents are not as strong in their negativity towards the coaches. One parent has long-term negative feelings towards the coach, but other parents either have had no negative feelings at all, or have had negative feelings in certain situations with one mother recognising that the coach would have had reciprocal feelings. One coach blames her own negative feelings on the parents' competitive behaviour towards each other asking her about the training of other children compared to their own child and believes it is a result of insecurity on the parents' part.

Concerning the c-a relationship, differences occur in perceptions of closeness and co-orientation. Whilst athletes value closeness as a desirable c-a relationship characteristic, coaches are careful to note that the c-a relationship cannot become too close in case respect is lost. Within co-orientation, coaches' allowance for their athletes to have more input into the training programme as they get older and to a certain level is not acknowledged by the athletes. None of the Seniors mention any aspect of co-orientation as a positive coach-athlete relationship characteristic, nor as a desired coach-athlete relationship characteristic.

Using Laing et al.'s (1996) terminology in their development of the relational analysis, the coaches', athletes' and parents' direct and meta-perspectives involve large areas of error as well as accuracy (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003) though the reasoning behind this has been found to be because coaches and athletes are motivated to see each other in the best possible way which bias perceptions (Jowett, & Clark-Carter, 2003). In this setting, parents would be biased in a similar fashion as all three parties are inter-twined based on the paradigm measuring accuracy and bias in the perception of close relationship members (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001).

Adolescence

The most notable and robust finding is that of adolescence being the stimulant for negative emotions in relationships with the parent or coach. From the well-documented adolescent changes in physical and psychological domains (Buchanan et al., 1992), these changes have a knock-on effect in the developmental process of the elite skater as other factors within figure skating aggravate the problems. For example, changes in parent-child relationships during adolescence as a result for the struggle for independence (Steinberg, 1988) would become even more marked by power struggles with the coach as the shift towards the coach is apparent in adolescent years (Higginson, 1985), illustrated by a coach commenting that a lot of parents find it hard to understand the relationship that he or she has with the pupil. This particular coach thought that jealousy was involved, and gave the example that if there was a teenager who had been arguing with his or her mother had come to training crying on the coach's shoulder, the mother would perceive the coach to be supporting the athlete and not the parent. Another coach recognises the vast amount of time the coach has to spend with the elite skater, exacerbating potential jealousy, and acknowledges that the coach probably spends more time with them than their actual parents do and the skaters would probably confide in the coach much more than what they would their parents.

Education sacrifice

An additional source of aggravation stems from the non-normative transitions elite skaters progress through in order to reach elite senior status. Out of the 10 athletes interviewed, 6 athletes did not attend school, although 3 of them are of secondary school level. According to the developmental model of Wylleman et al., (1992; figure 3), adolescents look to their peers, coach and parents for support and are in the process of completing their secondary education. Due to the nature of figure skating where skaters start at a young age, adolescent elite figure skaters are in their mastery stage whilst having their coach and parents for support. Athletes are found to have to make a choice between education and full-time training as exemplified by the current sample by excluding the attendance of secondary school altogether or going to "skate school" which are tutorial classes provided by the NIC.

With almost non-existent non-athletic roles, their peers are not their school mates, but are their fellow skaters revolving their life around skating, which is likely to pose problems later in life as there is a narrow self-identity. The issue of education must be addressed in young elite athletes to prevent potential problems later in life, such as unemployment, through lack of substantial educational qualifications.

Practical implications

What then, are the practical implications for the findings that parents are perceived to be over-involved, whilst they believe themselves to be moderately-involved and for coaches and athletes who view closeness as a vital part of their c-a relationship but where the coaches keep their distance to avoid getting “too close”? What are the consequences for the adolescent skater whose mood swings affect the parents and coaches who support them through their sport? Due to the biases in perceptions of the relationships between each pair in the athletic triangle (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2003), all three parties must gain an objective insight into the other’s perceptions to increase their accuracy of perceptions in order to achieve actual similarity (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). This underscores the importance of maximising the positive aspects of co-orientation by promoting self-disclosure, and information exchange so that there is acceptance between the coach, athlete and parent in order to gain a shared knowledge and understanding of each other (Jowett & Meek, 2000).

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