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Understanding the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland: A collective case study from an ecological perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland as a collective case study from an ecological perspective. Eight high-performance coaches from Northern Ireland were recruited and participated in semi-structured interviews. Each participant coached athletes at either World Championships, European Championships, Summer Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, and/or professional levels. An ecological perspective was adopted to explore the barriers and supports for coaches at individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural levels throughout their coach development journeys. Data were analysed through theme development, refinement, naming, and triangulation. Findings are represented through the main themes and subthemes of: individual (previous athletic experience, engagement in experiential learning), interpersonal (networks, mentoring, non-sporting mentors), organisational (formal learning activities, varying levels governing body support, previous limitations of the high-performance system), and sociocultural (Northern Ireland's unique political and geographical standing, dual nationality opportunities, and denominational perceptions of sports).

The experiences around becoming a high-performance coach continue to be of interest to researchers, sport administrators, coach educators, and coaches' alike (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016). This interest has in part been ignited by the perceived failure of coach education to cater for the learning needs of high-performance coaches (Mallett, 2010). High-performance coaching by its very nature is complex and thus attempts to understand high-performance coaching practice cannot be over simplified (Rynne et al., 2016).

By understanding the developmental experiences of coaches who work at the highest level in their sport, the education and development of aspiring coaches can be tailored to provide opportunities to obtain the pertinent skills, knowledge, and experiences, to reach and fulfil their potential. To date, researchers have tended to focus on establishing the learning needs of high-performance coaches more generally and have given less attention to the idiosyncratic and contextualised nature of coaches' development (Werthner & Trudel, 2009). Therefore, research which considers individual, organisational, and sociocultural, influences on coaches' development is needed.

Through adopting an ecological perspective, the present study used a collective case study approach (Hodge & Sharp, 2017; Stake, 2005) to examine the career development pathways of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland. An ecological perspective affords a re-conceptualisation of coaching, supporting the notion of mutuality for the individual and performance environment (Woods et al., 2020). A collective case study was used as the researchers were interested in assessing a number of cases concurrently to better understand their unique context (Hodge & Sharp, 2017).

Coaching context in Northern Ireland

The population of Northern Ireland is relatively small (less than two million people). Thus, the population of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland is also relatively small. Previous coaching workforce data (Sport Northern Ireland, 2010) identified that from the 1,679 coaches who took part in the research, over 80% of coaches were volunteers. Only 8% of volunteer coaches and 21% of paid coaches worked with elite/international athletes. To date, the understanding of the ways in which coaches in Northern Ireland gain expertise to work at the high-performance level is limited. Such knowledge, however, would offer value to the development of national and regional coach education systems in Northern Ireland and similar smaller nations with limited resources and development opportunities.

Northern Ireland is an independent nation state (similar to England, Scotland, and Wales) that is also part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is also geographically part of the island of Ireland and shares an open land border with the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland is a divided society along religious, ethnic, social, and educational lines (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019). Thus, sport in Northern Ireland can also be divided along similar lines depending on the history, traditions, and governance of a given sport. For example, some sports such as association football are divided between

Northern Ireland governed by the Irish Football Association (IFA) and the Republic of Ireland governed by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). In contrast, sports such as rugby, are "all island" where the sport shares the same governing body (IRFU) for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

To fully understand the current position of sport in Northern Irish society, context must be provided with regards to the wider sociocultural environment. A prolonged ethno-national struggle during the period of violence known as "the Troubles" (1969–1998) were characterised by turmoil and civil unrest, resulting from a struggle between Great Britain and the island of Ireland. "the Troubles" were fuelled by a political and social call for equality and freedom. This call would be ultimately answered by the Belfast Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, bringing Northern Ireland to a state of relative political peace and stability (Snyder, 2022). Dempsey (2022) notes that despite the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998, much of Northern Ireland remains socially divided, as it transitions from "the Troubles" period. Social identity varies throughout the region with citizens typically identifying as British, Irish, or Northern Irish, in a complex cultural setting (Liston & Deighan, 2019). Sport, or indeed coaching, is not exempt from these complexities, with many national and regional sporting organisations operating in a co-jurisdictional sphere. Despite the island of Ireland experiencing its strongest level of cross-border engagement since the GFA, particularly across local government, the decision by the UK to leave the European Union created further barriers for collaborative efforts (Connelly, 2017; O'Keeffe & Creamer, 2020).

Liston et al. (2013) identified local distinctions related to the dynamic and evolving elite sports policy arena in Northern Ireland, making it a unique site for investigation. The authors note a number of elements which characterise such uniqueness: a) the bi-partite (and sometimes, tri-partite) status of governing bodies of sports, sports councils, and athletes; b) dual nationality eligibility of athletes; c) government priorities towards the "big three" non-Olympic or Commonwealth sports (association football, Gaelic football, and rugby); d) sport policy complexities which force coaches (and athletes) from Northern Ireland to report to any number of national sports organisations across the island.

Due to this complex, nuanced status of elite sport in Northern Ireland, a wider sociocultural lens may be employed to better understand the environments, circumstances, and developmental experiences, these coaches have participated in during their careers. The present study considers the impact of such nuances as it seeks to explore this unique context as a collective case study of coaches from Northern Ireland through an ecological perspective. The present study considers whether the Northern Ireland context supports (or hinders) explicit learning on coach development and/

or corroborates with the coach education and developmental experiences of coaches in other parts of the world (Callary et al., 2014).

An ecological approach to coach development

The concept of coaching as a social process, is characterised by a series of negotiated outcomes between structurally influenced agents situated within an ever-changing environment (Cushion, 2010). Despite the notion that the social relationships which comprise coaching have much to offer (Potrac et al., 2017), essential social and cultural elements of the coaching process are often underplayed (Cushion et al., 2006; Evans, 2017). Allen and Shaw (2009) highlight the need for research into the social contexts in which coaches operate. Such research can offer support to further the understanding of the practices and cultures which influence coaches' experiences and effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

Social and political pressures from stakeholders who have, at times, conflicting or incongruous motives can come as a challenge for coaches in the form of micro-politics (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Micro-politics manifest in the Northern Ireland context with focus on the different religious, political, and ethnic identities, as well as the personal and role-related recognition, positioning individuals from Northern Ireland at an intersection of "composite" identities (McBride, 2022).

Leftwhich (2005) captures three main elements which underpin the concept of micro-politics: a) people, b) resources, and c) power, which has been demonstrated in sport contexts such as rugby (Rowley et al., 2020). With regards to the application of micro-politics in coaching, Potrac and Jones (2009) note that political interactions often take place between social actors in different organisational settings wherein the coach is situated. The aforementioned research highlights that the coach is not a lone entity and clearly influenced by the organisational and social environment in which they are situated. Despite this, scant attention has been given to examining the context/environment in which coaches' development occurs (Allen & Shaw, 2013). Therefore, exploring the social environment and cultural context surrounding coach development and the coach themselves as a social actor, would offer deeper understanding of their developmental experiences. One may begin to view the coach in this context as a learner who holds existing knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, and not divorced from others, social interaction, cultural context, and practice (Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) was used to categorise the coaches' developmental experiences into the various levels situated within the ecological model. The model was utilised to conceptualise coaching development as a chain of developmental outcomes and

activities that occur in response to personal and contextual requirements over time (Côté, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory focuses on the interconnected relationship of the micro and macro environments surrounding the individual in question. While Bronfenbrenner's (1979) initial work focused on child development, the concept has also been applied to sport settings. Côté (2006) notes that by borrowing from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ideas, coach development can be conceptualised as a chain of developmental outcomes and activities that occur in response to personal and contextual requirements over a period of time. Côté (2006) also suggests that to separate the "coach as learner" from the activities and environment in which the coach operates, does not give a concise picture of coach development.

Ecological Systems Theory in the context of coach development considers the wider contexts surrounding the coach, with the individual existing within and across various settings, with interactions occurring throughout. This concept situates the coach at an individual level and extends outward towards micro, meso, exo, and macro settings (e.g. sporting organisation, sports culture, wider societal, and cultural settings). Previous research has utilised an ecological model to understand the developmental experiences of coaches (Banwell et al., 2021; Kubayi et al., 2020; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Such research investigates the coach as an entity and expands beyond individual influences by identifying processes that shape behaviour and career development (Banwell et al., 2021). LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) review into the barriers and supports of female coaches concluded that an ecological model can be used as a reflective heuristic to educate with regards to the numerous dynamic organisational and societal barriers and supports. The authors found that in doing so, aspects such as policy changes, coping strategies, and positive developments within the relevant environment can be generated to increase opportunities for female coaches.

Coach development and learning experiences

The coach is imperative to the development of athletes with effective coaching often critical to success (Vella et al., 2010). Jones et al. (2003) note that a central tenet of coaching involves improving performance, which requires a cognitive activity to make decisions upon a multitude of dynamic situational factors (Chelladurai, 2007).

Learning activities and educational interventions such as coach development programmes are often conducted to bring about a positive behaviour change in a specific coaching domain (Lefebvre et al., 2016). Formal coach education (qualifications, accredited learning) often carries strong recognition from national sporting organisations. Formal coach education, however, often has a lower priority for many in the high-performance coach community (Rynne &

Mallett, 2012), with less time invested compared with coaching itself, which may give rise to the increased need for learner-centred development programmes (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). Until recently, coach development programmes have often been characterised by pedagogical approaches aligned with an overly simplistic view of learning. Despite a well-established understanding of the complexity inherent to both learning and coaching, this approach has endured over time. However, a more critical and innovative approach has been developed to address the shortcomings of programmes, embedding more constructivist and learner-centred strategies (Paquette & Trudel, 2018).

Outside of the formal learning environment, coaches have sought to utilise reflection and experiential learning as a development opportunity (Cronin & Lowes, 2016). Such experiential learning is often "self-initiated" and driven by the coach in question (Barker, Barker-Ruchti, Wals, et al., 2014). Sawiuk et al. (2018) note that coaching domains necessitate behaviours, practice, and expertise, to suit the domain the coach is operating within. Hence raising the question: what are the educational and developmental practices for high-performance coaches? Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) note that those in a position of responsibility for the identification, recruitment, and development of elite coaches are keen to better understand what types of coaches and coaching practices lead to sustained success. Several studies have examined the developmental pathways of sport coaches, to attempt to distinguish poignant developmental experiences coaches endure on the journey towards expertise (e.g. Blackett et al., 2018; Callary et al., 2012; Gearity et al., 2013; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016; Young et al., 2009).

To date, scant research has been conducted on the developmental and learning experiences of coaches within a Northern Ireland context. Such a dearth of literature offers an opportunity to gain insight into the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland. The present study aims to identify if the well-established research on coach development is also applicable within a country of various nuances or intricacies such as bi and tri-partite sporting administrations, dual nationalities, representation opportunities for athletes, two different coach education systems, two different coaching qualification systems and awarding bodies, and sports aligned to coach education pathways across three separate jurisdictions: Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Method

Participants

To gain a greater insight into the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland, a collective case study approach was used (Hodge & Sharp, 2017; Stake, 2005). A geographic

specific sample consisting of eight high-performance coaches from Northern Ireland were recruited for semi-structured interviews. The coaches who participated in the study were chosen for their acknowledged coaching experience at a high-performance level in their respective sports of netball, football, badminton, rugby, cycling, judo, and athletics. In relation to the jurisdiction of each sport, three of the governing bodies (rugby, badminton, cycling) are all-Ireland, representing all 32 counties across the island of Ireland. The other four governing bodies (athletics, football, netball, judo) represent the six counties of Northern Ireland. As such these sports also have a separate governing body who governs the sport in the Republic of Ireland. Despite each governing body holding specific jurisdiction, it must be noted that athletes from Northern Ireland hold the right to represent either Ireland, Northern Ireland, or UK/Great Britain in international sporting events resulting in coaches often facing tri-partite considerations.

Each participant coached athletes either at World Championships, European Championships, Summer Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, and/or professional levels. Northern Ireland consists of 6 of the 32 counties on the Island of Ireland, with the Republic of Ireland making up the other 26 counties. All coaches were based within the 6 counties (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Tyrone) of Northern Ireland during the time of the study. Six of the coaches involved were male and two were female. They ranged in age from 31 to 54 years ($M = 46.13$, $SD = 7.22$). The coaches had between 10 and 33 years of coaching experience ($M = 20.25$, $SD = 7.74$) and between 6 and 28 years of experience as a competitive athlete (developmental and high-performance) ($M = 16.25$, $SD = 8.22$). Table 1 displays the demographics of the coaches in the sample.

Procedure

Following ethical approval, coaches were invited to participate in the study by email or phone. All coaches who were contacted agreed to participate. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to the coach. All coaches were interviewed by the lead author via telephone or face to face. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes in duration. All interviews were transcribed by the lead author immediately after the completion of each interview with the researcher taking notes throughout the interview. The interview guide was developed via three methods. Firstly, conversations with co-authors who acted as a critical friends for the interview design; Secondly, via a pilot study, which was conducted independently; Thirdly, by exploring relevant literature focusing on the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches (e.g. Erickson et al., 2007; Nash & Sproule, 2009).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Coaches.

Coach Identifier Code	Gender	Sport	Highest Coaching Qualification	Highest Level Coached	Age (Years)	Total Coaching Experience (Years)	Total Playing Experience (Years)
Coach A	Male	Cycling	Level 4	Commonwealth Games	49	24	11
Coach B	Male	Soccer	Level 5	International/ Professional	43	10	20
Coach C	Male	Athletics	Level 4	Olympic Games	49	24	6
Coach D	Female	Netball	Level 4	Commonwealth Games	48	15	28
Coach E	Male	Badminton	Level 3	Commonwealth Games	31	13	12
Coach F	Male	Judo	Level 3	Olympic Games	43	17	8
Coach G	Male	Rugby	Level 2	Professional	52	26	26
Coach H	Female	Athletics	Level 4	Commonwealth Games	54	33	19
Mean					46.13	20.25	16.25
Standard Deviation					7.22	7.74	8.22

Interview questions sought to explore the life experiences of the coaches in a chronological sporting sense, from their initial experiences within a sporting domain to their current position as a high-performance coach. The interview questions challenged participants to reflect on their developmental experiences which supported or hindered their learning as a coach. Each coach was asked to recall their perspectives of each developmental experience and describe how this had supported or hindered their learning and development. The research was conducted as an inductive enquiry with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) applied during the data analysis phase.

Collective case study approach

Stake (2005, p. 443) indicates that: "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied". A collective case study is an in-depth assessment from multiple perspectives of the uniqueness of a particular group or community in a bounded context (Hodge & Sharp, 2017).

Philosophical position

Given the unique research context of the present study, the philosophical underpinning adopted was that of constructionist epistemology and a relativist ontology (multiple realities based on unique lived experiences; Smith & McGannon, 2018). That is, the coaching pathways are based on the lived experiences of coaches living and working in the unique society that is Northern Ireland (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019). We do not suggest that these

pathways are universal truths across all high-performance coaches from all countries, nor even all coaches from within Northern Ireland, however, it is important to consider the context from which the data is gleaned and how it was interpreted to best represent the lived experiences of participants from their respective context (Cronin & Armour, 2015).

Data collection

The lead author entered the study with a rich personal history of working in the coach development sphere in Northern Ireland for over ten years. As such, the lead author reflected on what a professional status within coach development might influence during the research design and interview phase through journaling and self-reflective bracketing (Fischer, 2009; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010), in the interpretation of the findings. The aim here was to reflect on one's own identity and to acknowledge any preconceptions or preconceived notions held about the topic to become more aware on how such preconceived notions might influence the data collection process or data analysis process (Giorgi, 2009). Such an approach may also inform the research, especially when interpreting context specific norms and values. Researchers typically have some intial reflexive thoughts or hypotheses based on previous experiences or from theory engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were used as a way to provide a personal, friendly encounter in which open, direct, verbal questions could be asked to elicit detailed descriptions of the coaches' developmental experiences (Whiting, 2008).

Data analysis

All the interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed, then read and re-read to develop familiarity with the data. The data were then examined to develop an understanding of the coaches' pathway, education, and developmental experiences. This process was primarily inductive in that, rather than searching for evidence of stages and experiences identified by previous research, the pathways and influential experiences were allowed to develop from the coaches' own descriptions of their journey (Patton, 2002). These were then compared across coaches to determine what, if any, commonalities existed.

The lead author engaged in the process of theme development, refinement, and naming (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was chosen as the most appropriate method to facilitate the findings. The lead author engaged in familiarisation of the dataset, coded the data, and generated initial themes. The themes were discussed and triangulated with the second and third authors who served

as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This discussion encouraged the refinement of themes. Participant coaches were provided with a copy of the findings to engage in member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018) to ensure they were comfortable what was presented and to elaborate on what was shared. It has been suggested that accruing participants from a single context (i.e. high-performance coaching in Northern Ireland) can be a useful attempt to develop meaningful claims from the participants in their own unique context (Hancock et al., 2018). As such, common norms and shared experiences in their context can be collated.

Upon the confirmation of themes, each theme was situated at a relevant level within the ecological model. In the context of the present study, emphasis was placed on how the sociocultural structures in this specific setting affect coach learning, hence, while individual agency and interpersonal relationships provide context on their relationships with the organisational structures and social systems, they are not the main focus of the findings.

Findings and discussion

To explore the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model was adopted. The model focused on the experiences which exist at each level of the model (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural). At an individual level, subthemes were in relation to *previous athletic experience* and *engagement in experiential learning*. At an interpersonal level, the subthemes consisted of *networks*, *mentoring*, and *nonsporting mentors*. At an organisational level, the subthemes were *formal learning activities*, *varying levels of governing body support*, and *previous limitations of the high-performance system*. At the sociocultural level, the subthemes were related to *Northern Ireland's unique political and geographical standing, dual nationality opportunities, and denominational perceptions of sports*. It may be contended that any given barrier or support could be situated within any of these levels. However, an ecological perspective situates interactions both within and across each of the levels, allowing one to draw upon a model which provides greater examination of the processes that shape development (Crawford, 2020). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) suggest the ecological model inherently embodies the complex, dynamic relationship between and within each of the ecological levels. In this instance, individual agency and interpersonal relationships are predisposed to both organisational structures and social systems.

Individual level

Two main themes were discussed at an individual level, *previous athletic experience* and *engagement in experiential learning*. Many of the coaches developed a passion for sport during their early athletic experiences which continued into their coaching endeavours. Previous athletic experience was identified as individual level support which contributed towards a sense of confidence when entering the high-performance environment. In addition, many of the coaches described a history of and a preference for experiential learning.

Previous athletic experience

All coaches played competitive sport before moving into coaching. During their final playing years, many of the coaches began developing an understanding of the coaching process and effective coaching skills. "The biggest thing as a coach is exposure to the coaches you have previously worked under, and that's about experiencing both the good and bad … I had the experience of seeing different people operate at different levels in from the Premier League to the Irish league. You are influenced by the coaches you're exposed to" (Male Soccer Coach).

As athletes, the coaches experienced different styles and levels of coaching, learned how the transformation of knowledge occurs, and were inspired to help other athletes. They also began to develop performance behaviours and a love of sport illustrative from the following quotes: "I was a perfectionist, I researched and worked hard" (Male Athletics Coach), "every sport I played, I wanted to be world champion, the best I could possibly be" (Male Cycling Coach), "in my head, it became a passion" (Male Soccer Coach). Coaches also noted previous athletic experience contributed towards a sense of confidence when entering the high-performance environment, "I had done it as an athlete, the experiential learning that I received (as an athlete) can't be got in any course" (Male Cycling Coach).

The coaches' previous athletic experience developed confidence and understanding of the high-performance environment along with insights into coaching practices. This finding is consistent with research that has found athletic experience, particularly high-performance experience, often provides a springboard into the coaching profession (Crickard et al., 2020). The positive growth opportunities gained through athletic engagement may also equip coaches with the the required problem-solving skills and resiliency mindset necessary within elite sport (Chroni et al., 2020). However, it has been argued that athletic experience provides only partial insight and understanding of the complexities of coaching. Furthermore, it has been suggested that in the future most high-performance coaches will have

comparatively less elite playing experience and more extensive background in coaching science (Blackett et al., 2017, 2018).

Experiential learning

Many of the coaches' learning experiences frequently included learning from "doing", this involved learning through making mistakes in situations within the coaching environment. One coach highlighted how they engaged in learning by reading or identifying theoretical models and testing their impact in practice.

The coaches described different takes on experiential learning, "I'm an experiential learner and I like to be hands on with my learning" (Male Badminton Coach). This included learning from mistakes, "I like to make my own mistakes, this helped empower me as a coach" (Male Athletics Coach). A number of coaches enjoyed testing information they had gathered from sources such as other coaches or reading, "I like to read, digest, and understand . . . I like to test theoretical models in practice, I like to learn experientially" (Male Cycling Coach).

At a personal level, previous athletic experience and experiential learning are not exclusive to coaches only within a Northern Ireland context (Chroni et al., 2020). Despite a unique organisational and sociocultural environment which the coaches faced, the components at individual level suggest that high performance coaches based within Northern Ireland learned in a similar manner to coaches around the world. This perhaps suggests that they possessed the agency to navigate and access learning across a more complex environment in relation to their organisational and cultural environments.

Interpersonal level

The themes discussed within the interpersonal level included *networks*, *mentoring*, and *non-sporting mentors*. Effective and supportive relationships supported the coaches throughout their coach development journey. The coaches cited having a range of networks, both within and outside of sport, signifying access to a multiple mentoring framework (Sawiuk et al., 2017). Some of the coaches also noted the presence of non-sporting mentors supporting their development as well as supportive environments outside of a sports context.

Networks

Opportunities to share ideas with others in the high-performance environment were valued by the coaches. This could be through formal or informal settings (Nelson et al., 2006) including coach development programmes or engaging in coaching networks. A number of the coaches noted that they

were members of communities of practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998) facilitated by national sporting organisations. Wenger et al. (2002) describe "CoP" as "a group of people (coaches) who share a common concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis" (p. 4). By focusing on the reciprocal nature of the interactions between the social context and individuals, not only are meanings developed but identities are also formed as individuals interact with each other, around a practice, within a community (Culver et al., 2009). Coaches noted that, "I have been part of communities of practice (CoP) like the PDP, Aspire and Inspire, Pursuit of Excellence programmes, CoPs are really good and offer loads of learning". (Male Judo Coach), or part of informal coaching networks, "engagement with national coaches, system coaches, other sports, I find this very useful to bounce ideas of coaches, it's vital" (Male Athletics Coach).

All the participant coaches noted that they valued the opportunity to engage in networks. A number of the coaches currently engage in high-performance networks made up of coaches from different sports as one coach said, "knowing that other high-performance coaches agree/disagree offers credibility" (Male Cycling Coach). The positive impact of learning from peers was evident even from the beginning of their sporting experience where the coaches drew inspiration, optimism, and learned about coaching from a coach, peer, or significant other within their sporting environment. The development opportunities these coaches gained through interacting with peer coaches, especially those within a similar position supports Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) suggestion that facilitating access to peers can offer an effective strategy for collective coach reflection and development. It could also be argued that due to the relatively small population of Northern Ireland and the even smaller population of high-performance coaches, there is an opportunity for coaches to collaborate and connect in a cross-sport setting. This is supported by the coaches' demonstrated desire to engage in supportive and context specific networks and communities of practice. However, the "less than optimal" status of elite sports development in Northern Ireland (Liston et al., 2013) may provide challenges and barriers to fully facilitating such a community.

Mentoring

The mentoring activities the coaches engaged with reflected a more informal relationship between mentor and mentee, despite occasions where mentoring was facilitated and coordinated by national sports agencies. As coaches became more experienced, access to mentors and the desire to be mentored increased. Some coaches received mentoring in a formal context through a national performance institute or similar organisation, however mentoring also occurred in an informal capacity often instigated by the coach

themselves as indicated here. "Mentoring is very important for me. Even in my current job, my mentors will change but you need a circle of influence, I've surrounded myself with people who have knowledge and experience. The support was good from SI (Sport Ireland), and SNI (Sport Northern Ireland)" (Male Athletics Coach).

While national sporting organisations have provided the opportunity to engage in a community of practice (Sport Northern Ireland, Sport Ireland), other networks seemed to develop organically, and mentors were often sought out by the coaches themselves rather than appointed. Here we see a unique feature of coach development in Northern Ireland in relation to other coach development activities around the world (Callary et al., 2014). The high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland were responsible for developing their own networks and finding mentors on their own, leaving what seems to be a vital experience to chance (Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). Such an approach may offer coaches the opportunity to drive their own agenda, free from elements of social control from a national governing body or national sports agency (Sawiuk et al., 2018). Ironically though, the fact they needed to drive this themselves was viewed as a hinderance and lack of support from their governing body, posing a double edged sword to the provision of mentoring the governing body offers.

The access to mentors proved to be a support mechanism for development, however, the lack of such significant others was a barrier for many of the coaches in their formative coaching years. Surprisingly, six out of the eight coaches identified as having no mentor in their early coaching years. This finding supports Erickson et al. (2007) suggestion that providers of coach development might consider making a coach/mentor pairing as part of their mandate. Due to the highly contextual and tacit nature of the high-performance environment, mentoring may provide a more bespoke pedagogical tool to facilitate learning in situations (Leeder, 2019; Leeder & Cushion, 2019) and enable coaches to make sense of their experiences.

Non-sporting mentors

Most of the coaches had a sports related mentor, however some of the coaches had mentors from outside the world of sport. As one coach said, "I've always had a mentor, usually more than one, I've always surrounded myself with experience and not always in the world of sport" (Female Netball Coach). As another coach said, "I have five or six people who I chat things through with, outside of sport too" (Male Soccer Coach).

Non-sporting mentors featured centrally within the learning experiences of a number of coaches within the study. These coaches held the support of non-sporting members as a valuable contributor to their overall development. Such a finding connects with Sawiuk et al. (2017) work in relation to a multiple mentoring framework, where it is noted that non-sport or cross

sports mentors were suggested to provide bespoke and personal support to the coach mentees. The coaches in this study, much like Sawiuk et al. (2017) study, valued expertise and learning from outside of the sports domain.

Supportive environment

One individual barrier which has been investigated across coaching demographics is work-family conflict (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2014; Leberman & LaVoi, 2011). Such conflict may pose a limiting factor at an individual/interpersonal level, and if addressed, may offer a greater pool of both male and female coaching candidates (Fasting et al., 2017). Importance of family support was mentioned consistently amongst coaches.

Many coaches identified family support began in their early athletic endeavours and continued into their coaching careers as one coach said, "My family have been supportive all the way through, I couldn't have travelled so much without their support" (Male Athletics Coach). Support from family members was deemed by many coaches to be a main factor in their overall engagement in sport and journey into coaching. As coaches reflected: "My father got involved because I was there (in the club)" (Male Athletics Coach), "My mother realised I was the most competitive person in the family and I was encouraged to do sport at home" (Female Netball Coach), "My father coached me up until I went full time, he was an enormous influence" (Male Athletics Coach).

In the context of Northern Ireland's wider sociocultural setting, one coach mentioned how his father wanted his club setting to be a cross community environment (with both Protestant and Catholic participants), however received pushback by some members of the club as the region was still religiously and culturally divided (Liston & Deighan, 2019).

Organisational level

At an organisational level, the subthemes discussed were *formal learning activities*, *varying levels of governing body support*, and *previous limitations of the high-performance system*. Liston et al. (2013) note that the bedrock for the development of a formal high-performance sports environment in Northern Ireland could be described as less than optimal, given the uniqueness of dual nationality eligibility for athletes and the co-jurisdictional status of sport there. Coaches' responses also reflected a range of organisational barriers in relation to Governing Body support and engagement. A major organisational barrier which was identified from the study was in relation to a sub-optimal high-performance system across many sports in Northern Ireland at the time of their entry into high performance coaching. An important finding in the present study was the lack of clarity on the journey

towards becoming a high-performance coach in Northern Ireland and disparity in the identification and recruitment processes for high-performance coaching positions. The majority of coaches highlighted that prior to taking a high-performance position they were unsure of how to access such opportunities. Each of the coaches highlighted varying methods of recruitment, ranging from formal application processes, to being asked over the phone if they want a job, to "drifting into it". This offers the opportunity to establish identification and recruitment systems to support the journey for potential high-performance coaches.

A number of coaches mentioned organisational supports from national sports development agencies. These came in the form of support services for athletes and high-performance communities of practice (CoP). Governing bodies were not identified as hosting or facilitating CoP in Northern Ireland. National sports development agencies did however serve as providers of such opportunities. This is a common developmental activity in other national sporting systems and often facilitated by the lead sporting policy agency (Callary et al., 2014). However, in this study, coaches noted that multiple sports development agencies from Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, provided such supports, illustrating another unique feature of elite sport in Northern Ireland (Liston et al., 2013).

Female coaches are underrepresented in the present study and within the coaching population in Northern Ireland (Sport Northern Ireland, 2010). Much research has demonstrated the lack of female coaches at the high-performance level (Fasting et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2018). One female coach noted that the cost of coach education courses had been a barrier to her development. The lack of organisational support in this instance (e.g. subsidised courses) highlighted a specific barrier towards development. Further understanding of the organisational barriers experienced by female coaches in Northern Ireland would help develop strategies to recruit and develop more females into high-performance sport.

Formal learning activities

Each of the coaches experienced learning in the formal sense, by undertaking either professional accredited coaching qualifications or academic qualifications. The comments below illustrate the varied perspective in relation to formal learning. "The UKCC was the best learning for me personally, because we are able to build upon knowledge that I already had and take it further in terms of coaching" (Female Netball Coach). However, one coach spoke of not seeking formal education, "I stopped formal education when I started getting really busy with coaching. Previous to that, I had level four accreditation. Formal education is not the be all and end all" (Male Athletics Coach). The impact of formal learning

varied throughout. Some of the coaches found formal learning to be useful, however others varied on this perspective and were indifferent towards the impact formal learning had played in their personal and professional development. Coaches also mentioned that they sometimes experienced geographical barriers to access formal learning activities with some training requiring travel either to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland, depending on governing body locations.

Varied levels of governing body support

A number of the coaches identified limited support from their governing bodies in progressing their development. One coach noted how the relationship with the governing body changed when he became a high-performance coach. This was due to the fact the governing body was now reliant on his performance as a coach and the expectations to win games and competitions, "I worked closely with the governing body but then they began to rely on me as an employee" (Male Rugby Coach). Two coaches noted they had received free access to learning opportunities, and this was considered an act of support, "I received no real support from the NGB, apart from possibly the national conference" (Female Athletics Coach).

While none of the coaches were overtly critical of their governing bodies, it was clear that many felt unsupported by their parent sport association. When asked about governing body support, four of the coaches answered very briefly, "*no support*" or "none" and did not elaborate further. Why this narrative came through is difficult to pinpoint and may have some underlying social identity and political complexities (i.e. Northern Ireland as a smaller component of a wider British or Irish system), however, the concept of "no support" from governing bodies may be worth further investigation. It also may be worth exploring if and how governing bodies have developed their learning and support offer to HP coaches since the participants began their coach development journey many years ago. Additionally, understanding what high-performance coaches interpret to be what adequate support looks like, may help governing bodies to identify potential opportunities in the future.

Previous limitations of the high-performance system in Northern Ireland

It is worth noting that significant development has occurred in relation to the high-performance system in Northern Ireland since the coaches began their developmental journey towards the high-performance environment, some of which began over 20 years ago. A lack of resources and opportunities is common in smaller markets such as Northern Ireland. A high percentage of the coaches mentioned having to leave Northern Ireland (geographic barrier) to access development experiences or employment in a high-performance role, "I did UKCC Level 2 in Scotland . . . . if I had

completed this back in Northern Ireland, I wouldn't have had access to the same expertise" (Female Netball Coach).

While some coaches were linked with a wider British or Irish system, others had to "construct a system from scratch and create their own HP environment" (Male Badminton Coach). This was reinforced further by suggestions that the induction into the high-performance environment was less than ideal, "there was no induction as there was no system, there was nothing to recruit into" (Male Soccer Coach). The majority of coaches did not experience formal recruitment into their respective high-performance programme but rather came about it informally though phone calls or self-selection. Initiatives such as coach succession planning, formalised recruitment processes, or transition programmes seemed to be absent leaving a rather haphazard way of moving into high-performance sport, as one coach put it that they "just drifted into it" (Male Athletics Coach).

Sociocultural level

The main subthemes within the sociocultural level were *Northern Ireland's unique political and geographical standing, dual nationality opportunities, and denominational perceptions of sports*. Findings at a sociocultural level encompasses the norms and cultural systems surrounding the coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Analysis of coach development considers understanding the "ways of being" which persist within the boundaries of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland (Barker, Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, et al., 2014).

Northern Ireland's unique political and geographical standing

Murray and Hassan (2017) note that despite significant improvements in the social and political landscape within Northern Ireland in recent years, sport and social identity has maintained its potency. Notwithstanding this, only one of the coaches mentioned how "the Troubles" specifically had affected their developmental experience. The coach noted that during this time sport offered an escape from the civil unrest and social challenges that the wider population were experiencing. The concept of nationalism and identity did however become apparent in relation to the sporting systems in which the coaches operated. The complexities of the Northern Ireland sporting environment became apparent with many coaches operating in either British, Irish, or a Northern Irish specific sporting system. Many of the high-performance programmes in Northern Ireland are connected to a larger British or Irish system. This reflects the complex milieu which characterises sport across the region through ties to either catholic or protestant religious communities (Hassan & Ferguson, 2019). This also

reflects the cross-jurisdictional, sociocultural position of wider Northern Ireland society. Anecdotal accounts report incidents of gatekeeping and exclusion from access to resources, training facilities, or deselection from participation depending on one's decision of which jurisdiction to represent as an athlete or coach. Northern Ireland's position has meant that a number of the coaches in the study had to leave Northern Ireland for high-performance opportunities and coach education. This has clearly also been the case with many high-profile coaches outside of this study and from other similar smaller countries and regions (e.g. Hämäläinen & Blomqvist, 2016).

To fully analyse developmental experiences of coaches', the sociocultural context must be considered. The coaches in the present study grew up in Northern Ireland and lived through a time where sectarianism and social unrest was central in society, influenced by British and Irish social under-pinnings (O'Keeffe & Creamer, 2020). Instead of having one national sporting organisation leading their development, which is the practice of many other nations (Callary et al., 2014), bi-partite or tri-partite agencies have been at the mainstay of their learning and development. Bi-partite and tri-partite influences come with their own unique political challenges as differing governing bodies may seek to protect their "assets" (coaches/athletes) and serve out specific agendas in terms of funding, representation, and competition. Despite this challenge of potentially "stepping on toes", the coaches have negotiated their way towards a varied programme of developmental and supportive learning experiences, often self-directed and without the support of their governing body.

Dual nationality opportunities

The Good Friday Agreement has afforded Northern Ireland athletes the opportunity to hold dual nationalities (British and Irish), this in turn, has offered athletes the opportunity to represent either Great Britain or Ireland on the world stage, thus effectively providing additional opportunities to compete. Coaches have also benefited from this opportunity, with the opportunity to become qualified across different jurisdictions. The coach noted, "as a club you have to follow your relevant governing body, but as a coach you don't. You have the choice of where you undertake your coaching qualifications" (Male Cycling Coach). While sensitivities exist in relation to which path a coach will choose, having the option to pursue education through a number of pathways does offer flexibility and oppor-tunity for the coach.

Denominational perceptions of sports

Despite the opportunities which dual nationalities offer, it was clear from the coach's dialogue that sports within Northern Ireland are still perceived

as denominational (i.e. catholic or protestant). Sports such as GAA are seen as traditionally catholic, while sports such as rugby and field hockey as seen as traditionally protestant. One coach highlighted that "even though an athlete or participant population may be religiously balanced or slightly towards the other religion, the national governing body may be viewed as having a tendency towards a specific religion based in history" (Female Netball Coach). This is not a feature which other countries necessarily have to navigate and reflective of the nuanced status of Northern Ireland, further reinforced by the bi-partite and tri-partite nature of sport governing bodies.

Summary and conclusion

In order to better understand the developmental experiences of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland, a collective case study through an ecological perspective was adopted based on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). It is suggested that an ecological perspective offered a more holistic overview of each coaches' developmental experiences and assisted in categorising and organising these developments across the four levels within the model (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural). In the present study, an ecological approach afforded the opportunity to view coaches' development as a dynamic social microcosm (Cushion, 2007) by capturing the coaches' surrounding environments and organisations. These elements were characterised by complex and dynamic interdependencies, between social and ecological sub-systems (Gain et al., 2020) with coaches sharing levels of influence from the most proximal (individual) to the most distal (sociocultural) (Burton & LaVoi, 2016).

The present study found that ignoring the social and organisational factors experienced by coaches in Northern Ireland is to ignore the wider context in which they practice, learn, and develop. The present study reinforced Côté (2006) comments in relation to using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model to conceptualise coaching development as a series of developmental outcomes occurring in response to personal and contextual requirements over a period of time. These experiences are situated in the complex social context of Northern Ireland and the sporting environment positioned within its borders. The adoption of an ecological perspective is an effective method of capturing the developmental landscape of high-performance coaches in Northern Ireland. The ecological perspective offers a deeper understanding of the specific geographical context in which these coaches operate.

Through the coaches' responses, one can see how sociocultural elements are interwoven within the ecological model. For example, the sociocultural status of Northern Ireland (i.e. divided society, multiple expressions of identity, strong government influence from the United Kingdom and the

Republic of Ireland) effects the status and structure of elite sports development policy. This in turn ensures that coaches at an interpersonal level, may have to navigate a number of barriers such as reporting to a range of sporting agencies, pursuing formal education in other countries, and seeking out their own networks.

It was highlighted within the present study that governing body support for high-performance coach development has the potential to vastly improve in Northern Ireland in relation to recruitment, clarity of pathway, education, and development. However, it is noted that the early developmental experiences of these coaches did occur mainly over two decades ago. While most of the coaches spoke positively about learning opportunities provided by national sports agencies, many of the peer networks developed were led by the coach and not supported by the governing body. The present study consisted of coaches from the same country operating across different jurisdictions, often reporting to agencies and governing bodies in the United Kingdom or Ireland. One action which may be useful based on the coaches' desire to engage in networks and learn from peers and mentors would be to pursue greater collaboration between the various national sports agencies, performance institutes, and governing bodies. Such effective partnerships may transcend organisational and sociocultural barriers and improve coach development throughout the region.

While the nature of bi-partite and tri-partite relationships may offer complications in various areas, some coaches did see this as an opportunity to pursue a variety of pathways towards their learning and development and were afforded a sense of choice. Despite the challenges which a multi-agency approach provides (differing strategic directions, opposing jurisdictional priorities) Northern Ireland is an evident example of how agencies can work together to create learning opportunities and developmental experiences for their high-performance coaches. Future research could assess the benefits that smaller or lesser resourced countries may receive by collaborating with larger, more established partners.

Despite the majority of the coaches living through "the Troubles" period, there was still a hesitancy to mention or discuss the impact that period had on wider society and in sport on the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland in particular. Indeed, the state was in a significant period of social struggle, however the coaches neglected to really address the full extent of the conflict. This reluctance is perhaps telling, mere mention of this period can be emotionally triggering for individuals with most on the island preferring to leave that period in the past. The fact that coaches chose not to go into much depth around such a significant period of strife in Northern Ireland perhaps also displays the sensitivities and lingering impact which this conflict provided. A number of factors could be at play here such as inter-generational trauma (e.g. Downes et al., 2013), thus the researchers needed to tread lightly

on the subject. One such lingering effect of that time period is displayed where sports are still often perceived as denominational (i.e. "catholic sports" and "protestant sports"), which is unique to the Northern Ireland context. The notion of denominational sports could severely restrict a coach's journey or affiliation with that sport. This is generally not the case in other countries around the globe, and highly illustrated when "new" sports enter the Northern Ireland sporting arena without any such legacies, such as ice hockey which brings the communities together (Hassan, 2004; Lepp, 2018). Future research on how the perceived denominational nature of some sports affects coach development in Northern Ireland may also prove fruitful in understanding the social context of coach development in Northern Ireland.

Disclosure statement

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