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Defining appropriateness in coach-athlete sexual relationships: The voice of coaches

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Summary: *The sporting culture, with omnipotent coaches, fierce competition for recognition and funding, and 'win at all cost' ethos, creates an environment conducive to sexual exploitation of athletes. Recent increased public awareness and the development of child protection policies in sport have led to the questioning of previously accepted coach-athlete relationships. This study is an exploratory investigation into male swimming coaches' perceptions of appropriateness of coach-athlete sexual relationships. Sexual relationships with athletes under the age of 16 were unanimously considered totally inappropriate. With regard to sexual relationships with athletes above the age of consent for heterosexual sex, opinions ranged from "totally inappropriate" to "it's a question of civil liberties." These results are discussed in relation to how coaches have adapted their own behaviours in the face of public scrutiny but are still reluctant to restrict the rights of their fellow coaches.*

Introduction

In addition to the papers being presented in this journal issue, existing data clearly indicate that sexual harassment and abuse occur in sport (Bowker, 1998; Brackenridge, 1997a; Kirby, 1995; Lenskyj, 1992; Tomlinson et al., 1997). Researchers have suggested that the culture of sport, specifically the power invested in the coach, facilitates an environment conducive to, and tolerant of, sexual exploitation (Brackenridge, 1997a; Donnelly et al., 1997; McKay et al., 2000). Some researchers (Donnelly et al., 1993; Brackenridge, 1997a; Bowker, 1998) have hypothesised that sexual abuse in sport is not perpetrated only by those with a sexual interest in children but also by coaches who have developed a "predator" mentality, and that abusive attitudes may be normative in some sports. As shown in institutional situations, attitudes of non-abusing authority figures can also influence the likelihood of abuse being reported (Green, 2001). This article reports some of the findings from an exploratory investigation into male swimming coaches' perceptions of appropriateness of coach-athlete sexual relationships.

Objective versus subjective experiences

Central to the debate of what is appropriate and inappropriate in coach-athlete relationships is how sexual harassment and abuse are conceptualised by those involved. Objective assessments of such experience, however, do not always correspond to how the experience is subjectively defined. For example, when researchers have instructed participants to indicate sexually harassing behaviours they had actually experienced, the proportion of female athletes reporting behaviours defined by the researchers as sexual harassment (see for example, Brackenridge, 1997b) ranged from 15% to 55% (Toftegaard Nielson, 2001; Lackey, 1990; Kirby et al., 2000; Volkwein et al., 1997; Fasting et al., 2000). One study, indeed, reported that some athletes who experienced what could be labelled as

sexually harassment reported positive emotional responses related to these coach-athlete interactions (Volkwein et al., 1997). These studies are limited by measuring hypothetical situations that are described in no more than one sentence and that often omit potentially crucial contextual information. When subjective experience is examined, especially that based upon hypothetical scenarios, there is considerable variance over what is considered appropriate.

One approach to assessing subjective experience is to ask participants to indicate which hypothetical behaviours in their view constitute sexual harassment. Sex differences in perceptions of appropriateness emerged in one study which found that female university students were more likely to rate ambiguous behaviours by lecturers as less appropriate than their male counterparts (Garlick, 1994). A later study revealed that 95% of female athletes surveyed perceived sexist comments and verbal or physical advances as at least somewhat harassing (Volkwein et al., 1997). More ambiguous behaviours, such as instructional touching, invoked greater variance in perceptions of harassment in the same study.

In another study involving male and female university sport participants, about half of the athletes experienced sexual comments but just under a third of the athletes labelled such comments as sexual harassment (Toftegaard Nielson, 2001). Some athletes reported that it was just "part of the game." An alternative explanation, supported in research by Fasting and her colleagues (Fasting et al., 2000), is that sport participation may boost one's resiliency against such behaviours. A further explanation offered by Garlick (1994), is that discrepancies between students' perceptions of appropriateness and projected discomfort level, may represent a difference between cognitive and affective responses.

Coaches' perceptions of ambiguity

Whilst Garlick's (1994) and Volkwein et al.'s studies (Volkwein et al., 1997) focused on the perceptions of the recipients of sexual harassment and abuse, two more recent studies in Denmark (Toftegaard Nielson, 2001) and England (Hassall, 2000) have included coaches in their studies. Results from the Danish study have suggested that male and female coaches might be more accepting of behaviours which might be misconstrued, whereas the coaches in the English study were less accepting of ambiguous behaviours compared with university athletes. Contrary to the hypothesis in the English study and the results of Garlick's study (1994), females athletes and coaches perceived ambiguous behaviours as *more* appropriate than did male athletes and coaches. These results suggest that male coaches, in the UK at least, may be becoming more cautious in their coaching due to increased concerns over sexual harassment and abuse.

Coach-athlete sexual relationships

In addition to researching perceptions of ambiguous behaviours, a few studies have also included sexual intercourse as one of the behaviours included in the questionnaires. The pervasiveness of intimate relationships in sport was highlighted by just over a fifth of the 266 respondents in a survey of male and female athletes on the Canadian National Team (Kirby et al., 2000) who reported engaging in sexual intercourse with an authority figure in sport. For 15 (11 female, and 4 male) of these athletes there were clear indications of a coercive relationship, in that the authority figure also verbally bullied or physically assaulted them. For five of these athletes (2 female, and 3 males) the forced sexual intercourse occurred when they were under the age of 16 years. In a study of former high school athletes in Nebraska, 12 of the 264 female respondents had engaged in sexual intercourse with a coach (Lackey, 1990). Ten of these participants defined the encounter as "consenting," again demonstrating the salience of subjective experience in defining abuse. It is likely that some of these athletes

were below the age for consensual sex and that the situation would have been legally defined as statutory rape.

Abuse of trust

Physical force and legal age of consent are two clear criteria for assessing the appropriateness of a coach-athlete sexual relationship. Decisions of appropriateness become much more contentious when discussing sexual relationships between consenting coach-athlete adult pairs. Legally, sexual relationships between consenting coaches and athletes above the age of consent are not prohibited; however, Brackenridge (2001) and Kirby (Kirby et al., 2000) argue adamantly that the implicit power in the coach-athlete relationships negates consent. This power can take many forms including, power over team selection, playing time, access to facilities and competition, and knowledge.

In Canada, an adult athlete could bring charges of sexual assault against a coach, even if the relationship was "consenting." Section 273.1(1) of the Criminal Code of Canada states that consent is negated if "the accused induces the complainant to engage in the activity by using a position of trust, power, or authority." Legislation in England and Wales, where the age for sexual consent is 16, has recently been modified to reflect the vulnerability of 16 and 17 year olds to such power relationships. It is now "an offence for a person aged 18 or over to engage in sexual activity with or directed towards a person under that age if he is in a position of trust in relation to that person" (Home Office, 2000, Chapter 44, Section 1.) The legislation does not specifically define a sports coach as someone in a position of trust; however, earlier guidance issued by the government specifically advises coaches against such relationships (Home Office, 1999).

Sport associations aware of the coach-athlete power imbalance are also starting to advise against such relationships (e.g., Australian Sports Commission (ASC), 1998; Sports

coach UK, 2001). Based on examples from medicine and psychology that strictly forbid practitioner-patient relationships (e.g. American Psychological Association (APA), 1992) the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) in their Coaches Code of Ethics (USOC, 1996, Section 3.04 to 3.06), has a clear policy statement forbidding coaches from coaching former sexual partners and from engaging in sexual intimacies with current and former athletes. Only after the coaching relationship has ceased for two years, and the coach can demonstrate no exploitation, are relationships with former athletes allowed under the policy. It is unclear, however, how the USOC policy is monitored. In Australia, the importance placed on the pursuit of Olympic medals influenced one judge's decision to suspend the sentence of an Australian coach convicted of sexually abusing an under-aged athlete, so that the Olympic contenders would not be disadvantaged by their coach's absence (Southport District Court, 1999). This case was one instance where the sport governing body took a stricter stance than the law and banned the coach from their organisation. More recently in America, two coaches have been dismissed from Olympic coaching duties for overstepping the professional coach-athlete boundary (Wahl et al., 2001).

Despite the power differential and potential for abuse of power in sport, many coaches consider sexual relationships between adult athletes and coaches as completely acceptable. Thus, for example, two-thirds of 172 male and female coaches responding to the survey in Denmark (Toftegaard Nielson, 2001) rated sexual relationships with athletes over the age of 18 years old as acceptable. Forty-one of these coaches reported having engaged in such a relationship.

The current study

Rationale

Studies undertaken by Hassall (2000) and Toftegaard Nielson (2001), which included coaches in their samples, provided an initial description of what was considered appropriate and inappropriate in coaching at the time and location of the studies. Quantitative studies are well suited for eliciting prevalence rates and statistics on predefined variables. Missing from the above studies, however, was an understanding of salient factors affecting coaches' decisions about appropriateness which, in turn, were likely to influence their actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). The inconclusive results suggested that variability in perceptions extended beyond measurable age, gender, and sport role differences. In a new area of enquiry, especially one as complex as exploring definitions of appropriateness, the qualitative data collection methods used in the current study provided participants with the necessary flexibility to fully express their views.

A shared aim of those working with sexual offenders is to prevent further sexual abuse. In order to understand sport coaches who sexually abuse it is imperative to understand how the subculture in which they work affects the decisions they make and how current policies are influencing coaches' perceptions and behaviours. UK Sport, the governing body responsible for developing elite sport in the United Kingdom, expects that:

> *… by 2012 the practice of coaching in the UK will be elevated to a profession acknowledged as central to the development of sport and the fulfillment of individual potential … [and that] … coaching will have: professional and ethical values and inclusive and equitable practice ...* (UK Sport, 2000, p. 5)

If sport governing bodies are to succeed in their aim to increase professional standards for coaches, it is important to understand coaches' current perceptions of appropriateness. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore coaches' constructions of appropriateness with regards to coach-athlete sexual relationships.

Methodology

The methodology for the study was based on the principles of the constructivist revision of grounded theory (Strauss et al., 1990; Strauss et al., 1998) including: (a) developing a research focus of relevance for the participants, (b) allowing analysis to be data driven, as opposed to driven by *a priori* theory, (c) building rather than testing theory (d) recognising the tendency toward researcher bias, and (e) allowing the emerging analysis to dictate further data collection. Rather than assuming an objective perspective of knowledge, this perspective values the subjective experience of the coaches who, through interaction with each other, their athletes and society, create meanings of appropriateness in relation to coach-athlete relationships.

Method

Focus groups were selected as the method for data collection because they are an effective way of gathering information which includes a mix of complex attitudes, behaviours, and past experiences (Morgan et al., 1993). A myth of focus groups is that they are not suitable for the exploration of sensitive topics; rather if conducted properly, focus groups can be beneficial for investigating sensitive issues (Zeller, 1993). In fact, numerous studies have used focus groups to examine sensitive topics, such as sexual intercourse decisions amongst teenage females (Zeller, 1993), sexual harassment in the workplace (Rospenda et al., 1998), definitions of sexual assault (Leonard, 1999), and facilitators and barriers to adult prevention of child sexual abuse (Chasan-Taber et al., 1999).

To reduce unhelpful variability due to sporting subcultures and to facilitate access to participants, this study was conducted with coaches from one sport only, swimming. Several high profile cases of coaches in the UK and Ireland who have been convicted of abusing swimmers in their care meant that coaches were likely to have at least thought about these

issues. Arguably, the most well know case is that of former British Olympic coach, Paul Hickson, who was convicted of child sexual abuse in 1995.Similar to most sport governing bodies at the time the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) did not have a child protection policy and, despite concerns being raised about behaviour prior to the 1988 Olympic Games, the ASA did not act. In a climate that relies on legal age of consent as the minimal standard for appropriateness, the ASA was able to look the other way. This attitude was well represented in a quote by the ASA director of swimming at the time.

> *I distinctly remember asking the question of under-age sex - were any under age? - and they said no. Although it is not to be condoned, there is a big difference between what is illegal and what is not. They were categorical that there was nothing to do with under-age children* (Spencer, 1995).

Hickson was not re-appointed as Olympic coach, and no further action was taken at that time by the ASA.

After Hickson's conviction the ASA in close collaboration with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was one of the first sport governing bodies in England to implement a comprehensive child protection strategy (Brackenridge, 2001). This had two implications for the current study: (a) coaches were likely to have some experience of the policies and procedures put in place from the mid-1990s and (b) the ASA's experience with child protection cases and acceptance of the organisation's responsibility to protect swimmers enhanced the organisational support for this research study.

Participants

Males were selected as the participants for this study, not only because they are over represented in coaching at the high school (Lackey, 1990), university (Acosta et al., 2000), and elite levels (Kirby et al., 2000; West et al., 1990) but also because the majority of reported sexual abuse is by male perpetrators (Fergusson et al., 1999; Grubin, 1998). This does not mean, of course, that abuse perpetrated by female coaches does not occur, or is any

less serious or traumatic. Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) have hypothesised that athletes within the 'stage of imminent achievement' (SIA; high level athletes who have the potential to, but have not yet earned elite honours) may be most vulnerable to coaches who groom them for sexual abuse. Therefore, males coaching swimmers within the range of SIA for swimming (about 13-17 years old) at international, national, and developmental levels were selected for this study.

Participants were selected with the assistance of administrative officials from the ASA and the swimming coaches' trade union (British Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association, BSCTA). Coaches who were identified as meeting the selection criteria (n = 70) were sent a joint letter of introduction from the ASA, BSCTA, and Institute of Swimming Teachers and Coaches which voiced organisational support for the lead researcher and the study. At a national competition, the head of the BSCTA introduced the lead researcher to a number of these coaches, all of whom then agreed to be contacted for the study. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, coaches with former allegations of abuse were specifically excluded from this phase of the research and were invited to participate in an individual interview as part of a follow-up study.

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 19 coaches who were available to meet at a common time and location. The coaches (n = 19) ranged in age from 27 to 67 years old, had been coaching for an average of 17 years, and spent on average 22 hours a week coaching swimming.

Procedures

Recruitment, data collection, and data storage procedures adhered to the Data Protection Act of 1998 and ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society. Once participation was confirmed, participants completed the consent form, confidentiality statement, and demographic questionnaire. The lead

researcher moderated all of the focus group discussions, which lasted approximately one hour each and included 3 to 7 coaches per group.

Pilot testing revealed the difficulties of focusing the discussion while maintaining an inductive approach. Other researchers (e.g. Kitzinger, 1999; Leonard, 1999) have overcome these difficulties through the use of vignettes, a strategy that was successful in the final pilot test. Seven coach-athlete intimate/sexual relationship vignettes were used in this study (see Appendix A.) It was important that the vignettes be not only plausible but also ambiguous enough to leave room for discussion. The vignettes were derived from real scenarios as reported in the media but amalgamated and anonymised. The seven scenarios included: a flirtatious athlete; a coach admitting being attracted to swimmers, but not acting on his feelings; a coach engaging a swimmer in long discussions about non-swimming topics on the drive home; a coach and retired swimmer moving in together as intimate partners; a coach and swimmer getting married; a coach rationalising his sexual relationship with a 15 year old swimmer as "love;" and a coach convicted of sexual misconduct with an under-age swimmer. The scenarios were indeed believable with a number of coaches confirming, "that happens."

Participants were asked collectively to rate the scenarios from the most appropriate to the least appropriate and to discuss thoroughly the reasons for their rankings. Summary and reflective prompts were used to enhance the discussion. In some situations the researcher purposely did not intervene and used silence to generate deeper discussion. The prompts were void of leading questions, and the researcher did not use topic specific prompts such as "age difference" unless the participants introduced them first.

Focus Group Analysis

In line with grounded theory methodology (Glaser et al., 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the aim of the study was not to test theory but

to identify, develop and relate concepts which would contribute to theory building. Grounded theory techniques for analysis (e.g., questioning, microanalysis, comparisons, and writing memos) were used to avoid researcher bias, enhance inductive analysis, and to assist in the discovery of category properties and dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The lead researcher bracketed (Ahern, 1999) her own assumptions about sexual harassment and abuse in sport before conducting the focus groups.

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher as soon after the focus group as possible. Ideally, under the guidance of grounded theory, each focus group would have been completely analysed before conducting the next one. This allows the researchers to build upon each focus group as the study evolves but this was not always practical. In the present study, the initial three focus groups were conducted over a span of four days in conjunction with a major competition. Instead of immediately completing a formal analysis on each focus group, the lead researcher wrote detailed memos after each focus group and noted areas for additional probing.

Analysis began with open-coding, where data were coded inductively and given "in-vivo" labels (Glaser, 1978), that is, they were taken directly from the participants wording when appropriate. In-vivo coding is one method of maintaining a grounded focus (Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Each time a new concept was coded a memo was created to explain the creation of the code. These memos were extremely important in further analysis. Similar concepts were compared and decisions made to drop, merge, adapt, or maintain codes. As coding progressed, the lead researcher met with her co-researchers to discuss the coding and start to develop higher order themes and examine links between categories.

The qualitative data analysis software package, QSR NVIVO (1999) was used to manage the data and emerging analysis. This software facilitates rigorous record keeping and deeper analytical thinking. Specifically, the software is designed to manage complex searches

based on the researcher's emerging theoretical questions. The researcher is more readily able to move analysis from the simple description in open-coding to deeper axial-coding, where links are made between categories, and actions, interactions, and consequences are examined. When the researcher finds that no new codes are emerging from the data and further data collection of the same type would be unlikely to yield any new information, "saturation" has been reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Krueger and Casey (2000) offer a basic rule of conducting three to four focus groups to achieve such saturation.

Results

In examining coaches' perceptions of appropriateness, it is important to acknowledge the wider milieu in swimming. Over the past 10 years, greater public awareness of child sexual abuse in sport has moved the issue to the forefront of policy makers' minds. Swimming in England has progressed over about a ten year period from having no child protection (CP) policies at all, to the ASA with the assistance of the NSPCC leading the way in CP policy development in sport. The intended purpose of CP policies is to create a safer environment in which children can enjoy sport.

One of the central themes from the focus groups was that "perceptions of appropriateness" are often directly in conflict with the coaches' schemas for "good coaching." There is an emerging perception that the restrictions of CP policies are negatively affecting coaching. The remainder of this paper discusses how the coaches are attempting to resolve the conflict between what is considered appropriate and their schema for coaching.

In resolving the conflict between good coaching and "appropriate behaviour" perceptions differed based on their own beliefs and actions versus setting standards or judging other coaches. All of the coaches were aware of the potential to exploit athletes under

the legal age of consent. However, when discussing intimate relationships with athletes above the age of consent, perceptions varied considerably. Some coaches also held higher moral standards for themselves than they did for other coaches, but expressed resistance to the development of any policies that would restrict "civil liberties." Despite not engaging in certain behaviour themselves, they said they would not condemn other coaches for such behaviour.

Continuum of appropriateness

The range of responses regarding relationships with older athletes demonstrates how contentious this topic is for coaches. Not surprisingly, relationships with athletes under the age of consent were considered totally inappropriate. Above the age of consent, the main arguments ranged from a moral absolutist standpoint, by which any relationship with an athlete was considered totally unprofessional due to the opportunities for exploiting an athlete, to a moral relativist standpoint, whereby it would be a restriction on civil liberties if they were not allowed to develop intimate relationships with athletes. In the middle were coaches who recognised both sides of the issues and sought guidance for appropriate behaviour. It is not surprising to see a wide range of perceptions regarding acceptability. What is interesting, however, is to examine factors influencing the coaches' perspectives.

Acting in a socially desirable manner

Central to coaches' decisions about appropriateness was the idea that they must be seen to be acting appropriately. Coaches discussed the problematic "grey areas" of congratulatory touching, instructional touching, and pastoral relationships in relation to increasing public scrutiny over appropriate behaviours. This public scrutiny appears to be a key category in influencing coaches' perceptions about appropriateness, especially in relation

to their own behaviour. For example, many coaches were reluctant to touch athletes, even their own children, for fear of that touch being misconstrued.

> *My daughter, she's 11, and she's big for her age, and um, there's occasion where she might be upset, and I want to put my arm around her, you know as father - daughter. And again, I feel, that I can't do that, I have to just sit down, cause I'm very nervous about what other people might think, who don't know she's my daughter.*

The perception of public scrutiny is also influenced by coach age and marital status, with younger, unmarried coaches feeling greater scrutiny. Although these perceptions of scrutiny may be valid, it should be noted that they are not based on actual risk factors for offending.

Strategies for avoiding false accusations

A common theme throughout the study was the tension between developing a trusting relationship and a fear of good intentions being misconstrued by swimmers, parents, or bystanders. Coaches voiced a general perception of role conflict derived from the need to motivate, mentor, counsel, and coach athletes while at the same time maintaining a professional distance. Acutely aware of the implications that false accusations can have for one's career, coaches actively avoided putting themselves in situations where accusations might arise from disgruntled parents and swimmers or malicious bystanders. Precautions included creating an open environment. This was achieved by reducing or eliminating time alone with swimmers and inviting club managers to attend coach-swimmer meetings. Managing relationship boundaries by not favouring any one swimmer, and keeping a physical and emotional distance were other strategies adopted for avoiding false accusations. Finally, some coaches actively followed club, union, and governing body guidelines in the hope of avoiding false allegations.

Evaluating relationship consequences and coaching priorities

Public scrutiny and fears of false accusations provided coaches with reasons for not personally becoming involved with adult swimmers, even thought they did not necessarily

perceive such involvement as inappropriate. In discussing appropriateness of legal

relationships, coaches evaluated the consequences of such relationships beyond the negative

consequences of scrutiny and false allegations. The potential effect on the team and the

individual's performance were key factors in deciding the appropriateness of a relationship. It

was recognised that the first responsibility was to the swimmer's sporting development. In

the absence of negative consequences, the coach's civil rights to develop intimate

relationships prevailed.

> *But if that relationship was formed through mutual attraction, and over time, two people getting to know each other, with no detrimental effects. Um, then I don't see the problem with that. I think, you know, yeah, you have to take the moral high ground. But, there's also, you have to start living your life at some point. You know, and if the only chance to socially interact with people, as a coach, is with athletes of a sensible age, and something materialises out of that, then you know, people go to night clubs and form relationships. You know, everyone has to have that chance of finding a partner, however, it happens.*

Acknowledging the power imbalance

Some of the coaches, however, put the athlete's welfare before their own and

acknowledged that relationships with their performers were potentially unequal and might

constitute an abuse of trust. Interestingly, only a few coaches felt that such relationships were

absolutely inappropriate; the other coaches had a relativist ontology by which they expected

themselves to hold higher moral standards than they expected of their peers.

> *It's more from a professional point of view myself, but if, if say, [the coach] was 30, and there was a 22, 23 year old swimmer in the programme, I'd be like, 'Fair play.' I wouldn't do it, but I'd be like 'fair play.'*

Reluctance to interfere

Coaches were especially reluctant to judge other coaches' behaviours as inappropriate

or to interfere with potentially inappropriate coaching behaviours. The reluctance to interfere

was magnified by awareness of the damage unfounded allegations can cause. Difficulties in

assessing intention, a key category identified by the coaches for determining appropriateness,

further facilitated an environment of complacency. Furthermore, it was understandable that

coaches did not want to take on the role of reporting suspected abuse when doing so was not in their job description. For example, after being asked to counsel another coach about inappropriate behaviour, one coach commented,

> *I, at that meet, was just another coach…you know, and it's not up to me, to go and tell somebody, of the concern, a fellow coach, I'm not his senior coach, I'm not his mentor, I'm not involved in his club, so I don't find, I felt it was them who had to deal with the situation as they felt appropriate. They did nothing.*

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore coaches' perceptions of appropriateness in relation to coach-athlete sexual relationships. The rich discussions elicited through four focus groups illustrate the complex nature of defining appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in a sporting relationship. Not surprisingly, coaches' perceptions of sexual relationships before the age of consent were in line with the law. Discussion about legal relationships, however, encouraged greater debate of factors contributing to 'appropriateness'. Analysing how coaches reacted to public scrutiny and how they judged their fellow coaches also provided valuable information about the coaches' constructions of appropriateness.

In general, a higher standard was held for one's own behaviour compared with that expected of other coaches. On a personal level, there was a willingness to adapt to the pressures from the scrutiny generated by greater awareness of child sexual abuse and the emergence of child protection policies. The 'true' perception of appropriateness, however, was more evident as coaches discussed appropriateness in terms of judging their coaching peers. Awareness of career-damaging false allegations, recognition of job roles, and attempts at maintaining civil liberties contributed to the reluctance to interfere when suspicions of abuse arose.

Working coaches are well placed to influence the social acceptability or otherwise of potentially harassing and abusive behaviours in sport. When coaches adhere to professional

standards these are likely to reflect external inhibitors restricting perpetrators from abusing in sport (Brackenridge et al., 1999; Finkelhor et al., 1986). However, the emerging data from this study indicate that, whilst coaches may be willing to change their own behaviour, they are reluctant to interfere with that of their peers. This is underpinned by a general feeling that CP policies and public scrutiny are contributing to coaches questioning what it means to coach. Strategies that they formerly considered 'good practice' are now scrutinised because a few coaches have used these strategies with ill intentions. Future research should, therefore, include one-to-one interviews with working coaches to investigate further how coaches' perceptions of appropriateness are changing. Interviews with convicted coaches are also needed to examine contextual factors in sport that may contribute to perpetrator motivation and internal and external inhibitors faced by perpetrators in sport. Finally, theory development in this area will benefit from research examining cross-sport differences, female abusers, and recreational level abuse in sport.

Appendix A: The vignettes

Drive home

Simon sometimes drives several of the swimmers home after training. He is becoming friends with one swimmer, Adi, who is more mature than the others. He drops Adi off last, and they often sit in front of Adi's house talking about swimming, politics, religion, etc.

Attracted to swimmers

Tim has been coaching swimming for many years. Sometimes he finds himself attracted to a swimmer. He says "maybe it's infatuation, but at the end of the day, I keep it to myself."

Moving in

After swimming for Max for 4 years, Chris was very attracted to Max. Upon retirement from competitive swimming, Chris agreed to "see" Max outside of swimming. Within a month, they were living together.

Flirtatious swimmer

Pat felt that the coach might be interested in more than a coaching relationship. Pat isn't interested in anything romantic, but often flirts with the coach, knowing that the coach's interest might result in more attention during training.

Marriage

Trevor kept a sexual relationship with one of his swimmers secret. When the club found out, he was asked to resign, but half of the parents were keen for him to stay. He went on to have a sexual relationship with another swimmer whom he married. They had 2 children before divorcing 4 years later.

Rationalising "It's Love"

Explaining his sexual relationship with an under-aged swimmer, one coach said, "When you have someone you spend hundreds of hours with, when they give you blood, sweat, tears, their lives, you become close. You become attached to them. I think that's human nature, and I don't think it has anything to do with being fifty or being fifteen. It's human nature to love someone who gives themselves to you."

Sexual misconduct conviction

After coaching a number of swimmers to elite standards, Mark pleaded guilty to an accusation of sexual misconduct with an underaged swimmer from 12 years earlier. In addition to a prison sentence, Mark was banned from NGB funding and endorsements.

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