



## A longitudinal examination of stressors, appraisals, and coping in youth swimming



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Involvement in sport has the potential to cause athletes, coaches, and parents to experience stress. However, the extent to which experiences of stress are shared within the athletic triad is unknown. The purpose of this study was to examine the individual and shared stress experiences among youth swimmers, their mothers, and coach within the context of training, tapering, and competition.

**Design:** Multi-case study design.

**Method:** Four female swimmers, their mother, and one coach completed daily diaries for six weeks and up to three semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through within- and cross-case thematic analysis.

**Results:** The study showed evidence of shared stress experiences between all three members of the athletic triad. Participants predominately encountered organizational stressors, which they appraised in relation to movements between squad, interpersonal relationships, and overall progress towards performance goals/outcomes. Numerous coping strategies were employed by participants, with varying degrees of effectiveness, such as seeking social support, distancing, and lift sharing. The coping strategies used by coaches, swimmers, and parents were often interrelated with participants frequently seeking emotional support from one another. The majority of stressors and appraisals cited by parents and swimmers were shared, with both heavily relying on social support to help each other cope with the stressors encountered.

**Conclusion:** Athletes, parents, and coaches have the capacity to influence one another's stress experiences and as such their experiences should be considered simultaneously to maximize the impact of interventions.

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Involvement in youth sport has been associated with a number of stressors among athlete, parent, and coach populations (Frey, 2007; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Nicholls, Hemmings, & Clough, 2010). If individuals are unable to effectively cope with these stressors, it can result in negative outcomes both individually and in terms of the relationships that exist within the athlete triad (athletes, parents, and coaches; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004;

Tamminen & Holt, 2010b). Given such consequences, substantial attention has been given to examining stress experiences in sport (see Nicholls, 2016; for review<sup>2</sup>).

Contemporary approaches to understanding stress and coping experiences utilize a transactional approach (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1999). Here stress is viewed as a process of an ongoing transaction between an individual and their environment, mediated by that person's cognitive appraisal of the environmental demand or stressor they encounter. The term stressor is used to denote "environmental demands encountered by individuals" (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu et al., 2006, p. 329). Lazarus and Folkman postulated that strain arises from a perceived imbalance between environmental demands (stressors) and an individual's coping resources.

According to Lazarus (1999) there are two types of appraisals:

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<sup>2</sup> A full synthesis of this literature is beyond the scope of this manuscript. Readers are referred to Crocker et al. (2015); Nicholls, Taylor, Carrroll and Perry (2016) and Fletcher and Arnold (2016) for some of the latest reviews in the area.

primary and secondary. Primary appraisal is concerned with how an individual evaluates the personal significance of the situation in relation to his or her own beliefs, values, and goals. Secondary appraisal is an individual's cognitive evaluative process that focuses on what can be done to manage the stressful situation and whether the individual feels they possess the ability to cope (Lazarus, 1999). Having appraised the demand, the extent to which individuals may experience strain is dependent upon their implementation of effective coping strategies (Lazarus, 1999). When a person appraises a given encounter they may employ specific coping strategies to deal with the demand or stressor encountered. The implementation of such coping strategies can vary in effectiveness (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005). Thus, to assess the stress process in sport awareness of stressors, appraisals, coping, and coping effectiveness is necessary.

In applying the transactional model within the sporting context, a plethora of research examining stressors and coping in athletes (often, but not exclusively, adult athletes), coaches, and increasingly parents has emerged (e.g., Frey, 2007; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009; Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2010). Some research has focused on examining changes in stressors and coping over very short time periods, for example during a single competition (Gaudreau, Blondin & Lapierre, 2002), while other research has been prospective and longitudinal in nature (Levy, Nicholls, Marchant, & Polman, 2009; Nicholls, Levy, Grice, & Polman, 2009; Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009; Thelwell et al., 2010). In line with the transactional model the key findings in the literature suggest that stressors fluctuate over time and differ depending upon whether demands are encountered in training or competition. Linked to this, there is substantial evidence that athletes and coaches experience stressors from competitive, organizational and personal sources (Thelwell et al., 2010; Woodman & Hardy, 2001) and for parents, competitive, organizational, and developmental sources (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b).

With regards to coping strategies, research indicates that coping is dynamic in nature and athletes employ multiple coping strategies to manage a single stressor at any given time point (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Nicholls, Levy, et al., 2009; Tamminen & Holt, 2010a). Athletes appear to utilize problem-focused coping strategies when stressors are perceived as controllable, whereas stressors with low levels of perceived control are associated with emotion-focused strategies (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Moreover, it appears that athletes employ different coping strategies on training days compared to competition day and that coping effectiveness may be higher on competition days (Nicholls, Jones, et al., 2009; Nicholls, Levy, et al., 2009). Olusoga, Butt, Maynard, and Hays (2010) similarly reported that coaches employed a variety of coping strategies, often simultaneously, to manage the demands encountered in the world-class sporting context. The coaches' predominately used problem-focused strategies such as structuring and planning, and time management, as well as engaging in professional development opportunities. Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu (2016) meanwhile identified that reappraisal, problem-, and emotion-focused coping strategies were required for parents to manage the demands they encounter in youth sport.

In comparison to that of stressors encountered or coping deployed, fewer studies have been conducted examining appraisals within sport contexts (Nicholls, Perry, & Calmeiro, 2014). Those studies that have examined appraisals (e.g., Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012; Nicholls et al., 2010; Tamminen & Holt, 2010b) have typically focused upon athletes. Findings have indicated that: contextual factors likely influence stressor appraisals (e.g., Tamminen & Holt, 2010b); appraisals are often in the form of harm

or threat (Hanton et al., 2012); and appraisals are dynamic and change over time (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2005; Tamminen & Holt, 2010a). Given such findings, expanding our understanding of stressor appraisals across athletes, coaches, and parents is warranted in order to enhance the effectiveness of subsequent stress intervention programs delivered with these populations.

Further, despite the continued commitment to research in this area, there are a number of aspects that warrant further examination. For example, although there are some notable exceptions (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2010; Tamminen & Holt, 2010a, 2012), research examining the overall stress process has generally focused upon adult rather than youth athletes. Given that children and adolescents often have more limited coping abilities than adults (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006; Tamminen & Holt, 2012), and as such might be at greater risk of experiencing strain, ensuring a thorough understanding of their experiences of stress is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of interventions with this population.

Additionally, although a large body of literature exists examining athletes', coaches', and increasingly parents' experiences of stress in sport, these studies have generally considered individuals in isolation or dyads (see for e.g., Hanton et al., 2005; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Olusoga et al., 2010) resulting in limited attention being given to how the stress experiences of individuals across the athletic triad are related (Burgess et al., 2016). This lack of research is surprising considering that parents, coaches, and athletes have a substantial capacity to influence one another's behaviors and experiences (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Tamminen & Holt, 2010b) and spend considerable time interacting during childhood and adolescence (Harwood & Knight, 2016).

Parents have been shown not only to be a source of strain for children (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009) but also influence children's coping strategies (Lafferty & Dorrell, 2006; Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Indeed, given young athletes' limited coping capabilities, they are typically reliant on social support from parents and coaches (Fletcher et al., 2006). Similarly, children can influence their parents' behaviors through their responses and requirements (Dorsch et al., 2009), and their performances and behaviors during competitions themselves can be a source of stress for parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b). Parents and coaches also influence each other within youth sport contexts (Knight & Gould, 2016). For instance, it is not uncommon for coaches to frequently interact with parents, and, in turn, for parents to be a large source of strain for coaches (Knight & Harwood, 2009). According to Knight and Harwood (2009), tennis coaches cited a variety of parental behaviors as stressors. The prominent stressors were categorized into stressors related directly to coach-parent contact and indirectly via parent-child interactions. Similarly, coach-parent interactions can cause parents strain (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b) and coaches have the potential to influence athletes' stress experiences, both by acting as a stressor for athletes and by influencing their coping capacity (e.g., Nicolas, Gaudreau, & Franche, 2011).

Taken together, the literature gives a clear indication that members of the athletic triad can all influence each other's stress experiences. However, the exact ways in which one parties' stressors, appraisals, or coping strategies are experienced by, and potentially influence, the stress experience of others is unknown. Given that parents and coaches both play a large role in the lives of adolescent athletes (Côté, 1999) there is a particular need to examine the complex interactions within the athletic triad during this time (Burgess et al., 2016). To this end, the purpose of this study was to explore the individual and shared stress experiences of adolescent swimmers, their parents, and their coach across three phases of swimming (training, tapering, and competition). The study sought to answer four key research questions: 1) What

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