Examination of novice coaches' previous experience as athletes: Examples of autonomy support and controlling behaviors as influences on future coaching practice

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Abstract

As part of a coach’s informal learning process, previous athletic experience is a foundational element of an athlete's future coaching career, determining the perspectives, beliefs and behaviors the coach will utilize in their interactions with athletes (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). While it is investigated more generally, previous athletic experience is rarely considered in understanding specific coaching behaviors related to supporting athletes’ needs and motivation. This study investigated fifteen novice coaches’ personal athletic and coaching experiences to determine how these experiences influenced their own coaching practice with regards to use of autonomy supportive and/or controlling behaviors. Interview data revealed that novice coaches utilized their past experiences to inform their practice in three ways: 1) experienced controlling behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be more autonomy supportive in coaching, 2) experienced controlling behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be controlling in coaching, and 3) experienced autonomy supportive behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be more autonomy supportive in coaching. These results suggest the importance of considering previous athletic experience as an antecedent to utilizing autonomy supportive behaviors.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, coach behavior, informal learning, coach learning, antecedent
Introduction

Researchers indicate that the coach development process begins when the coach is still an athlete (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). Wherein, the individual learns about the coaching role through interactions with a variety of coaches over the course of their athletic career. These previous athletic experiences serve as a foundational resource to direct a novice coach’s first few years in the coaching profession (Jacobs, Claringbould, & Knoppers, 2014; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Upon entering the coaching role, previous athletic experiences become a primary resource in determining the beliefs, perspectives and behaviors the coach will utilize in their interactions with athletes (Cushion et al., 2003). In fact, research conducted to evaluate coaching education programs indicate that the primary sources for coaching knowledge were learning by doing and interacting with other coaches rather than formalized training in coaching education programs (Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008). This suggests coaches continue to value and rely on their experiences as a basis for future coaching behavior even beyond the first few years of coaching.

The role of athletic experience as a useful and positive source of coach learning is up for debate. However, athletic experience may have implications for future learning as these experiences may form a “lens through which new [coaching] knowledge is viewed” (Cushion et al., 2010, p. 69). Although previous athletic experience is not always required to fulfill a coaching position, many coaches of elite and youth athletes have acquired knowledge of the coaching role during their experience as athletes (for a full review see Cushion et al., 2010). Interestingly, elite coaches have reported athletic participation as being both an important (Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004) and a relatively unimportant (Schempp, Templeton, & Clark, 1998) learning source for a coach in comparison to other modes of learning. It has therefore been
recommended for these experiences to be investigated with greater scrutiny (Cushion et al., 2010) to identify the meaning and significance coaches have tied to their experiences.

Coach learning has been considered extensively (Cushion et al., 2010; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Walker, Thomas, & Driska, 2018; Werthner & Trudel, 2006) to delineate the theoretical perspectives from which coaches develop. It is not the purpose of this work to review all existing frameworks in the coach learning literature, but to illustrate the learning experiences of novice coaches within the present study. Therefore, Coombs and Ahmed’s (1974) widely accepted framework of formal, informal, and nonformal learning will be included from which coaching knowledge and practice have previously been conceptualized (Nelson et al., 2006).

Formal learning sources are defined as structured and institutionalized learning systems such as coach certification and higher education degree programs with coursework specific to the sport sciences and coaching. Informal learning is referred to as a lifelong process (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974) in which knowledge is accumulated outside of a formal learning setting such as in previous experience as an athlete, interactions with athletes and other peer coaches, informal mentoring, guided and self-guided reflection, and practical coaching experiences. Finally, nonformal learning includes organized and systematic learning activities conducted outside of the framework of formal learning. These activities include coaching seminars, workshops, conferences and clinics that are presented to a subgroup of coaches as additional sources of learning (Cushion et al., 2010).

The formal, informal and non-formal components of learning are interconnected within the complex coach learning process and may exist “simultaneously in concert or conflict” (Nelson et al., 2006, p. 249). While coaches have been shown to prefer learning from informal learning sources (Erickson et al., 2008) this does not indicate that coach learning should be
confined or catered to this source. As previous athletic experience was previously mentioned as a foundational and informal element to establishing coaching practice (Jacobs et al., 2014; Lemyre et al., 2007), it is of interest to explore the quality of these experiences and how they have contributed to novice coaches’ attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives regarding coaching practice and the resulting impact on coaching behavior. Combined with Cushion et al. (2010)’s recommendation to investigate previous athletic experience with more scrutiny, an investigation into influence of these experiences on a coach’s behavior regarding athletes’ motivation is warranted.

Coaching behavior has been found to be highly impactful on athlete motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), having the potential to be facilitative or restrictive of an athlete’s basic psychological needs and motivation. The self-determination theory (SDT) distinguishes between two interpersonal motivational styles, autonomy-supportive and controlling, that have been applied to the coaching context (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy-supportive coaches satisfy athletes’ three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, by engaging in several behaviors classified by Mageau and Vallerand (2003) as being autonomy supportive. These coaching behaviors are 1) providing the athlete choice within specific limits, 2) providing rationales for rules and instruction, 3) distinguishing and acknowledging athletes’ feelings, 4) allowing for independent work, 5) providing feedback in an informational and non-controlling way, 6) avoiding overt control through criticisms and tangible rewards, and 7) preventing ego-involvement. Athletes under the supervision of an autonomy-supportive coach have been shown to experience autonomous motivation for participation, an increase in athletic performance, and basic psychological need satisfaction (Occhino, Mallett, Rynne, & Carlisle, 2014). Utilizing these behavior definitions, a variety of research has begun
the task of identifying specific application examples in coaching (Beauchamp, Halliwell, Fournier, & Koestner, 1996; Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2019; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Mallett, 2005; Sheldon & Watson, 2011). Further, Zougkou, Weinstein, and Paulmann (2017) suggest that individuals can distinguish between behaviors that are more autonomy-supportive or controlling in nature through the tone of voice and the characteristics of the wording from which the directives are sent.

Controlling coaching, however, has the potential to thwart the basic needs of athletes by actively undermining athletes’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Coaches who engage in more controlling behaviors are distinguished by their 1) emphasis on tangible rewards, 2) controlling competency feedback, 3) excessive personal control, 4) intimidation behaviors such as verbal abuse and physical punishment, 5) promotion of ego-involvement and 6) use of conditional regard to shape desired athlete behavior (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009). Psychological ill-being and negative athlete consequences have been linked with controlling coaching interpersonal behaviors and have been observed in athletes’ negative affect, disordered eating, burnout, and depression, to name a few. Interestingly, autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors have been shown to co-occur in order to elicit desired behaviors indicating that these behaviors are not mutually exclusive (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Therefore, it is likely that these behaviors can be used interchangeably by a single coach depending on what the coach perceives to be the most effective method for producing desired athlete behavior. This allows for athletes to be subjected to a myriad of coaching behaviors throughout their sport experience that may or may not be facilitative of their psychological well-being and motivational tendencies.
Athletes have been shown to distinguish autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors even at the youth level, including coaches’ interest in athlete’s input and praise for autonomous behavior (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007). In furthering this line of research, Coatsworth and Conroy (2009) observed that autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors such as praise for autonomous behavior are important for need satisfaction and the development of initiative in youth athletes. This opportunity for positive personal development within athletic participation is often why parents have their children participate in sport in the first place.

Controlling forms of coaching have been observed in research (d’Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998; Erickson & Côté, 2016; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009) with further evidence to suggest that despite negative repercussions, coaches believe controlling behaviors to be effective and warranted in producing desired athlete behavior (Delrue, Soenens, Morbee, Vansteenkiste, & Haerens, 2019; Ng, Thogersen-Ntoumani, & Ntoumanis, 2012). In some cases, coaches are unaware of their controlling behaviors or personally have not experienced unpleasant feelings while using such coercive methods (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Cushion and Jones (2006) provided evidence from professional youth soccer coaches indicating coaches used more controlling behaviors because it was “the easiest way” to coach amid the pressure within the coaching environment. However, in this specific case, a harsh form of coaching was considered traditional and acceptable in the training of future professional athletes as this same method was present when these coaches were playing at the professional level. This perpetuation of traditional controlling coaching behaviors despite the negative impact on athletes’ motivation is noteworthy and further affirms how previous experience plays a role in the future development of coaching.
Research to uncover the antecedents to coaches’ engagement in autonomy-supportive and/or controlling behaviors has been established (Matosic, Ntoumanis, & Quested, 2016; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017). Whereby the nature of the cultural norms and the social-environmental factors (stress, professional development opportunities, job security, work-life conflict) coaches operate in was broadly identified as important to understanding why coaches may engage in autonomy-supportive and/or controlling behaviors (Matosic et al., 2016). However, much of the antecedent literature has not explored the beliefs coaches have formed regarding the effective strategies to develop athlete ability and the normalized behaviors associated with the coaching role as a result of their athletic participation. This may be attributed to coaches not being able to recognize how their assumptions and personal experiences are guiding their coaching practice (Harvey, Cushion, & Massa-Gonzalez, 2010; Strean, Senecal, Howlett, & Burgess, 1997) and the difficulty associated with effectively measuring such a dynamic construct. Despite this, coach development literature has identified coaching practice to be reliant on intuition, tradition and emulation of other coaches’ behaviors rather than evidence-based findings often learned in formal coaching education (Williams & Hodges, 2005). In this sense, coaching behavior is shaped through informal learning sources such as the coach’s athletic history, his or her personal experiences in coaching, cultural norms within the coaching context, and the contextual forces (antecedents) enacting on the coach.

Given this information, novice coaches could be expected to draw upon their own experiences as to what coaching methods were effective or ineffective within their athletic participation, adhere to the traditional forms of coaching they observed, and mimic the behavior of the coaches they have been exposed to through their coaching practice. In this regard, it is anticipated that the autonomy-supportive and/or controlling coaching behaviors novice coaches
have experienced within their own sport participation could inform and shape their coaching practice.

With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate novice coaches’ personal athletic and coaching experiences to determine how these experiences influence their own coaching practice, especially with regards to how they communicate with athletes. A secondary purpose of this study was to outline examples of autonomy-support and control within novice coaches’ experiences as an athlete and a coach. Mageau & Vallerand’s (2003) examples of autonomy-supportive behaviors and Bartholomew and colleagues’ (2009) examples of controlling behaviors guided the organization of novice coaches’ experiences and coaching practices.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 15 students (ten male, five female) between the ages of 20-24 years (M = 21.53) who were enrolled in coaching education courses at a large Southeastern university. Participants reported race/ethnicity as eight White, five Black, one undisclosed, and one Hispanic, and had varying levels of coaching experience ranging from less than six months (three participants), at least six months (nine participants), three years (one participant), and five years (one participant). Within these experiences, 11 participants coached both males and females and three participants only coached males. Participants coached a variety of sports to include soccer, skateboarding, volleyball, track and field, rifle, football, bowling, lacrosse, basketball, t-ball, and softball. Coaching assignments varied for participants in terms of level coached and head/assistant coach assignments. Table 1 highlights the specific experiences of

coaches according to age group and coaching position to account for twenty-one coaching experiences described by the fifteen participants.

*Insert Table 1 here*

All participants indicated they would like to work as a coach after they completed their degree, with 12 indicating they would like to work part-time and three indicating they would like to work full-time as a coach. Athletic experience for each participant is located in Figure 1. This information highlights the variety of sport experiences and potential exposure to multiple coaches throughout each participant’s athletic history.

*Insert Figure 1 here*

**Procedures**

Following IRB approval, participants were recruited from coaching education courses by the secondary researcher. Here, recruitment was purposeful within the courses of Technology in Sport, Psychology of Coaching, and Principles of Coaching to garner responses from novice coaches. Students were advised that course grades would not be contingent on participation in the study to eliminate obligatory participation. Another researcher recruited participants from a course in the event the primary researcher was the instructor for that course. Participants completed informed consent forms before participating in the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and took place in a private room on campus.

Demographics were collected at the beginning of each interview including age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of coaching experience, gender of athletes coached, and course taken in the coaching education program. The semi-structured interviews included questions about participants’ experiences as a coach and an athlete, the sports they participated in as an athlete and at what ages, their coaching philosophy and what formed that philosophy, interactions with
previous coaches, familiarity with autonomy-support and examples of what autonomy-support has looked like in their experiences. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for the exploration of responses in more detail and took approximately 45 minutes to complete, ranging from 30 – 60 minutes. The interview protocol can be reviewed in Appendix A. It should be noted that the data obtained for this study was part of a larger project, therefore questions related to other aspects of the project are not included in the appendix.

Data Analysis

To address the primary and secondary purposes of this study, a dual approach was followed during analysis. First, a directed content analysis was chosen to guide the identification of autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors within the participants’ experiences. This approach was chosen as it allows for an existing framework or theory to be extended or validated and focuses the research question (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As part of this process, Mageau & Vallerand’s (2003) examples of autonomy-supportive behaviors and Bartholomew and colleagues’ (2009) examples of controlling behaviors were used as predetermined codes. On subsequent passes, an interpretive approach, utilizing both deductive and inductive analysis, guided the coding of novice coaches’ experiences in comparison with their reported use of autonomy-supportive and/or controlling behaviors within their coaching. The use of an interpretive paradigm “allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants” (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p. 24) and is recommended for exploring the coaching process which is heavily influenced by social context (Strean, 1998). From these experiences, the researchers were able to interpret these viewpoints while accounting for the specific context of the social environment of being a novice coach. As the primary purpose of
this investigation, the researchers felt that this interpretivist paradigm was appropriate in
determining how novice coaches draw upon their previous experiences to inform their coaching.

This study followed a ten-step process for analysis: 1) recorded interviews were
transcribed verbatim; 2) researchers familiarized themselves with the data by independently
reading and re-reading the transcripts; 3) researchers independently coded all reported coaching
behaviors, and coaching philosophies using N-Vivo 12 software while athletic participation
timelines were constructed and chronicled using Microsoft Excel; 4) researchers independently
matched coaching behavior codes with a set of thirteen predetermined codes (definitions for
autonomy-support and controlling) using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh &
Shannon, 2005); 5) remaining codes that did not fall within the predetermined codes were
independently organized into similar categories to account for potential biases of the directed
content approach; 6) researchers met to discuss each stage of the coding process (steps 3-5) to
refine each code or grouping and ensure an accurate interpretation of the data; 7) an interpretivist
approach (Potrac, Brewer, Jones, Armour, & Hoff, 2000; Strean, 1998) was used for subsequent
passes through the transcripts to compare individual novice coaches’ experiences with their
reported use of autonomy-supportive and/or controlling coaching behaviors. In this stage,
researchers independently coded supporting and non-supporting evidence of novice coaches’
behavior replication or adaptation; 8) researchers again met to discuss codes from the
interpretivist stage and refine groupings 9) internal and external member checks were utilized to
ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Participants were given copies of transcripts as well as
their sport participation timelines to check for accuracy. Member checking was also used during
the interviews to verify participants’ responses were accurately conveyed and understood.

Although recent commentaries suggest that member checking is not a way to establish rigor in
qualitative research (Smith & McGannon, 2017), the researchers utilized this technique to ensure that the data represented was accurate before coding began. In addition, during the interviews, researchers would paraphrase or restate information back to the participant throughout the line of questioning; and 10) a critical friend reviewed the transcripts and all classified codes to offer an outside perspective and prompt further exploration and reflection upon the interpretation of the data as a means to achieve methodological rigor.

Results

Novice coaches briefly discussed their coaching philosophies as an insight to how they perceive their role as a coach. Four main categories emerged from the interview data. Novice coaches described in their philosophies the specific coaching qualities and behaviors they embody, the coaching climate they create, the expectations they hold for their athletes, and the outcomes they seek to produce in their athletes. Coaching behaviors included listening and talking to athletes, being flexible and attentive to players’ needs, providing equal treatment and specific feedback while upholding coaching qualities of honesty, patience, respect, and humbleness. Descriptions of the climate included maintaining structure, consistency and a team focus, placing a low emphasis on winning and a high emphasis on skill development and having fun, and facilitating a positive and encouraging environment. Coaches expected athletes to do their best, exert effort, and be selfless and committed teammates. Finally, coaches aspired to facilitate several athlete outcomes including character development, good sportsmanship, confidence, self-discipline, mental toughness, career and academic development, and the learning of life lessons.

During the interviews, novice coaches spoke of their previous experiences as athletes and as coaches. Towards the end of the interview, the researchers asked the participants if they knew
what autonomy-supportive coaching was. Definitions were then given to the participants, along
with examples taken from participants’ own experiences. Novice coaches were then asked to
describe any other experiences they may have had that would be indicative of an autonomy-
supportive motivational climate within their previous experiences as athletes as well as behaviors
in their own coaching. All experiences, both before and after the last question asked, were
categorized by the researchers as being one of the seven reported autonomy-supported behaviors
(Mageau & Vallerand, 2003) as shown in Table 2. Novice coaches also described coaching
behaviors indicative of a controlling motivational climate within their athletic histories and
within their own coaching. These experiences were not directly investigated in the interview
protocol but were memorable and described by all fifteen of the participants. Therefore, novice
coaches’ controlling examples were also categorized and are shown in Table 3 which were
categorized by one of the six controlling behaviors (Bartholomew, et al., 2009).

In summary, novice coaches experienced autonomy-support from their previous coaches
in six out of the seven categories of autonomy-supportive behaviors. Drawing from examples of
their previous coaches, frequencies of autonomy-supportive behaviors reported from the athlete
perspective were as follows: rationales for rules and instruction (11 coaches), providing
informational and non-controlling feedback (9 coaches), providing choice within specific limits
(5 coaches), inquiring about athletes feelings and allowing independent work (4 coaches), and
avoiding overt control (3 coaches). Interestingly, none provided examples of preventing ego-
involved.

Participants all had varying levels of personal coaching experience from which they
provided dialogues of their coach-athlete interactions and use of autonomy-supportive behaviors.
Overall, thirteen of the fifteen participants gave examples of how they engage in at least one of
the seven autonomy-supportive behaviors as coaches. Ten coaches described acknowledging athletes’ feelings, six coaches reported avoiding overt control and providing informational and non-controlling feedback, use of rationales for rules and instruction was reported by five coaches, while four coaches gave examples for preventing ego-involvement. Finally, three coaches gave examples for providing choice and allowing for independent work. Table 2 lists the specific autonomy-supportive actions of participants’ previous coaches and participants’ own actions in more detail.

*Insert Table 2 here*

Participants also gave several accounts of how their previous coaches engaged in all six categories of controlling behaviors. The frequencies of these behaviors are as follows: excessive personal control (8 coaches), intimidation behaviors (7 coaches), promotion of ego-involvement (4 coaches), conditional regard and controlling competency feedback (2 coaches) and coaches’ use of tangible rewards (1 coach). Although reported more infrequently in comparison with those of autonomy-support, controlling behaviors were identified by five novice coaches’ accounts of how they would coach or currently coach their athletes. Among the controlling behaviors, the use of intimidation behaviors and the promotion of ego-involvement were each reported by two coaches while the use of excessive personal control and emphasis on tangible rewards was reported by one coach each. Table 3 lists the specific controlling behaviors of previous coaches and participants’ own coaching.

*Insert Table 3 here*

One final theme was identified within the interview data that could not be categorized as part of novice coaches’ coaching philosophy or as a part of the definitions for autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching. This theme was the cultivation of team culture. Novice
coaches described how they sought to develop a team culture and/or shared their experiences of team culture as athletes. Subthemes included coaches emphasizing the building of relationships, participating in team building activities, producing a never-give-up and process driven mentality, nurturing a family-type atmosphere, promoting equal treatment among team members, holding athletes responsible for their actions, and encouraging athletes to play for each other and have fun.

The interpretivist approach to the data analysis revealed several nuances when comparing novice coaches’ previous athletic experiences with their current coaching practices. Several novice coaches explicitly linked the way they currently coach to events they experienced as an athlete in one of three ways: 1) novice coaches experienced controlling forms of coaching as an athlete and therefore formed their coaching behavior to be more autonomy-supportive, 2) novice coaches experienced controlling forms of coaching and consequently found themselves exhibiting similar controlling behaviors within their own coaching, and 3) novice coaches experienced autonomy-supportive forms of coaching and replicated autonomy-supportive behaviors with their athletes. Examples of each are presented in the following dialogues.

**Controlling coaching experiences transferring into autonomy-supportive coaching**

In recalling his experience as a lacrosse player, Don noted how his coaches conditioned the team to run and execute various skills. In his description of the training, Don indicated his coach’s strict and controlling approach to conditioning athletes to run and how he has taken a more autonomy-supportive approach. He accomplishes this by allowing the athletes autonomy in choosing when they run during practice while also providing athletes a rationale for doing so:

“...my coaches in high school were definitely of those guys that you know ‘you're running right now whether you want to or not’ and that's something I brought to college
where I'll tell my guys we play lacrosse, we have to be conditioned, we have to run...We

can either run now or run later and that's the choice usually that I give them, they can

choose to run tired or they can choose to run fresh it's up to them”

Don also discussed how his coaches approached skills training in a controlling way, which

included an example of punishment for not following coaches’ directives. In reflecting upon how

this experience negatively impacted his ability to develop specific skills, Don chose to adopt

strategies that allowed for a more flexible learning approach that did not involve punishment.

Similarly, Gloria was able to recognize that more controlling behaviors such as yelling and using

running as punishment are not in best practice to motivate athletes.

“I really, I hated this one coach. He was just...extremely hard and it was middle school

level. It was track. He just used to yell at us...I think there's other ways to approach

players especially at a young level because...young athletes are so easily discouraged

sometimes and if you're constantly yelling at them, that can be a great potential athlete

and you never know because they’ll never come back to practice cuz of the vibes given at

practice.”

In her own coaching, Gloria indicated she would use creative ways to condition athletes to where

they would enjoy running instead of using it as a punishment. She valued the use of discipline in

a fair and consistent way. In Tina’s experience, she found it difficult to adapt her coaching style

because she had experienced a coach who utilized yelling and punishment in his coaching.

However, she recognized that this was not an ideal way to coach youth:

“You know it's hard to adapt what I've learned and what I've been taught from my club

coach...it was a huge adaptation for me...my coach is always for the fitness punishment.

Like if you're talking you'd go run two laps...you can't do that with 8-year-olds...it’s
definitely been a challenge for me to kind of adapt how I speak and how I think and stuff like that to how they’re gonna want to learn...For example...you don't yell as many strict or like harsh comments at them because they’re 8 year-olds...You gotta say, oh great job...way to get that ball, instead of, you need to do better.”

Tina was able to reflect upon her formal educational experiences which informed her of the appropriate methods for creating an adaptive motivational climate for youth athletes. This was compared with her personal experiences, which were driven by more controlling motivational behaviors. Ultimately, she explained how she adopted a more autonomy-supportive approach despite having been exposed to more controlling behaviors. Terrance saw his coach’s controlling behavior within position selection and felt he was not given the opportunity to make choices for himself. However, when asked how he would provide choice to his athletes, he emphasized the importance of giving athletes opportunities to learn and try new positions in the early stages of sport development. He felt in this way, he could accommodate athletes needs and potential. Through this example, it was apparent Terrance adapted his coaching strategy as a result of his experience to better align with his values. For Terrance, the role of the coach is to facilitate athlete development by considering what the individual wants to get out of a sporting experience and acting in a manner that would not restrict those possibilities.

**Controlling coaching experiences transferring into controlling coaching**

A few participants indicated that their previous coaches’ controlling behaviors were reflected and utilized within their own coaching. Elijah described this directly:

“Well, one thing I emulate is how firm they [my coaches] were. Because they were so firm with me, it's like in my head I talk to myself. I'm not gonna be so firm with the kids I was coaching, but I've seen that to be able to lead a team, you have to be firm, you have
to make the harder decisions, you have to say no, put your foot down...I'd like to be more
like that, more firm, [and] not be afraid to communicate ideas.”

Elijah accepted the behavior of firmness to be associated with the coaching role as a necessary
characteristic despite his initial resistance to this notion. He further explained how he aspires to
continue this behavior through his communication with athletes and how he associates the
characteristic of firmness with effective leadership. Here, it is evident that Elijah’s previous
experience has largely informed his continuation of firm coaching. In considering the nature of
the coaching environment, Dominic explained how he grew accustomed to players being yelled
at consistently by coaches:

“...when I was playing youth football...I knew I was gonna get yelled at from day one.
So, I just was used to coaches yelling and them telling me you got to do it this way or
you're not gonna do it at all. So, I mean I’d incorporate that somewhat [in my coaching]
but you can only yell at someone so much before they just stop caring about it.”

In response to what his coaching would look like Dominic replied:

“Depending on what kind of group I'm coaching. If I'm coaching high schoolers, I'm
probably gonna do a lot of yelling because I feel like that's the only way they'll listen is
yelling, you discipline them. Whereas [if] I'm coaching the youth group, I can really more
talk to them and you know this is how they do it when you get to high school, you want
to play in high school you should do it this way. But less yelling for the youth and more
yelling for high schoolers.”

Dominic’s account is particularly interesting in that he internalized his coaches use of yelling
during his youth and high school football participation to inform his own coaching methods.

Dominic identified his use of yelling as a form of discipline for his high school athletes.
However, Dominic indicated a difference in his communication with his youth athletes than that of his previous coaches. This shift in communication is described as him talking to athletes and yelling infrequently in comparison with high school athletes.

Autonomy-supportive coaching experiences transferring into autonomy-supportive coaching

It was apparent within the interviews that coaches replicated autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors that they experienced within their own coaching. For example, Elijah’s coach often used game-related scenarios to test athletes’ problem-solving abilities. Elijah sought to replicate this teaching strategy as a way to provide rationales for learning important game-related skills while also allowing athletes to think independently. Christine felt her coaches were open and personable with their athletes which facilitated strong coach-athlete relationships. She valued and appreciated those qualities in her coaches and indicated she wants to do the same for her athletes. Stephany felt that her coaches gave her a lot of freedom as an athlete to explore her skills and replicated these same behaviors:

“[In my coaching] I’d want to say I would be flexible with anything...I really am an open-minded person...I was never told I wasn't allowed to do something and so I feel as a coach...I think I'd be very flexible with someone trying maybe a new position [or] trying what they wanted to ...but depending on the age like we could always do a game or something that would make the players comfortable and...I’d listen to my players and what needs to be done or like kind of see what needs to be done versus just doing what I think personally.”
Here, Stephany illustrated how she adopted a similar approach to coaching to align with her autonomous experiences. She felt that considering what athletes want to get out of practice could take priority over what she may have had in mind.

**Discussion**

Within the framework of self-determination theory, the purpose of this study was to investigate novice coaches’ personal athletic and coaching experiences as well as outline examples of autonomy support and control within these experiences. Our findings indicate that novice coaches’ previous experiences as athletes contributed to their knowledge of the coaching role and subsequent interactions with their athletes. Further, results revealed that novice coaches had experienced and enacted several autonomy-supportive behaviors as athletes and coaches, respectively. Examples of controlling coaching were also reported from the athlete and coach perspective, however, novice coaches described controlling behaviors less often than autonomy-supportive behaviors.

The relative infrequency of reported controlling behaviors could in part be explained by the nature of the interview protocol. Novice coaches were not explicitly asked to recall experiences related to controlling coaching behaviors and instead, these behaviors emerged as a natural result of participants recollecting their athletic experiences. However, it was apparent that the controlling behaviors of excessive personal control (conveying a lack of choice) and coaches’ intimidation behaviors (yelling and punishing) were exceedingly memorable and impressionable moments of novice coaches’ athletic careers that warranted attention. It is therefore our recommendation that future works more intentionally explore coaches’ previous experience of controlling coaching in relation to coaches’ perceptions of coach-athlete communication.
The fact that novice coaches’ previous experience contributed to their knowledge of the coaching role is supported by previous work (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Williams & Hodges, 2005). Novice coaches were shown to process the relevant behaviors associated with coaching during the interviews as they reflected upon how a variety of autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors contributed to their overall athletic experience and development. In this way, novice coaches subconsciously adopted coaching behaviors that they felt were qualities of a ‘good coach’ (Jacobs, Claringbould, & Knoppers, 2014), even without knowing that the behaviors could be autonomy-supportive or controlling. Coaches’ behaviors were also focused on conversations surrounding team culture. Novice coaches frequently reported an intentionality toward implementing team culture ideals of a caring and family-type atmosphere among players which was a prevalent feature of their personal athletic experiences. Novice coaches viewed themselves as an integral part in facilitating the development of strong bonds among team members. While not explicitly autonomy-supportive, there is support in the literature for autonomy-supportive and caring climates to produce positive outcomes for athletes (Gano-Overway et al., 2009).

**Coach learning**

Previous athletic experience served as an informal learning source for the novice coaches within this study which has been similarly reported in the literature (Cushion et al., 2010). Although the current study structured the interview to explore these informal learning experiences within autonomy-supportive and controlling coach-created climates, it is important to note that novice coaches also alluded to their formal learning experiences as contributing to their coaching practice. Don said:
“These classes have been beneficial towards my coaching experience. It’s taught me a lot of things and also [revealed] a lot of bad stuff about my previous coaches.”

Meanwhile, Trevor indicated his coaching philosophy has shifted as a result of his coursework. He claimed his coaching philosophy was initially reflective of what his previous coaches did, both good and bad. Trevor now believes his coaching is more congruent with what he has learned. This information is supported by other volunteer and recreational level coaches who have similarly noted the importance of formal education in the first few years of coaching (Walker, Thomas, & Driska, 2018).

Based on this information, it appears that novice coaches’ coaching practice was therefore informed by multiple experiences (both formal and informal) which illustrates the interconnected nature of coaching learning (informal, formal, nonformal). In fact, it is when these experiences are combined that the learning environment is optimized (Cushion et al., 2010). Although the present analyses intended to capture how novice coaches learned of the coaching role from their previous experience as athletes, we must acknowledge the sources of learning are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, future research should consider the interaction of what novice coaches have learned in their formal coaching education experience as well as the lessons learned from coaches’ previous experience as an athlete.

**Previous experience as an antecedent to autonomy-supportive coaching**

The findings of this study support previous athletic experience as an antecedent to autonomy-supportive or controlling coaching. Here, the novice coaches’ provision of autonomy-supportive or controlling coaching behaviors was associated with participants’ beliefs regarding the coaching role. Similarly, literature has identified social-environmental factors as antecedents to a coaches’ need-supportive or need-thwarting behaviors (Matosic et al., 2016) to include
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Evidence of teachers utilizing more controlling behaviors in the classroom in collectivistic cultures as a result of a cultural norm or belief in the effectiveness of controlling behavior (Reeve et al., 2014). Participants described the ‘cultural norms’ of their sport experiences which embodied both autonomy-supportive (consistent provision of choice) or controlling coaching behaviors (consistent yelling and restriction of choice). These coaching norms were found to be replicated given the novice coaches’ interpretation of the experience as facilitative to their athletic development.

**How coaches interpret past experiences to structure future behavior**

Our results indicated that novice coaches utilized their past experiences to inform their practice in three ways: 1) experienced controlling behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be more autonomy supportive in coaching, 2) experienced controlling behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be controlling in coaching, and 3) experienced autonomy supportive behaviors as an athlete which transferred to a desire to be more autonomy supportive in coaching. In some cases, novice coaches were able to draw from autonomy supportive experiences easily, while others struggled to adapt their coaching due to previous experiences. Stephany, for example, was able to provide a flexible environment for her athletes based on her previous experience as an athlete, but Tina struggled to work with young athletes because she recognized how controlling her previous coaches had been. Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers (2014) gave a similar account from a coach who was attempting to change his coaching practices after a coach education course. This coach felt he was a “prisoner of his own sport history” (p. 13) in his replication of previously experienced coaching methods even though they caused friction on his team. He felt that he did not have other examples of coaching behavior with which he could reference as a basis for changing his behavior. Both Tina and the coach from Jacobs et
al. (2014) were therefore able to recognize coaching methods that were not as facilitative to their athletes’ sport experiences but found it difficult to adapt given their limited perspective of more autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors. However, it was apparent that Tina’s beliefs regarding effective coaching were informed by her formal learning experiences in a way that inspired her to create a more facilitative and autonomy-supportive environment.

Other explorations of the coaching process have shown coaches utilize their ‘lived experiences’ to determine how their athletes may be feeling based on their own feelings in a similar situation when they were athletes (Saury & Durand, 1998). Terrance illustrated this when he spoke of his coach who did not consider the position Terrance wanted to play in football leaving him feeling unsatisfied and underwhelmed. Therefore, Terrance actively engaged in coaching behaviors that acknowledged individual preferences to prevent future athletes from experiencing similar feelings that he endured. He felt that in letting athletes have the option to choose which position they wanted to play he was less likely to inhibit their sport development.

Finally, novice coaches reported emulating coaching behaviors they viewed to be consistent with more traditional forms of coaching (Williams & Hodges, 2005). This was clear in accounts by Elijah and Dominic who endured more controlling forms of coaching, such as yelling and a strict coaching approach. These conversations revealed a subtle resistance to perpetuate such behaviors, however, both of these novice coaches rationalized their use of these behaviors as necessary to the role and in-line with their previous encounters with their coaches. These examples illustrate how both positive and negative athletic experiences were internalized or adapted to inform and shape the behaviors of novice coaches. Indeed, coaching behavior involves assumptions about what it means to be a coach (Harvey et al., 2010; Jacobs et al., 2014; Strean et al., 1997) that in many cases, have first been considered from the athlete perspective.
Limitations

In considering the results of this study, it is important to highlight some limitations of the work. First, most of the participants were interviewed early in their coaching education experience, having only a few courses taken and less than 2 years of coaching experience. Knowing that perspectives can change over time, capturing the experiences of this particular group was paramount, helping to explain the process early in their careers. We recognize that perspectives might have been different if participants had more experience and therefore recommend that future studies investigate the role of previous athletic experience at various stages in the careers of sport coaches. Second, many participants were operating as assistant coaches. The interview protocol did not explore whether participants’ head coaches may have influenced their practice. However, participants did not report conflict with the head coaches they worked with. While we did report the level of coaching of our participants, we did not explore how these coaching positions may have impacted our results. Lastly, the data collection methods within the study did not take into account actual coaching behavior. It would provide a more well-rounded view to match perspectives of participants to actual coaching behaviors. This would allow for the triangulation of data and subsequently contribute to the trustworthiness of the findings.

Conclusions

Even without formal knowledge of autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors, novice coaches were able to identify autonomy-supportive and controlling interactions they had as athletes and connect them to how they coach currently. As part of the coach learning process, we believe that consideration of previous athletic experience as an antecedent to engaging in autonomy supportive coaching behaviors is warranted. Coupled with
formal education and opportunities for reflection, examination of previous athletic experience could have the potential to influence more positive and adaptive coaching behaviors.
References


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