**Abstract**

**‘Always picking country over club’: A creative non-fiction story of an international coach-athlete-coach triad.**

This paper explores coaches and athlete experiences of being part of a triadic coach-athlete-coach relationship spanning across two sporting organisations, namely a women’s international rugby union and premiership club. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach and a creative non-fiction (CNF) story representation is utilised to appropriately capture this triads lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each individual in the coach-athlete-coach triad. Interpretation of personal experiences occurred first at an individual level and then across the triad. To show the complexity of the organisational impact evident from the interviews, a CNF story on the triad’s relational experience was developed. A contribution to sport psychology research is made on numerous levels. First, the impact of this exploration is in providing a ‘relational’ focus, showing and then telling the reader of complexities present, within a triadic relationship context. This paper provides an avenue for relational conception in sport psychology that captures the past, present and future interactions of those that occupy sporting relationships. Second, it provides this avenue by interpreting the lived experiences of all relational members, providing an insight into the contextual and organisational factors influencing this sporting relationship. Finally, this papers originality is evident in its approach and representation, combining IPA and CNF to move the theoretical focus beyond replicating the current relationship research in sport.

Keywords: triadic relationships, creative non-fiction, coach-athlete relationships, representation, environmental impact, rugby.

# Introduction

Numerous influential interpersonal relationships develop through sporting encounters. The most obvious being the coach-athlete (C-A) relationship, with both coach and athlete seeking interdependence, for professional and personal growth (Jowett 2003). The current relational literature in sport has principally focused on dyadic coach-athlete interactions (Jowett and Meek 2000, Jowett and Cockerill 2003, Jowett 2003), with the development of a conceptual model based on each individuals cognitive, affective and behavioural perceptions (Jowett 2007). However, this literature is challenged on how it exemplifies the ‘relational’ element of these C-A relationships, outside of each individuals’ perception of their cognitive assumptions on closeness, affective assumptions on commitment and behavioural assumptions on complementarity (3Cs) (Smith 2013). Smith highlights the relational element should focus upon a stream of interaction, accounting for past and future interaction between relationship members, rather than an individualised asocial conceptualisation. The current sport psychology literature is individualised and presents a linear interaction between two individuals’ perceptions of each other (Balduck and Jowett 2010). The present paper aims to contribute to the advancement of this theoretical knowledge in sport psychology, moving away from a facsimile approach, to focus on the complex social ‘relational’ aspect of relationships in sport, as advocated by Smith (2013). Meaning, the social ‘relational’ focus is on contexts, organisations, thoughts, emotions and future behaviours and interactions of all involved in the ‘relation’-ship. Additionally, viewing relationships from a complexity standpoint, whereby the whole (the triadic relationship in this case) is greater than the sum of its individual (athlete, coach, coach) parts.

This paper is concerned with exploration, the intention for understanding and exemplifying relational complexities of triadic coach-athlete-coach relationships from each members’ perspective. The paper aims to bring all relational members into the picture, first showing and then telling the reader of their relational complexities. Previous literatures reliance on one method (questionnaire based) and the replication of methods, limits the research domain (Landers, 1983, La Voi 2007). Relationship researchers in sport should seek to diversify approaches, as too often premature commitment to a theory/model occurs, where potential exploration and novel discovery may transpire (Poczwardowski *et al.* 2006, LaVoi 2007). Therefore the aim of the current paper is to further explore relationships in sport, in particular relationships encompassing three individuals, coach-athlete-coach. This papers intention is to encourage knowledge and theory development from more of a relational foundation as opposed to individual interaction (McGannon and Spence 2010, Smith 2013).

Due to a number of professional and amateur sports competing at international and national level, organisational structures are in place for athletes to follow numerous representative pathways (club, county, region, and nation). Therefore, within and across sporting structures, multiple dyadic coach-athlete relationships occur. A triad can be defined as a group of three closely related persons or things (Noller and Feeney 2000). Triadic relationships, whereby athletes interact and build relationships with two or more coaches is commonplace. This prevalence, where an athlete is coached by his or her club and/or regional coach and their national and /or international coach means athletes form new relationships across sporting organisations, expanding their coach-athlete dyad to form a coach-athlete-coach triad.

These triadic relationships cannot be fully understood devoid of their relational context (Jones *et al.* 2010), and the sporting organisations in which they take place. Furthermore, sporting contexts have the potential to shape ‘relational’ development and progressions (Jones *et al.* 2010). Washington and Reade (2013) advocate that the coach is one member of a wider system, which can consist of inter-related sporting organisations. In reality, coaches and athletes work or attempt to work collectively, in dynamic and nonlinear ways, within complex adaptive systems (Bowes and Jones 2006), namely sporting clubs or organisations. These systems refer to the context in which the coaching takes place, which is susceptible to change over time as a multitude of relationships form within an environment. The triadic coach-athlete-coach is just one of these multiple relationships forming within and across sporting environments. Coaches can build relationships vertically within their sporting organisations with athletes, other coaches, and support staff (Bowes and Jones 2006). Similarly, coaches can interact horizontally across one or more sporting organisations with other coaches, athletes, and organisational stakeholders, meaning relationships do not always sit neatly within the confines of one sporting organisation (Bowes and Jones 2006). Understanding the complexities of these vertical and horizontal interactions is principal in moving this research forward to facilitate understanding the ‘relational’ side of coach-athlete-coach relationships.

Coaching researchers have enhanced understanding relationships in sport by attempting to discuss and exemplify some complexities. This paper has been approached from a complexity theory standpoint, due to its connection with reality (Saury and Durand 1998, Puddifoot 2000, Jones *et al.* 2004, Jones and Wallace 2005, Cushion 2007a, 2007b, LeUnes 2007). Complexity theory which is sometimes labelled ‘chaos theory’ is associated with micro-interactions, and is focused on the intricacies of interrelationships, interaction, and interconnectivity of elements within a system, and between that system and its context (Bowes and Jones 2006). Sporting relationships, like their organisations can be characterised by ambiguity and obscurity. Therefore, an exploration of a dynamic sporting relationship such as a coach-athlete-coach triad is warranted to further understand both dyads (C-A relationships) and extensions of dyadic relationships, namely triadic relationships. Understanding the complex bidirectional impact organisations have on the relationships that occupy them can inform coaches, athletes and the other support staff on how best to manage these relationships (Cushion 2007a, 2007b).

This paper aims to explore the dynamic system of a triadic coach-athlete-coach interpersonal relationship, which occurs within and across two sporting organisations. The paper offers a relational knowledge extension to what we already know, in order to facilitate understanding triadic coach-athlete-coach relationships and their contexts. Rather than describing and discussing only dyadic interpersonal relationships in isolation, greater consideration of the relational environment and organisations in which these dyadic and subsequent triadic coach-athlete-coach relationships occur is warranted, as each form part of the social entity of the organisation (Slack and Parent 2006). This paper aims to show and tell the reader about a triadic relationship spanning across two sporting contexts, highlighting the relational complexities that fall outside the already established 3+1Cs conceptual model advocated by Jowett and colleagues (2007).

This contribution to relationship research in sport is threefold. Firstly, exploring coach-athlete-coach triads from the lived experiences of all relational members provides an insight into the contextual and organisational factors influencing relationships. Secondly, the impact of this exploration is in providing a ‘relational’ focus, first showing and then telling the reader of complexities present within triadic relationship contexts. This paper takes a step in the direction of providing a relational conception in sport psychology that captures the past, present and future interactions of those that occupy sporting relationships. Finally, this papers originality is evident in its approach and representation, combining Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Creative Non Fiction to move the theoretical focus beyond replicating the current relationship research in sport. It moves away from unidirectional analysis of relationship research and provides an interactive account of a detailed, lived experience in a captivating form (Smith *et al.* 2015), with an intention to show the reader this triad’s relational complexity.

# Methodology

A qualitative, interpretative phenomenological (IPA) approach was undertaken, underpinned by a relativist ontology (i.e. reality is multiple, created, and mind-dependent) and an interpretivist epistemology (i.e. reality is constructed intersubjectively) (Smith 2004). IPA allows for description and interpretation of participants’ accounts collectively and seeks to discover how people make sense of their personal and social world (Smith 1996). It has been encouraged as an approach when “one is concerned with complexity, process, and novelty” (Smith and Osborn 2003, p. 53). IPA respects the role of the analyst in making sense of the personal experiences of the research participants (Smith, 2004). It involves a two-stage interpretation process in which the researcher attempts to make sense of participants’ sense making (Brocki and Wearden 2006). Given the exploratory aim of this study in understanding coach-athlete-coach relationships and the lack of research on triadic interpersonal relationships, IPA combined with Creative non-fiction (CNF) story representation has the potential to make meaningful advancements within relationship research in sport (Nicholls *et al.* 2005, Woodcock *et al.* 2008). IPA is concerned with how the individual makes sense of their world and CNF representation provides a meaningful method of linking individual’s stories in a dialogical manner, using the accounts of each individual to show their story (Smith *et al.* 2009, Smith 2013).

Adopting this approach allowed for the revelation and exploration of similarities and differences across each of the three relational members’, the researcher played a key part in bringing these perceptions together to show the ‘relational’ dynamic through combining the IPA analysis with a creative non-fiction representation. CNF involves writing non-fiction using fiction techniques (Caulley 2008). Cheney (2001) explains it, stating that creative non-fiction uses many techniques of fiction but tells the story using interviewees’ words, interpreted and analysed from data collection. These interviewee accounts are not simply reported; they are shown to the reader through the creative writing methods employed in fictional writing. The researcher plays a key role in first the interpretation using IPA and next the story development. Smith *et al.* (2015) discuss how stories act as meaningful methods of knowledge transfer which are evidence-based, accessible, and credible. Therefore the combination of IPA and CNF allowed for rich description and interpretation at different levels, at the individual and then across each individuals story. This combination illuminated the findings in a way that encourages knowledge transfer of the actual ‘relations’ between triad members.

# Method

This paper forms part of a larger programme of research of collective case studies on triadic coach-athlete-coach triadic relationships within sport. One case study of a triadic coach-athlete-coach relationship is presented. Smith *et al.* (2009) advocate that IPA allows detailed examination of particular cases, offering exploration of similarities and differences within and across cases. An adult triad consisting of two coaches and one athlete, from professional level rugby union participated in the research. Each participants’ names and locations were given pseudonyms to protect identity and maintain confidentiality. Institutional ethical approval and informed consent were obtained prior to commencing the research. Initial contact was made with one member of the triad, leading to contact with the other two members. Based on the IPA approach, individual interviews with each triad member were carried out by the lead researcher. Therefore, two interview guides were developed, one for coaches and one for athletes regarding their personal experience of the triadic relationship they formed. Each individual took part in a face to face, semi-structured interview to explore their personal experiences of being part of a coach-athlete-coach triad, interviews lasted up to 60 minutes for each individual (3 hours in total across the triad).

***Rugby union triad - participants***

The rugby union triad consists of one female athlete who plays her club rugby at a premiership club in Europe, this club plays across five different divisions with the opportunity for players to move up and down between the 1st and 5th teams for each division of play. She is coached by her team coach at the premiership club and she is also an international rugby player for her country, therefore being coached by her head international coach. The triad consists of Lisa (athlete), Mike (international coach) and Luke (club coach). Lisa (pseudonym) is 22 years of age and has been playing women’s premiership rugby union with her current club for three years. Lisa has also been playing rugby for her home nation’s international team for the last fourteen months. Lisa’s plays premiership rugby at a division two level, her club coach is Luke (pseudonym), aged 24. He has been coaching her for the last two years. Luke has five years of rugby coaching experience at premiership level. The premiership club Lisa is currently playing for has numerous coaches for each of its five divisions, with Luke being the division two and three head coach. At international level, Lisa’s head coach, Mike (pseudonym) is 48 years of age. He has been coaching Lisa for the past 14 months. Mike has 20 years of coaching experience at provincial and international level. Of relevance to this triad are the sporting structures, which each coach works within. At both international and club level, there are numerous coaches in contact with Lisa highlighting the working relationship across two sporting organisations. Of importance to this triad’s story is another club member Kelly (pseudonym), she is the premiership clubs’ women 1st team head coach and she was mentioned by all triad members.

***Interview guide***

Each interview guide (coach and athlete) consisted of probes and open exploratory questions such as ‘Tell me what the triadic relationship is like for you?’ and ‘any positives or negatives about being part of a triad?’ Demographic information was also collected within the interviews and used initially to build rapport with individuals. The interviewer and interviewee relationship is important as it can have the potential to open up discussion on relevant information (Randall and Phoenix 2009). Using a semi-structured interview guide was in keeping with IPA studies whereby the interviewer is guided by the structure rather than controlled by it (Smith 1996, Smith and Osborn 2003). Probes were listed within the guide alongside the open questions to progress the interview if needed (Smith 2004).

The process of interviewing each triad member separately meant initial impressions and knowledge of the triadic relationship was created. Information from the first interview informed the second and third interviews, making the researcher an informed interviewer throughout the process. Awareness of this was important, as decisions about information to probe or discuss in each interview was informed by the interviewer’s initial interpretation of the triadic relationship. The use of an audio journal, directly after each interview facilitated in reminding the researcher of the initial impressions of the individuals and the relationship (such as the tone of their voice, physical appearance, the direction they took the interview, how they justified interaction in the relationship). Within this data collection the athlete was interviewed first, as she was the gatekeeper for both coaches. Interview order also warrants consideration within relationship research due to its potential to impact the interviewers’ perception and interpretation of the relationship.

***Data analysis and representation***

The triads’ interview transcripts were analysed using IPA guidance steps from Smith *et al.* (2009). The data analysis was carried out in two stages, individual analysis of each interview followed by looking for patterns across the triad interviews. Stage one, the manuscripts were read and re read several times, to ensure full engagement with each individual’s experiences. The Atlas.ti 7.0.82 software programme facilitated this analysis for Windows PC. Descriptive and interpretative comments were made in the margins of manuscripts to identify common patterns within the interview, which acted as unfocused notes to facilitate coding and developing themes within one manuscript. In keeping with the ideographic nature of IPA analysis, this process was repeated for each individual’s interview manuscripts. To transform these codes into themes, the researcher was required to make links between their own personal interpretations and the participants’ actual statements (Smith and Osborn 2003). Following this individual analysis, moving between the manuscripts and seeking patterns across the triad occurred. This process followed Smith *et al’s.* (2009) process on reading and re-reading, noting, and developing emergent themes, and searching for connections across emergent themes. The challenge of representing this interpretation led to the formation of the CNF story. The choice is supported by the researchers relativist ontology (i.e. reality is multiple, created and mind-dependent) and an interpretivist epistemology (i.e. reality it is constructed intersubjectively). Although an IPA approach was utilised to uncover the emergent triadic theme linking to the environmental/organisational impact across the triad, the researcher chose to present this in a creative nonfiction story format to highlight the complexities within triadic relational environments from all three members’ perspectives. This form of representation also encourages reflection from a broad audience, it encourages interpretive insights which can lead to multiple understandings of the relationship due to its accessible story format (Smith *et al.* 2015, Schinke *et al.* 2016). Leo and Goodwin (2014) combined a similar approach of IPA and story vignettes in their investigation of how students make sense of their participation in disability simulations in their course. Although not explicitly stating the use of CNF, they created storied vignettes across their four student participant experiences.

***Creative nonfiction representation***

The use of a story can show the complexity associated with triadic relationships both within and across sporting organisations and environments. By using a CNF story format, this research attempts to bring relational complexities experienced by three individuals to life through an understanding that has not been explored previously in relationship research. CNF has been used extensively within sport literature as a way of representing qualitative findings. Smith’s (2013) paper on experiences of spinal cord injury, McGannon and Camerons (2013) stories of body anxieties from female exercisers and Erickson *et al’s.* 2016 paper on storying the impact of doping in sport. All provide examples of how CNF stories can be used to disseminate knowledge to reach multiple audiences, using everyday language, with the intention to encourage and stir imagination in those reading (Smith *et al.* 2015). This is something the current coach-athlete relationships literature in sport psychology lacks at present (Smith 2013). Its focus on dualisms which are concept driven means the relational aspect of coach and athletes past, present and future experiences and expectations are not expressed or explored fully. Therefore the use CNF story allows the relational element between triad members to come to life in an authentic and engaging manner.

### *Story development*

Based upon the researcher interpretations of the triad, the individual transcripts with annotations were used to develop the first draft of the creative nonfiction story. The IPA approach facilitated this stage of story development as reflections and interpretations of each individual were revisited. Specifically, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, interpretations and themes focused around the environment/organisation impact were also read once again, alongside the quotes linking to these interpretations. The memo notes from initial interpretations facilitated this process, providing reminders to interpretations across the data collection and analysis process. Where possible, direct quotes from the interviews were left intact, however for literary purposes to coherently develop one story from all three individuals’ perspective, fictional writing techniques around a story plot were created. The researchers interpretation becomes apparent in the development of the plot of the story around a ‘fictional meeting’ of all triad members.

The story represents each individuals’ thoughts and feelings from the interview around the points of communication and interaction which has been impacted by the organisations and subsequently continues to effect the relational environment moving forward. Recommendations by Caulley (2008), which were heavily influenced by Cheney’s (2001) literary techniques, were used in story development. Representative quotes were used as a skeleton for the story development. The CNF format allowed for internal and external dialogue between relationship members. Throughout this process the researcher relied on interactions with each individual in the interviews for relevant observed information, for example the physical appearance of the individuals. Re-reading the transcripts and listening to the researcher’s audio journal enabled this information to transform into a story through selecting the most relevant quotes on the theme of organisational impact.

***Judging quality***

As previously mentioned, a relativist position informed the approach on how this piece of research could be judged (Sparkes 1998, Sparkes and Smith 2009). Specific criteria is recommended for judging the quality of creative analytical practice (Sparkes and Smith 2009). Prior to reading the CNF story detailed below, it is important for the reader to consider how this IPA approach and CNF representation be evaluated and judged. According to Smith *et al.* (2009), IPA research criteria for quality judgement could include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. CNF research criteria may include focusing on evocation, visual aesthetic, authenticity, the contribution of the work to the field of research, and coherence of story (Smith *et al.* 2015). Therefore characterising traits, rather than a fixed template is presented in order to judge the quality of this study (Sparkes and Smith 2009). These traits are presented in question form, based on Smith *et al’s.* (2015) suggestions. (1) Is there a purpose or point to the story and does it stay on track? (2) How does the story show you the relational interaction between triad members, based on their past, present and future interactions? (3) Are you satisfied that you are left with a new perspective to relationship research, one that is interesting, useful or important? (4) What new questions does the story generate for you around relationships and social interactions in sport contexts? (5) Finally, is this story meaningful and transferable to you as a coach, athlete, and/or sport psychologists? Judging the story according to the outlined characterising traits means holding this piece of creative nonfiction writing to a suitably high standard, as all qualitative research representation should (Smith and McGannon 2017).

**Findings**

The creative non-fiction story presented below has been developed based on the lead researchers’ interpretations of the interviews with each member of this triadic relationship. The story is entitled ‘always picking country over club’ as it is reflective of the relationship spanning across two sporting organisations and three people making sense of this. The story offers insight into this triad’s relationship, highlighting individual perceptions and showing the ‘relational’ complexities associated with communication, organisation and context, perceived coaching roles and future interpersonal interactions. The reader is invited to reflect on the transferability of this story to their own and other triadic interpersonal relationships they form part of. Following the story, the researcher provides their interpretations of the story in relation to how this study in this format advances theoretical knowledge within the sport psychology by seeking to evoke what Smith (2013) would call ‘a relational foundation’.

# *The Story: ‘Always picking country over club’*

*Introduction to the triad*

‘Mike, if you’re free on the 12th when you’re in town, it would be nice for you to meet Luke. Might be good for us all to sit down and, you know, meet formally and just iron out some stuff about playing position and training sessions?’ asked Lisa, who is a young, loud, enthusiastic premiership and international rugby union player. Mike is her slightly greying, deep voiced, experienced international head rugby union coach and Luke, her baby faced, blue eyed, premiership club team coach.

‘Wait who’s Luke? Is he a coach for your club team?’ Mike replies sternly, glancing curiously at Lisa. She glares back confusingly at Mike, wondering how on earth he doesn’t already know who Luke is after all these months. Her face must show her bewilderment as Mike quickly responds.

‘I’ve been in contact with Kelly; does she not oversee you there?’ Mike interrupts before Lisa has a chance to open her mouth. Mike is franticly fidgeting to get his diary out to check the date of the 12th, whilst Lisa attempts to explain who Luke is in her premiership club.

‘Well Kelly is obviously the head coach of the entire club, but Luke is the head coach of the seconds team that I’m playing on, that’s why I thought it might be good for us all to chat, because Luke sees me the most. I mean they all coach together there but Luke has more to do with me’ Lisa says rushing to clarify her relationship with Luke to Mike, while still looking a little confused as she’s sure she’s mentioned Luke before to him.

‘Ok right, yeah that’s fine. It’s in the diary now. See if he’s free the evening of the 12th because I have a jam packed day’ explains Mike. And with that he closes his diary and stands to leave. ‘Oh and well done this weekend Lisa, I think being in the backs suits you better than the forwards, we can utilise your strength more, but we’ve still got lots to work on. See you next weekend and safe journey back tonight’ Mike says swiftly as he attempts to pack his overflowing laptop bag to leave.

*Lisa’s thoughts….*

Lisa sits alone in the dimly lit changing room that smells like fresh mud and stale sweat after a tough international training weekend. While she packs away her muddy football boots, and prepares herself for the long journey back to her life outside rugby, her thoughts turn to the organised meeting on the 12th with her, Mike and Luke. She’s starts to consider how different both coaches are. Luke is youthful and energetic with fresh ideas and she feels he is open to her point of view, maybe because he gets to know the girls on a different level. Luke is always up for a few drinks after the games. Mike is friendly, but they’re definitely not friends. Mike just has more of a presence. Lisa wouldn’t want to have any confrontation with Mike and hopefully she won’t, she feels a little scared of him at times. Not because of his stature, he’s big. More because of his experience and his job title. But then again that’s quickly fading the more time she spends with him and they get to chat over random coffees and in between training weekends.

Mike is always encouraging and has knowledge of the game, making her an even stronger player. Lisa can’t help but think back to his final comment before he left the changing room about her position and effort at the weekend. She smiled to herself and wondered what her session tomorrow night with Luke will bring. Will he comment on her positioning? Her effort or what she needs to work on? She feels a sudden wave of worry about telling Luke she has to miss next weekend’s club game because of an international game. Surely Luke must find it annoying and frustrating, that she always picks country over club? Lisa shakes her head as if to dismiss the confusing thoughts of comparing both coaches, she zips up her heavy kit bag and leaves the smell of mud and sweat behind until tomorrow’s club training session.

*Mikes thoughts…*

Mike rushes through the packed train station, swerving and dodging the slower commuters on his route to his platform. He’s only got four minutes to spare. Sweat trickles from his brow as he lugs his large laptop case and even larger kit bag onto the train. Finally, on board and relaxing into his seat, he has a minute to reflect on the weekend’s training camp and his final discussion with Lisa. He thinks about how much Lisa has grown over the last year as a player, and how this change in position will show her skill and physicality to benefit the team more. He also thinks about how she has grown as a person. The Lisa six months ago would never have approached him and asked for a meeting, she was too shy and almost like she was afraid of me, never mind organise a meeting with her other coach.

Mike feels Lisa is growing as a player; this is showing that she wants to improve. His thoughts then turn to this “Luke” coach and why Kelly never mentioned him when they’ve spoken on the phone about Lisa? Is he new? Mike wonders how open he will be to meeting and chatting about Lisa as a player? Mike can’t handle another coach who gets annoyed at the international team for ‘stealing’ players for games; maybe he’s not like that. Lisa’s club have been positive and encouraging so far. Hopefully we can talk and work out what’s best for Lisa. The train doors sound to close quickly and Mike is relieved to have a seat and start his long commute home to his family, after a weekend away from them again. His thoughts shift back to Lisa and meeting Luke. It can only be beneficial, I need all coaches on board so my information can be filtered down. He must be an ok guy, because Kelly is a great coach and they must work together. It will be good, we can chat about building Lisa’s weaknesses, hopefully only positives can come of having him on board. I hope he hasn’t got a big ego and he is willing to think about what is best for Lisa. I can’t handle another situation where a club coach thinks their way is the only way. With that Mike opens his laptop bag, takes out his laptop and begins to type up some notes from the training weekend just past in preparation for next weekend’s game, and the thoughts of Luke and Lisa are dismissed for now.

*Setting up a meeting*

‘Luke, have you got a minute for a quick chat?’ asks Lisa in a shortened breath at the end of the club training session. ‘Yeah of course, I meant to ask, how was the weekend training camp?’ Luke replies cheerfully, pulling his hood up, as rain lightly falls at the end of the session.

‘It was good thanks, tiring but good. I like playing in the backs. It’s different, and a challenge. Anyway, I wanted to see if you were free on the 12th of this month by any chance? Mike, my international head coach is over and it would be good for us all to meet and chat in person?’ asks Lisa managing to get her breath back.

‘Yeah I don’t see why not; does he have anything in particular he wants to talk about?’ asks Luke inquisitively. ‘Don’t think so, just because you guys have never met, but you both coach me, it might be good to meet if you’re both free. Mike said he can do the evening of the 12th, if that works for you?’ says Lisa, as she picks up her empty water bottle from the side-line.

‘Okay, yeah let’s meet. Kelly won’t mind will she?’ asks Luke. ‘Nah, I doubt it, I’m sure her and Mike already talk anyway’ replies Lisa. ‘Oh really, she’s never said they’ve spoken?’ Luke responds looking slightly confused. ‘Anyway yeah I’m free that evening, we can meet here at the rugby club if that suits you both?’ suggests Luke. ‘Great, I will let him know. Thanks for tonight’s session, I’m going to feel it tomorrow’ Lisa laughs knowing that she always feels her muscles ache after a weekend international training followed by club training. ‘See you Wednesday Luke’ shouts Lisa as she jogs into the changing room. ‘See you then Lisa’ replies Luke as he walks to collect the remaining cones and tackle bag from the vacant rugby pitch.

*Luke’s thoughts…*

Luke paces across the damp grass, bending down to collect the evenly distributed cones from the wet mud covered grass, of which most has been torn away by rugby boots throughout the session, leaving more mud than grass. As he bends to collect the cones, thoughts enter his head about meeting Mike for the first time. He’s curious, why hasn’t Mike got in contact with him sooner? Luke wonders what he would do if he was an international coach. If he were in that higher position, would he make the effort to contact the club, should he have contacted Mike? Suddenly he remembers what Lisa said about contact between Kelly and Mike and he’s curious why Kelly never mentioned it to him? He wonders if Lisa wanted the meeting or did Mike get her to organise it? It must have been Lisa. He knows from previous experience; international coaches don’t deviate too far outside of their networks making contact. He suddenly thinks maybe I should have contacted him? But then Mike was here for the international game in January and never contacted me, not even a chat, nothing. Luke tries to shift his attention away from being annoyed about not being contacted, his thoughts are brought back to Lisa. It’s about the best interests of Lisa. Luke starts to think about how positive it is that Lisa has got both sets of coaches, a difference of opinion, and different techniques. Luke knows that he might be stronger in one area and Mike might have some advice and be able to help Lisa in other areas.

As Luke makes his way to the club house, dragging the tackle bags and cones he can’t help but wonder what Mike is like, his experience, his knowledge? He hopes he’s not one of those ego coaches, my way or the highway type. He hopes he’s not, he might be like him and happy for more input to help Lisa. He’s probably used to working with other coaches, because in the international coaching set up, there’s more than just him. It’s the same at club level. Luke starts to think about international set ups and Lisa’s team in particular. He thinks Lisa’s team’s lack of international funding in comparison to other countries means they haven’t got the professional set up yet and the staff must have jobs outside of their coaching. Their financial side of things needs to grow. Luke can’t help but feel Lisa’s international coach has segregated himself. Cut himself off by not making contact earlier. Luke then wonders if maybe Mike has already made contact with the club, just not with him, with Kelly? Why then hasn’t Kelly said anything? Luke enters the club house, looking around eagerly to see if Kelly is around to ask. She’s already gone, it’s late.

*Lisa’s thoughts…*

‘What have I done’. Now that the meeting on the 12th is organised, Lisa is unsure if it’s a good idea for Mike and Luke to meet and start talking. She forgot that she actually likes it if she’s having a bad training session with Luke she can forget about it and have a really good session with Mike because the other coach will not necessarily find out, meaning a clean slate every time. Lisa starts to think about all the other complications, some are positive and some annoyances of her being an athlete who trains between two different countries. Obviously it’s a pain travelling to a different country to get coaching and for training sessions. She has already felt that affects the coaches because they’re not in much contact, they haven’t even met before. And it’s just more awkward.

Lisa’s thoughts turn to the other girls on her team and their club coaches and she knows that Mike would communicate a lot more with other club coaches than he would with her club. Maybe that’s because Kelly is an international coach as well as a club coach. Mike probably doesn’t like telling her what he’s doing with me because Kelly would know weaknesses about my game and she might even use that to the advantage when we play her team internationally. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t want to meet too much. Maybe we should keep our sessions private. I know I’m not allowed go over any backs moves at club because those international girls will see and so will Kelly. Maybe I prefer keeping both things separate instead of having a blurred confusion bringing them together? Lisa thinks back to conversations with her club team mates who play internationally for other countries and they don’t like the amount of conversations that take place between their international coach and the club coach because the coaches know too much about them. Do I want that? But if it makes me a better player for both teams, surely it’s good? Lisa’s head starts to hurt asking herself all these questions. She reminds herself that she will just have to keep playing rugby and that’s all she needs to worry about.

# Discussion

This study contributes to the advancement of relationship research in sport by exploring coach-athlete-coach triads from the lived experiences of all relational members. The CNF story above provides an insight into the contextual and organisational factors influencing relationships. Some of the lead researcher interpretations around these contextual and organisational factors are discussed below. All triad members highlight their concerns in the first person, in conversations between coach-athlete dyads within the triad and then shifting to their internal dialogue. Lisa, at the centre of the two sporting structures can foresee potentially important decisions she makes regarding her sporting commitments, which impact her as a player, such as ‘having to pick country over club’. The context in which this particular triadic relationship develops (geographically between two countries) affects the specific triadic interactions within the relationship. For example, the environment affects individual’s perceptions of each other, and the initiation and frequency of communication between triad members, in particular between coaches. Relational members may have a perception of each other based on their prescribed roles. Luke’s perception of Mike based on his high power international head-coaching role, may influence his choice to initiate contact with Mike.

The individual triad members may not have an awareness of exactly how their environment/organisation is impacting their relationship. Understanding this can occur indirectly through the other variables such as triadic communication and specifically lack of coach-coach communication. For example, within the story, the relational environment stretching across two sporting organisations proves difficult in initiation and continuation of triadic and dyadic coach-coach communication. With the increased demands and expectations being placed on coaches in high performance sport their role has started to resemble a manager in an organisation (Jones and Wallace 2005). Therefore, it is becoming more apparent that coaches provide the link between organisations for athletes, with Mike communicating to Lisa’s club team for the benefit of Lisa’s development. Coaching is far from being a dyadic relationship between coach and athlete, understanding relationships and the organisational structure in which they sit is key to being able to facilitate them. The coach has to be the open systems manager, meaning that coaches have to manage micro relations with other stakeholders such as other coaches (Jones and Wallace 2005; Potrac and Jones 2009).

The narrative highlights how the context (geographical location and large sporting organisations) influences the contact between club and country coaches. Luke emphasises the lack of the coach-coach interaction across structures, mentioning his perception of Mike’s ego, while stressing the reality of multiple coach-coach interactions within each structure (club and international). Mike also alludes to his perception of previous experiences of club coaches in an attempt to understand Luke’s perception of Mike before the two have met or communicated. Luke, in his vignette alludes to the reality of working within a high performance environment such as premiership rugby and the amount of working relationships, which can form within a club or international coaching structure. Support staff could also form part of a triadic relationship within sporting structures and with growing multi and interdisciplinary teams within sport, broadening relationship research outside the coach and athlete could facilitate in developing effective sporting organisations (Collins *et al.* 1999, Cruickshank *et al.* 2013). By focusing on each participant’s internal dialogue within the story, the reader can see how his or her relational perceptions differ. This complexity alludes to earlier mentioned discussion about viewing interpersonal relationships in sport as complex adaptive systems, in which the relation between individuals cannot be fully understood without an appreciation for the context and the people who occupy it.

The impact of this exploration is in providing a ‘relational’ focus, the CNF story first shows and then tells the reader of complexities present within triadic relationship contexts. The story provides a relational conception in sport psychology that captures the past, present and future interactions of those that occupy this triad. The meaning of this relational conception is discussed around how context drives behaviour and interaction. We see caution from Luke about contacting Mike. Lisa wants to initiate the contact; however, her thoughts later show her questioning this. Mike was unaware of Luke and felt his triad with Lisa was with Kelly (the premiership clubs head coach) rather than with the team coach Luke. This environmental complexity is evident when all three individuals’ stories are brought together. This links back to the strength of the IPA approach (Smith 1996, Smith and Osborn 2003), as not all triad members explicitly verbalised the environment/organisations influencing the relationship, however through analysis of all three relational members’ stories, the environment is impacting other aspects of their relationship. Much of the sporting organisation literature is informative in outlining the potential organisational issues; however, this literature is predominantly focused upon issues pertaining to one club or organisation (Wagstaff *et al.* 2012a, 2012b, Cruickshank *et al.* 2013). Further exploration is warranted when issues arise in emerging triads, such as the above outlined coach-athlete-coach relationship, which spans across sporting organisations. Understanding these relationships could provide coaches and athletes opportunities to establish communication pathways and manage expectations and roles across and within their relational environment.

The complexity of triads is further uncovered when the communication patterns within and across sporting triads become an area of concern within this particular triad. Bowes and Jones (2006) advocate that current coaching research falls short of capturing the inherent complexity. Coaching, like relationships do not simply occur naturally, it is a sophisticated, complex interpersonal social process, as can be seen from the above triad case story (Jones *et al*. 2010). At times, unfortunately, we are offered unproblematic representations of coaching and coach-athlete relationships, to simplify for the reader of what are in fact complex dealings (Jowett and Meek 2000, Dension and Jowett 2007, Olympiou *et al.* 2008, Jowett *et al.* 2010). Similar can be argued when we discuss relationships within sporting organisations, with little mention of relationships spanning across sporting structures, with a dominant focus on the coach-athlete dyad, void of context (Jowett 2003, 2006, Antonini Philippe and Seiler 2006). At times relationship research in sport, presents one small piece of a larger puzzle, with the conceptualisation of dyadic relationships not always considering the environment/ organisation in which these dyads develop and maintain their relationships (Jowett 2003, 2006, LaVoi 2007, Rhind and Jowett 2010, Lorimer and Jowett 2011).

This focus on psychological constructs without consideration of the context, could result in missed opportunities to fully understand and facilitate these relationships (Poczwardowski *et al.* 2006), as well as educate others for development of their own sporting relationships. An understanding of the functional complexity within and across relationships and social interactions in various contexts is required. Evidently, from the above story the relational context is complex, dynamic and constantly in a state of flux. Some situations are uncontrollable, incomprehensible, and imbued with contradictory values and perceptions, as there are three individuals forming and reforming perceptions of their dyadic and triadic social interactions, at times within one organisation and across others. Berscheid (1999) calls for the greening of relationship science, and her argument focuses around taking the relationship research domain forward by consideration of the relational context, as human behaviour occurs in the underlying powerful context of relationships. Within sport psychology this links to the importance of understanding the environment or organisation in which triadic relationships develop to identify and understand situations that are healthy or harmful to the development and maintenance of triadic relationships in sport.

Finally, this papers originality and impact is evident in its approach and representation, combining IPA and CNF to move the theoretical focus beyond replicating the current relationship research in sport. The findings presented provide an interactive account of a detailed, lived experience in a captivating form, with an intention to show the reader this triad’s relational complexity. The CNF story helps show the emotion of the triad members’ interviews, as felt and interpreted by the researcher and you the reader. This highlights strengths in the analytical approach of the current paper and some of the nuances associated with representation of qualitative research findings in a CNF format. Initial, accessible insight into a reality of a triadic relationship spanning sporting organisations, of which there will be numerous in sport is presented. This avenue of exploring relationship research in sport has been lacking in the sport psychology literature. This papers representation allows the reader to see the ‘relation’ between relationship members, feel the confusion and contextual impact of their relationship. This is largely due to the creative approach, whereby the CNF story works as a transfer of knowledge to the reader, disseminating this research-based knowledge in an accessible, credible, and meaningful way (Smith *et al.* 2015, Erickson *et al.* 2016).

Approaching representation of relationship research from a CNF story encourages the reader to make sense of the complexities of this triad’s life experience and shape what becomes the experience (McGannon and Cameron 2013, Smith 2013, Smith *et al.* 2015). We are storied individuals, all engaging in relationships across our lifespan, stories reach multiple audiences in an accessible way that uses everyday language, in which reflection is encouraged and imagination evoked (Smith *et al.* 2015). Gaining a sense of the relational context from all members’ perspective allows the applied practitioner, coach and or athlete to make informed decisions about intervening on their personal potential issues such as lack of communication or rationalising emotions about individual’s perceptions of others. The practitioner could also act as the mediator between relationship members if required, providing advice and support for the athlete, coaches or both depending on the context, to prevent or manage potential conflict (Mallett 2010).

# Conclusion

The advancement of relationship research in sport is threefold. Firstly, exploring coach-athlete-coach triads from the lived experiences of relational members provides an insight into the contextual and organisational factors influencing these relationships. Secondly, the impact of this exploration is in providing a ‘relational’ focus, the CNF story first shows and then tells the reader of complexities present within triadic relationship contexts. Finally, this papers originality and impact is evident in its approach and representation, combining IPA and CNF to move the theoretical focus beyond replicating the current relationship research in sport. It provides an account of a detailed, lived experience in a captivating form, with an intention to show the reader coach-athlete-coach relational complexity both within and across sporting organisations. It encourages imagination and reflection from the reader on their ‘relations’ with others. It provides an avenue for future interpersonal relationships research in sport to move away from the individual forms of analysis and consider all relationship members perspectives in ‘relation’ to each other. This paper further supports and encourages knowledge and theory development from more of ‘relational’ foundation, as advocated by Smith (2013). The CNF story approach shows the reader a stream of interaction between coaches and athletes, which can be past, present and future focused. Something previous relationship research in sport falls short of doing by being concept driven and focused on cognitions of the individual.

An understanding of how a triadic relationship develops when the organisations form and function separately, yet the relationship exists between them is shown. The complexity of coaching literature discusses the importance of relationships and the issues maladaptive relationships can cause, however, these will be context specific (Fletcher and Wagstaff 2009, Cruickshank and Collins 2012; Cruickshank *et al.* 2013, Gould *et al.* 2001, Gould *et al.* 2002). The CNF story offers awareness of potential issues and implications the environment/organisation can have for those within a triadic relationship. The intention is not to provide ways of overcoming these issues, rather to emphasise the complexity of them. The next step with CNF representations of this nature is to engage coaches and athletes about their reactions to this and stories of this nature, to see the relevance and impact upon those currently part of a triadic relationships (Erickson *et al.* 2016). With an intention to take relationship research in sport to a more interpretative, meaningful and creative domain, which can inform coaches, athlete and applied practice.

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