

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Touch as a mediator of relationships in the sports coaching profession

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Abstract

Background: Based on the theories of interactional touch and interpersonal relationships, touch can be an important part of the coaching profession. **Objective:** The research aimed to identify and describe what touch means in the coach-athlete relationship from the coach's perspective. There is widespread ignorance of the law and a lax approach to intimate contact with athletes in the sport environment. The main research question was formulated as follows: What does touch mean in the coach-athlete relationship from the coach's perspective? **Methods:** This is qualitative research conducted in the form of a multiple case study, whose unit is the case – the coach and their perception of touch in the coaching profession. Five coaches were selected and interviewed in depth in semi-structured interviews. Three men and two women coached floorball, weightlifting, handball, ice hockey and basketball. Three were head coaches, two were conditioning coaches, and their average age was 39. The coaches work in the Czech sports environment and four of them have an average of 8.5 years of experience with national teams. The coaches' statements were analysed using data coding, clustering and pattern capture methods. **Results:** Two main categories were identified: risk-safety, and intimacy. Both main categories are characterised by the dimension of measure. Risk-safety includes the subcategories: coach self-reflection, form of touch, pressure of touch and location of the touch on the body. Intimacy contains the subcategory of the level of the coach-athlete relationship. A "touch-based coach-athlete relationship model" was created to express the hierarchy and relationships between the main categories and subcategories. **Conclusions:** The results demonstrated that touch and self-reflection in the coaching profession are important mediators of the coach-athlete relationship. Specific forms of these mediators can be observed in the risk-safety dimension, and the intimacy dimension in the coach-athlete relationship.

Keywords: coach, athlete, touch, relationship, sexuality

Introduction

The sports coaching profession encompasses the theories and principles of sports training, intervention programmes (Lyle & Cushion, 2016), as well as specific cooperation between the athlete/team coach (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). Lyle and Cushion (2016) recommend using the term "the coaching process", which refers to the contract/agreement concluded by the athlete and the coach, as well as the operationalisation of this agreement. The cooperation between the coach and the athlete is based on interpersonal relationships. At a general level, three fundamental theories of interpersonal relations have been described – personal relationship theory (Kelley, 1986), social exchange theory and interdependence theory, both developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) describes the interaction within interpersonal relationships as a means of achieving the highest possible interpersonal gain while simultaneously minimising losses. According to this theory, we chose an interpersonal relationship with respect to these gains and losses. When evaluating the "success" of a relationship, a

comparison of other partner relationships in the available social circle plays a role. Similarly, the theory of mutual dependence (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) is embedded, based on the concept of social exchange theory. In this case, a gain in a relationship with another person is characterised by the degree of satisfaction of needs, positive emotional experience and the individual's benefit in that relationship. The difference with the social exchange theory is the move away from selfish personal gain (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The personal relationship theory of H. H. Kelley (1986) views the personal relationship as specific and proximate. It is as a result of the proximity that the relationship becomes personal and affects us strongly and in the long term. A personal relationship can exhibit a high degree of mutual dependence, but at the same time, it can be filled with tension, conflict, etc. Another characteristic of a personal relationship can be its duration, which is determined by commitment. Commitment implies the resilience and longevity of a relationship, and if an individual experiences it, they have a strong need to maintain a close relationship with their partner (Smith & Mackie, 2000). The above theories relate to interpersonal relationships, their specifics

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and emotions. The specifics of the coach-athlete relationship are determined, among other things, by the power of the coach, in which the factors of dependence and subordination play a role that significantly influence the athlete's experience and shape his or her personality.

Research in the area of the coach-athlete relationship has, among other things, focused on verifying the effectiveness of theories involving dyadic interactions and developing more effective models. For example, Shepherd et al. (2006) sought to clarify interpersonal relationships in sports using reversal theory, which is a structural phenomenological theory of personality, motivation and emotion in the field of psychology. Harvanová and Štěřbová (2018) examined satisfaction in the partner dyad in sport dance, and Jowett et al. (2012) also examined the connection between the quality of the coach-athlete relationship and athlete satisfaction. As a result, dimensions of collective efficacy, such as unity, preparation, and ability were found to be the best mediators. The subject of the research is also the factors that influence the relationship between the coach and the athlete during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings showed that members of a well-functioning dyad made sense of their interpersonal relationships in a dynamic way, which included quality communication between the parties involved (Philippe et al., 2020). Athletes live in a high-pressure environment, and supportive relationships with coaches are critical to athletic performance and adaptation to stress (Burns et al., 2019).

Non-verbal communication (facial expressions, gestures, haptics, proxemics, posturing) can be considered an important factor in interpersonal relationships and has received more research focus in recent years (Mehrabian, 2017). According to Field (2014), touch is the most social of all our senses and usually represents interaction with another person. Human touch is also a fundamental aspect of human emotional life that affects our mood, health and well-being (Field, 2014). Studies report that nonverbal communication differs after successful and unsuccessful sporting performances (Moesch et al., 2015; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008). Several theories have been described to explain how touch works and why it is important.

To understand coach-athlete communication as a process, a model based on four basic elements can be used: the transmitter; the information; the channel of information transfer; and the receiver (Van Cuienburg et al., 2000, as cited in Predoiu et al., 2019).

In the training process, coaches need to make effective communication decisions to achieve set goals. In this regard, the ability to empathize (Predoiu et al., 2019) and social support (Kassing & Anderson, 2014) are important.

If these "principles" are followed, we can talk about communication responsibility, which is characterised, among other things, by coaches being careful about what, how and when they communicate with athletes (Predoiu et al., 2019). Coaches' communication has a direct impact on the success or failure of the athlete, but also their sporting life (Kassing & Anderson, 2014).

Touch has a strong influence on communication, which is important for creating and maintaining relationships,

and can be used as a means of expressing emotions such as affection, support and sympathy, as well as a means of confirmation and reassurance (Field, 2014). According to the author, touch is an essential part of human interaction and its absence has a negative effect on the emotional and social development of the individual. It is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is important for many emotional, social and physiological processes.

Touch research in a sports environment has focused on cooperation and sporting performance. Cooperative touch behaviours between teammates, such as high-fives and group hugging, can be beneficial to athletic performance (Kraus et al., 2010). For example, early season touch predicted higher individual and team performance later in the season, even after accounting for player status, preseason expectations, and early season performance (Field, 2014). A limitation of these studies is the focus on touching between athletes. Furthermore, gender has been found to have a moderate effect on the types of touching that participants perform (Kneidinger et al., 2001). Women perform more hugs and group touches, while men were found to use their hands more frequently for touches directed at different parts of the body. These differences between men and women are probably because they convey different messages through this form of communication.

In the case of research focused on touch exclusively in the coach-athlete relationship, it appears that both coaches and athletes consider touch to be important and even necessary in the sports environment, provided that it is individualised and contextualised, that is, the touch is preceded by the athlete's consent and the coach justifies its use in relation to the specific sporting situation (Kerr et al., 2015). Inappropriate touching is a risk that can occur in a sporting environment (Brackenridge, 2001). Coaches have considerable power and influence over their athletes, which can make it difficult for athletes to assert their own boundaries or talk about uncomfortable situations. Therefore, it is essential for coaches to be aware of the power dynamics at play and to ensure that they do not abuse their position of authority.

Nielsen (2001) conducted research to establish the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by coaches including the types of behaviour expected to lead to sexual abuse. A significant number of athletes reported that they had experienced various types of inappropriate behaviour by coaches during their sporting careers. Other important findings include widespread ignorance of legal regulations and a lax approach to intimate contact with athletes. Sexual violence in sports and how to support the victims of such violence is further explored by Imrie (2022). More generally, our topic can be approached through cultural sport psychology approach, which, for example, posits that self-identification may change in different socio-cultural contexts (Fisher et al., 2009). It also explores the importance of factors such as gender, race, social class or sport identity (McGannon & Johnson, 2009).

Our research focuses on a specific type of non-verbal communication – touch between coaches and athletes from the coach's perspective. The research aimed to identify and describe what touch means in the coach-athlete relationship

from the coaches's perspective. The main research question was formulated as follows: What does touch mean in the coach-athlete relationship from the coach's perspective?

Methods

Five coaches participated in the research (see Table 1), three of whom worked in different sports (women's floorball, women's handball, women's and men's weightlifting) across a range of ages including children, and two who were fitness coaches working in ice hockey and basketball with athletes regardless of age and gender. All the coaches were citizens of the Czech Republic, where they also worked professionally. In the Czech environment, a fitness trainer focuses on the conditioning component of sports training (conditioning coach). The fitness trainers in our research sample have a university degree. This is a coaching profession – coach. Three coaches had been working in the position of head coach for at least five years and four coaches have experience with national teams. The age range was 27 to 56 years and the average was 39.

The research project focused on the issue of sexuality in sports practice, was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Physical Culture of Palacký University Olomouc (under ref. No. 83/2021). The participants signed the informed consent.

The research sample was selected intentionally to meet the criteria of heterogeneity in terms of the sports sector, type of sport (individual, team), gender, age and performance level of the trained athletes as well as the position or focus of the coach (head coach, fitness coach). As part of the sampling strategy, we adopted the principle “maximum variation sampling” (Meyer & Mayrhofer, 2022, p. 277).

This is a qualitative investigation in the form of a multi-case study, the unit of which is the case – the coach and his/her perception of touch in the coaching profession. Concerning the selection of research methods, emphasis was placed on researcher triangulation, which involves the participation of two or more, in our case three, researchers to obtain

multiple findings (Carter et al., 2014). The method of data collection was interviews, with an emphasis on the depth of each interview. In-depth interviews are useful in obtaining detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviours (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Carter et al., 2014). The type of semi-structured in-depth interviews is the most used for qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The interviews were conducted by three researchers from the fields of psychology and coaching. The semi-structured interview included 28 open-ended questions and lasted on average 1 hour and 40 minutes. Emphasis was placed on the anonymity of the respondents, including the use of a soundproof room at the authors' workplace. The interviews were audio recorded on a digital voice recorder. The interviews were transcribed into text and the data was subsequently analysed. Data coding was used to analyse the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The codes from the units were merged using the clustering method and the pattern capture method was also used.

We chose a continuous data analysis to get as close as possible to the point where no new categories or themes emerged during data collection, which DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) describe as the ideal state. This iterative process of data collection and analysis did not affect the structure of the topics and questions that were compiled for the interviews in the preparatory phase of the research.

Results

The research framework consisted of theories of personal relationships (Kelley, 1986), interdependence (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), social exchange (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and interactional touch (Field, 2014). The semi-structured interviews yield categories (main categories, subcategories) which are hierarchically ordered and compiled according to the meta-analysis of the coaches' statements. The relevant terms are assigned to each category. The overview Table 2 shows the main categories and subcategories including relevant terms and their frequency of occurrence in interviews.

Table 1 Demographic data of coaches

Coach	Sex	Age	Position	Sport	Age and gender of wards	Experience
Coach 1	Female	43	Head coach	Floorball	From the age of 12, men and women	16 years head coach
Coach 2	Male	56	Head coach	Weightlifting	Juniors, men and women	National team, 20 years head coach
Coach 3	Male	37	Head coach	Handball	Adults, women	National team, 10 years head coach
Coach 4	Female	27	Fitness coach	Ice hockey	From the age of 12, men and women	National team, 4 years
Coach 5	Male	33	Fitness coach	Basketball	From the age of 12, men and women	National team, 8 years

Table 2 Touch and its meaning from the coach's perspective: Categories, terms and frequency of occurrence in interviews

Categories and subcategories	Terms	Frequency of occurrence
I Risk-safety		
Coach's self-reflection	Violation of norms, manipulation, resistance to education, ability to empathize, risk prevention	111
Form of touch	Sexual – violent and harassing, caring, nurturing, massage, activation-motivational, rescue-helping, instructional-helping	76
Touch pressure	Strong, optimal, weak	9
Place of touch	Chest, buttocks, thighs, abdomen, hips, back, legs, arms	37
II Level of intimacy high-low		
Level of relationship coach-athlete	Sexual – harassment-abuse, partner, friendly, professional	43

Risk-safety with the dimension of the measure was identified as the main category, namely for the subcategories of coach self-reflection, form of touch, pressure of touch, and place of touch on the body. Another main category is intimacy with the dimension of measure, and the level of the coach-athlete relationship is the subcategory. The terms are divided into three groups according to the level of risk/safety and high/low level of intimacy. Figure 1 expresses the hierarchy and relationships between the main categories and subcategories mentioned above. The coach's self-reflection moderates the shape, pressure and place of touch on the body, as well as the level of the coach-athlete relationship. The subcategories of the form of touch, pressure of touch and place of touch on the body are related to the level of the coach-athlete relationship. How the coach touches the athlete is determined by the coach's self-reflection and the level of the coach-athlete relationship. The degree of self-reflection of the coach simultaneously determines the level of the coach-athlete relationship. The degree of risk-safety and intimacy in the coach-athlete relationship is expressed in dark grey, grey and white colours.

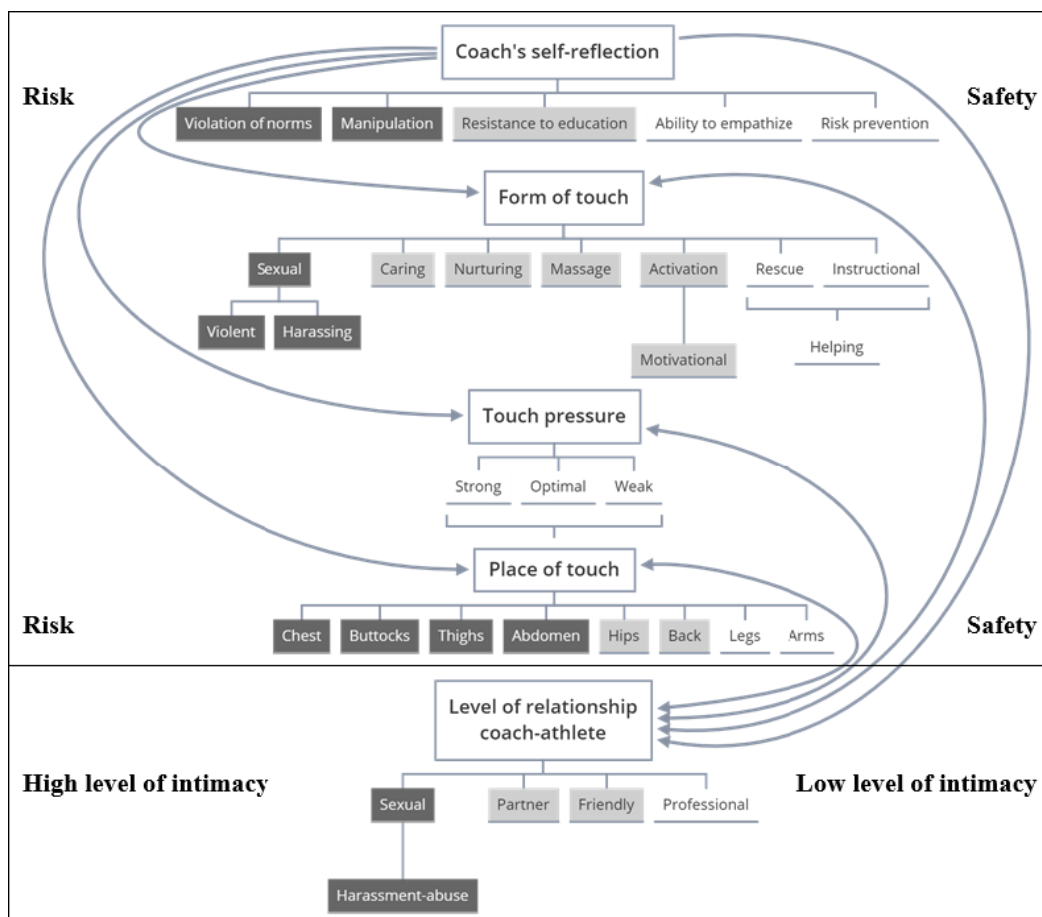
The coach's self-reflection subcategory focuses on the coach's ability to reflect on his/her own actions and communication. It includes awareness of one's own attitudes, values and limitations, and the ability to adapt to the individual needs of the athlete. Coaches consider violation of norms and manipulation to be risky behaviour, as evidenced by, for example, the following statements: "the

risk is...when the coach is not a professional", "the coach does not behave in a gentlemanly manner", and "what the coaches should be careful about is often violated and, unfortunately, on purpose". They see a lower level of risk in resistance to training and rate the ability to empathise and prevent risks as safe.

The subcategory of the form of touch describes how the coach uses touch in communicating with the athlete. In relation to the form of touch, the results show that: "after a good performance, the coaches hug their students, yes, there are a lot of expressions that could be perceived as sexual". Sexual touch, which can be violent and harassing, is considered risky. According to the trainers, caring, nurturing, massage and activating-motivating touches are less risky. They then perceive rescue and instructional touches as safe, both of which are perceived as helpful: "perhaps correcting the correct position in some special exercises is safe", "I want to position the players somewhere in a certain way or show them how to stand somewhere, it's a kind of natural movement that goes with coaching".

In the touch pressure subcategory according to the coaches, it is possible to distinguish between strong, optimal and weak touch pressure, depending on the goal of the touch procedure. In these cases, however, the level of risk and safety cannot be separately distinguished without information about the form or location of the touch on the body: "that I actually catch them and sometimes they just need to feel it, that I touch them, that I squish them".

Figure 1 Touch-based coach-athlete relationship model



The subcategory of body touch location focuses on specific places on the athlete's body that the coach touches as part of the coaching interaction. It includes areas of risk, the chest, buttocks, thighs and abdomen: "Inappropriate is all touching of, I don't know about, intimate parts, all touching like that, but again as unwanted touches". The coaches classify the hips and back as less risky: "Someone needs a pat on the back to tell them, yeah, you're good". Legs and hands are considered safe places to touch.

In the subcategory of the level of the coach-athlete relationship, the riskiest level of the relationship is sexual, which includes harassment-abuse: "the coach came in, the player was injured, so when the player is injured during the match, the coach can come in there and looks at her and start patting her on the butt and says, that's good. Like it was targeted, when he behaved like that, when it all added up, it was targeted, it wasn't about calming the player down, but the goal was a little bit of harassment". The levels of partnership and friendship are less risky: "I certainly remember friendship between the trainer and the client ... yes, yes ... which, of course, did not have the subtext of any kind of harassment or harassment ... there was simply some kind of ... relationship between them ... the relationship later turned into marital relationship". The only safe level of relationship between the coach and athlete is the professional level. This is related, for example, to the coach's statement about mindfulness and consistently maintaining the boundaries of the relationship or professionalism: "and the relationship simply had some limits... I simply just brushed it off or gave some looks or something like that or that behaviour".

Discussion

The line between risk and safety is perceived very subjectively by the coaches. In our case, safety means psychological safety. According to Cunningham et al. (2014), psychological safety refers to the feeling that one can show and express the self without fear of negative consequences for self-image, status, or career. Touching that may be safety or instructional in the training process may contain hidden and risky intentions, which undermines psychological safety. Safety and risk can also be seen as factors that are reciprocally diminished by their presence, that is, the more safety, the less risk and vice versa. Touch has a reciprocal position to the coach-athlete relationship, thus influencing each other and determining the level of their relationship.

Recently, there has been an emerging trend to limit or avoid touch in the coach-athlete relationship to minimise the risks associated with sexual harassment and abuse (Bringer et al., 2002; Piper et al., 2013). According to Johansson (2013), romantic and consensual sexual relationships between coaches and athletes are commonly accepted, although more and more sports organisations are discouraging or banning such relationships. In coach-athlete relationships, the symmetry of their communication may be evident. Specifically, athletes in the Cranmer and Myers (2015) study showed higher quality relationships with coaches and greater satisfaction when they had a high

degree of symmetry in their communication with their coach. Research shows that sexual relations between a coach and an athlete cannot be classified as sexual abuse unless the criteria for such behaviour are met. However, the risks of such relationships are not negligible, as pointed out by Fasting and Brackenridge (2009). They present a typology of the trainer-perpetrator of sexual abuse and emphasize the importance of validating the phenomenon against a range of possible manifestations of sexual harassment that might otherwise escape attention. On the other hand, there may be growing distrust of coaches' motives related to physical touch and concerns about sexual misconduct by the coaches themselves. Compared to other authors (Stansbury et al., 2012), in our case the notion of negative touch is identical to risky touch, whereas positive touch is safe touch. Safe touch is justified touch and risky touch is unjustified touch. We have examined the coach-athlete relationship, even in the implementation team, some individuals may be exposed to the same risk/safety.

According to the coaches in our research, there are clear indications that a coach-athlete sexual relationship is highly risky, unhealthy or even prohibited by law. The main one is the age of the athlete. Consistent with this finding is a study in which coaches' sexual relationships with athletes under the age of 16 were unanimously considered completely inappropriate (Bringer et al., 2002). When it came to sexual relations with older athletes, opinions ranged from "completely inappropriate" to "it's a question of civil liberties". Sexual relationships between coach and athlete, which the parties involved experience as consensual and mutually fulfilling, need to be further investigated.

Another essential level of the relationship between the athlete and the coach is the form of friendship, which is desirable to support common sporting goals. Deep friendships cannot occur between athletes and coaches because the condition of equality between the parties to the relationship is not met. Drewe (2002) introduces the terms "friends of good, friends of pleasure and friends of utility" to explore the appropriate boundaries of coach-athlete relationships. A study by Cranmer et al. (2017) highlights the use of sharing-based approaches to understand interactions between athletes and coaches.

The research also shows the importance of the personality characteristics of both coaches and athletes, which can be important in determining the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (Aşçi et al., 2015). Everything a coach thinks and does is connected to his/her personal life. As a result, coaches should develop self-reflection of their personal sports stories as this will help them recognise and acknowledge how various influences have either limited or enhanced their lives (Hardman et al., 2010). The attitude of our coaches is that in all professional matters, the coach should act in such a way as to set a good example by word and deed. They used the label of being a professional coach to describe this characteristic.

According to Kneidinger et al. (2001), behaviour in sporting environments differs from other public environments. Parent and Demers (2011) identified the sports context as conducive to sexual abuse. This context includes

a power dynamic between the coach and athlete that creates a normative culture of abuse within a broader culture of silence and inaction. It was not evident from the research findings that the sporting environment directly promotes sexual harassment and abuse. Nevertheless, according to the coaches, there is a consensus in the Czech sports environment that athletes and coaches are not sufficiently educated or trained in this issue. This is consistent with Brackenridge (2001), Brackenridge and Fasting (2002) and Fasting et al. (2007), who add to this by stating that both research and professional development in the field of sports psychology are needed to address these issues. Furthermore, it is possible to improve communication styles, attitudes, gestures and group management techniques as some of the elements of coaching in sports can be done precisely through preventive education in the area of sexual harassment and abuse (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009), thereby supporting the importance of coach self-reflection.

The sports coach plays an important role in promoting emotional well-being through physical contact. However, the moral panic surrounding this has led to coaches increasingly limiting their interactions with young athletes (Field, 2014). Touch is an integral part of the coaching profession. Athletes do not negatively perceive physical contact from their coach but rather consider it a necessary part of quality coaching (Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2016).

In this context, it may be important to establish codes of ethical behaviour that include clear boundaries for what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in the coach-athlete relationship, not only for touch but also for other types of behaviour (e.g., intimate relationships, verbal interactions, etc.; Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2016). It is essential for coaches to understand and respect the boundaries of athletes' sexuality and to create an environment in which both athletes and coaches feel safe and comfortable. If coaches are not aware of the importance of touch and what it can mean to athletes, athletes may perceive safe touch as sexual harassment, a risk that affects the coach-athlete relationship.

Five sports coaches from specific sports areas took part in the research, a fact we consider a limitation, which we compensated for by the depth of the individual interviews. It was not possible to cover all sports. As part of the deliberate selection of the research group, we encountered refusals to participate, which can be explained by several reasons or a combination of them: (a) the time-consuming nature of the interviews, which lasted an average of 140 minutes, (b) coaches' concerns about a taboo topic, (c) the coaches' subjective feeling of vulnerability with respect to the sensitivity of the questions.

Conclusions

A "touch-based model of the coach-athlete relationship" was created to describe the importance of touch in the coaching profession and determine the level of risk-safety and intimacy in the coach-athlete relationship. The coach's self-reflection and the form of touch are important mediators of the level of the relationship between the coach and

the athlete. We consider raising the awareness of coaches, athletes and officials about these factors affecting the level of the coach-athlete relationship, including the risk of sexual harassment and sexual touch, which is considered risky, to be a practical outcome.

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Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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