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'I'm not the police': practical strategies for sport coach mentors to develop trust and trustworthiness

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines trust and trustworthiness in sport coach mentor-mentee relationships. Specifically, we investigate the place and importance of trust from the mentor's perspective and establish how trustworthy impressions are actively developed. Guided by theoretical ideas addressing trust relations, we conducted 18 online, two-to-one semi-structured interviews with nine mentors affiliated with two National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of sport. Data were subjected to a phronetic, iterative analysis, which involved inductive and deductive sensemaking and an interactive writing process. Key findings suggested a) that the mentors defined trust as a crucial construct in the development of mentee motivation, learning, and engagement, b) establishing trustworthy impressions was important for the mentors' material and non-material interests, c) mentors reported how mentees were initially aloof due to an apparent distrust of NGBs, and d) mentors used numerous interactional strategies to create trustworthy impressions. These included i) deformalising mentor-mentee relationships, ii) actively demonstrating reliability as mentors, iii) using mutually beneficial lies to simultaneously secure buy-in and build mentee confidence and self-esteem, iv) illustrating their own fallibility as sport coaches, v) considering the value of displaying their own coaching competency, and vi) developing mentees' competencies through empowerment. The findings offer practical strategies for NGBs and other [non]sporting bodies to support mentors in creating trustworthy impressions and building successful mentoring relationships.

Introduction

This paper examines trust and trustworthiness in sport coach mentor-mentee relationships. Specifically, we investigate the place and importance of interpersonal trust from the mentor's perspective and establish how trustworthy impressions are actively developed. At present, sport coaching is wrestling with issues surrounding volunteerism, professionalisation, and inconsistencies related to coach education provision (Cushion 2015). In the quest to professionalise sport coaching,

there has been a purposeful move towards coaches needing to engage with formal coach education qualifications and assessments to be deemed as 'competent' (Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2016, Taylor and Garratt 2010). However, formal coach education provision has been criticised for its decontextualised nature and 'one-size-fits-all' approach, which often overlooks coaches' personal needs, wants, and desires and fails to change their practice (Cope et al. 2021, Cushion, Stodter, and Clarke 2022).

Sport coach mentoring has been positioned as a pedagogical approach, which may overcome these criticisms of formal coach education, due to its ability to support the experiential learning of coaches in a contextualised, bespoke, and meaningful manner (Cushion 2015, Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Informal mentoring refers to observations and interactions, which promote reflective practice with other coaches in-situ, without oversight and direction from a National Governing Body (NGB). In contrast, formalised sport coach mentoring programmes are designed and delivered by NGBs, where relationships are more structured, evaluated, and monitored in relation to predetermined objectives (Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2018). Thus, sport coach mentorship is a social process involving interactions, interdependence, and the interests of multiple stakeholders, which does not operate in a social, political, or technological vacuum (Cushion 2015, Leeder and Sawiuk 2021, Potrac 2016). For example, trust and trustworthiness are considered essential features of successful sport coach mentoring pedagogy (Alexander and Bloom 2023, Chambers 2015, Jones, Harris, and Miles 2009), despite being frequently overlooked within the literature (Leeder and Cushion 2020).

Beyond sport coaching, a variety of other fields (e.g. education, healthcare, and business) have also positioned mentoring as a common social practice that is underpinned by relational trust (Baker et al. 2019, Fleig-Palmer, Rathert, and Porter 2018, Vostal, LaVenia, and Horner 2019). For example, Kerry and Mayes (2013) contend that trusting relationships enable learning to occur more effectively and collaboratively. Further, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998, 341) have argued that trust 'is an important variable in all human learning', with trust and trustworthiness helping to facilitate connectedness between individuals and develop professional and social capital. Mentoring relations lacking interpersonal trust can become difficult (e.g. toxic, selfish, undermining, conflict-ridden, career-damaging, uncivil, and deceptive; Ivey and Dupre 2022) and, as such, reduce job satisfaction and wellbeing and/or increase stress and anxiety for both mentors and mentees (Eby et al. 2008).

Despite trust being recognised as a critical facet of mentor-mentee relationships in other fields, there is a need to further develop our empirical, theoretical, and applied knowledge of this topic in sport, exercise, and health mentoring contexts. There is a paucity of research that explicitly aims to understand the role of interpersonal trust using a designated theoretical framework (cf., Gale et al. 2019). Further, sport coach mentors receive limited professional development, training, and ongoing support opportunities for navigating trust relations in their work (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). This situation has resulted in Potrac (2016, 85), among others (e.g. Leeder and Sawiuk 2021), arguing the need for research that better prepares 'mentors and coach educators to gain the trust and "buy-in" of those they engage with'. It is also important to recognise that sport coach mentors are now increasingly required to navigate neoliberal working conditions (e.g. non-standard employment and intense performance auditing; Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2018), which often create a culture of distrust, fear, and paranoia (Kalleberg 2009). For example, Verhaeghe (2014) argues that individuals are becoming risk-averse and that this has led to a reluctance, even at the interpersonal level, to make oneself vulnerable in trust-based relationships for fear of being exposed. According to Colley (2005), researchers need to develop knowledge of these mentoring issues through focusing on the relationship between micro-level interactions and their wider socio-political context. They argue that this requires the use of qualitative approaches, which 'reveal the meaning and intentions brought to practice by all its stakeholders' (Colley 2005, 41).

Through a social constructionist framework, this paper aims to generate original and rigorous knowledge concerning why and how sport coach mentors develop trustworthy impressions with mentees. Assuming trust and trustworthiness are social phenomena developed *in and through* relations in a particular culture, the specific research questions guiding the investigation were: a)

from the mentor's perspective, what is the place and importance of interpersonal trust in mentor-mentee relationships; b) how do structural (i.e. organisational) conditions influence and shape relations of trust between mentors and mentees; and c) what strategies are used by the mentors to develop trustworthy impressions? We argue this paper makes a significant contribution to the sport coach mentorship literature by advancing our knowledge of the intricate interpersonal and political processes involved in the development of trust and trustworthiness and how and why mentors engage in strategic practices to actively create trustworthy impressions (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021, Potrac 2016). This, in turn, may better enable NGBs and other [non]sporting bodies to develop evidence-based training that equips sport coach mentors with a reflective framework to develop trustworthy impressions and build successful mentor-mentee relationships within their own unique contexts, situations, and interactions.

Theoretical framework

The respective theorising of Hardin (2002) and Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) were combined to frame our exploration of trust and trustworthiness in sport coach mentor-mentee relationships. As will become evident, both theories recognise that trust and trustworthy impressions are social constructs developed through relational interactions by the people in a culture that already exists. For Hardin (2002), trust is an *encapsulated interest*, proposing that trust exists when the truster (e.g. mentee) believes that the trusted (e.g. mentor) has incentive to act in the interests of the truster or to take their interests to heart. The primary foundation of this model is the assumption that there is an important incentive for the sport coach mentor to be trustworthy, which, for Hardin (2002), comes in two main categories. *Internal inducements* are concerned with the embodiment of social and cultural norms, especially a sense of morality that drives a compunction to fulfil commitments without need of sanction (e.g. love, friendship, civic duty). *External inducements* are driven by the sanctioning and rewarding capacities of others, including legal and other institutional constraints and, more broadly, by the gaze of society at large (e.g. financial gain, career reputation).

Although Hardin (2002) establishes the tenets of trust and trustworthiness, his work is less concerned with the actual behaviours of the trusted party (e.g. mentor), which can initiate, maintain, damage, or repair a trust relationship during repeated interactions. For us, trustworthiness is not only built on the recognition of incentivised cooperation (i.e. encapsulated interests), but, in addition, on the continued instances of expected, positive behaviours of the trusted, which confirm their commitment to the relationship. For example, a mentee coach will trust their coach mentor to provide them with effective guidance, while a mentor trusts their mentee to commit to embracing new coaching pedagogies. Hence, trust is relational and dynamic, with individuals becoming more disposed to trust someone who proves to be trustworthy (Gale et al. 2019).

Therefore, in addition to Hardin (2002), we also used Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) theorising for this investigation. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) suggest that there are five facets of trust, which allow the truster to make judgements about the trustworthiness of trusted. First, coach mentors can create trustworthy impressions through the common act of *benevolence*. This involves presenting an attitude of goodwill, showing consideration for the mentee's interests, demonstrating to them that their wellbeing, or something they care about, will be protected, and refraining from exploiting their vulnerabilities for personal gain even when there is the opportunity to do so. Second, mentors may confirm their trustworthiness through *openness*, which is about making oneself vulnerable to create an environment of reciprocal sharing of, or not withholding, information. For example, coach mentors may share professional secrets, strategies, personal limitations, and previous mistakes in the interest of helping the mentee to succeed and to encourage them to share their own thoughts and ideas without the fear of being exploited or denigrated. For Leeder and Sawiuk (2021), this is an important yet often overlooked feature of mentoring practice. Third, coach mentors can demonstrate trustworthiness through being *honest*. Central to the development of honesty is

authenticity and integrity. Authenticity can be exemplified by not distorting the truth about the coaching situation or performance, accepting responsibility for one's actions, and avoiding the shifting of blame to another. Integrity relates to a positive correspondence between one's behaviours and values. For Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999, 188), then, honesty is about remaining true to '"what really happened" from that person's perspective and when one's word about future actions is kept'. Fourth, mentors can further operationalise trustworthiness through *reliability*, which combines a sense of predictability and benevolence or caringness. That is, they can be relied upon to act in good faith and deliver on commitments that they have made to mentees (e.g. sticking to a previously agreed routine in terms of contact and engagements with mentees). For the mentee, then, the mentor is deemed to be reliable when they do not have to invest energy into worrying or making alternative arrangements because they know the mentor can be counted upon to meet their needs. Fifth and finally, *competence* is an important facet of trustworthiness, especially when a degree of knowledge and expertise are fundamental to successful role performance. A sport coach mentee may take comfort in knowing that the coach mentor has accumulated a sufficient degree of coaching experience, qualifications, and status as an employed NGB mentor (Leeder and Cushion 2020). According to Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), an individual who is well intentioned yet does not have the necessary levels of competence is not trusted. For example, the mentee of an inexperienced sport coach mentor may feel that this mentor wishes very much to support them, but if the mentor has a poor track record, the mentee will likely not trust the mentor (cf. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). While each of the five facets of trust described above are important for establishing trustworthiness in their own right, these facets are often interconnected, with the relative significance of benevolence, openness, honesty, reliability, and competence being dependent upon the specific relational context. In summary, we believe the amalgamation of Hardin (2002) and Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) has much to offer to the critical examination of trust and trustworthiness in sport coach mentorship. For this study, they facilitated analyses of how sport coach mentors *constructed* knowledge of, and attached meaning *to*, trust and trustworthiness. Further, the frames enabled conceptual explanation of the mechanisms that underlay and shaped their behaviours, views, and perspectives.

Methods

Participant recruitment

Following ethical approval from the first author's institutional Research Ethics Committee, a three-phase purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit sport coach mentors (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). We first agreed on criteria for selecting participants: a) 18-years and over; b) currently qualified (i.e. certified by a NGB) as a sport coach mentor; and c) willing to discuss their experiences of trust and trustworthiness. We then used network sampling to recruit three participants who we knew would meet these criteria and be willing to participate in our investigation. Thereafter, snowball sampling – asking recruited participants to share the contact details of other interested sport coach mentors – was used to find additional participants. The final sample comprised nine, White British male sport coach mentors affiliated with two NGBs and employed on casual contracts. In line with the aspirations of their NGB, these individuals were required to provide formalised mentoring support to develop the mentees' skills and challenge them to take responsibility for their own development. This included a) targeted individualised one-to-one support, b) encouragement to break down barriers and challenge inequalities, and c) help mentees work towards additional NGB certification. However, as Colley (2005, 32) suggests, even formal mentoring environments such as these are likely to include informal or 'hybridised' attributes of learning (e.g. paternalism, individuality, friendship). The table below provides further background information about the coach mentors involved in this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Background information for the sport coach mentor research participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Coaching-related qualifications	Mentoring experience (years)	Coaching experiences (years)	Industry of full-time occupation
Danny	35	UKCC Level 4	5	16	HE Sport
George	32	UKCC Level 2	2	9	Elite Sport
Parker	26	UKCC Level 3	5	9	Community Sport
Finley	58	UKCC Level 3	30	28	Retired
Charlie	64	UKCC Level 3	30	40	Sport Coaching
Riley	51	UKCC Level 3	3	17	Sport Coaching
Marley	53	UKCC Level 3	20	33	HE Sport
Zion	56	UKCC Level 4	5	34	HE Sport
Freddie	32	UKCC Level 3	5	10	Community Sport

Data generation

This research investigation was underpinned by social constructionism. We adopted a relativist position that prioritised the examination of knowledge as contextual, multiple, and mind-dependent. Indeed, epistemologically, social constructionism 'proffers that knowledge is constructed through cultural auspices and relational interactions rather than something that is objectively observed, discovered, or found' (Papathomas 2016, 37). This position, then, facilitated clear analyses of how coach mentors' meanings of – and practices related to – trust and trustworthiness were developed in and through social (inter)actions with other mentors, mentees, NGBs, and other individuals.

In line with our constructionist position, we used two-to-one semi-structured interviews as our method of data generation: an interview form consisting of the simultaneous, active involvement of two interviewers and one research participant (Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer 2021). Semi-structured interviews are an established interactional method that allowed us to generate knowledge *together* with the coach mentors and co-construct a situated report about meanings of trust and trustworthiness in the coach mentorship milieu (cf. Koro-Ljungberb, 2008).

Prior to conducting the interviews, the research team iteratively developed an interview guide to direct the conversations. This guide was informed by our theory framework, our own experiences, and critical conversations within the research team. It broadly focused on a) the place and importance of being trustworthy as a sport coach mentor, b) developing trust relations with mentees, c) the role of reciprocal trust in mentor-mentee interactions, and d) the structural influences shaping relations of [dis]trust. We shared the interview guide with the participants c. seven days prior to the interview to provide them an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the guide and, importantly, think about the questions posed. Upon completion of two pilot interviews, it was agreed that the first author would adopt the role of the lead interviewer for topics a and c, working through the guide and using follow-up probes, while the third author actively listened, made notes, and asked curiosity-driven questions as unexpected or interesting dialogue developed (Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer 2021). Their roles were then switched for topics b and d to ensure freshness and minimise fatigue.

Each sport coach mentor was co-interviewed on two separate occasions, resulting in a total of 18 interviews. Each interview averaged 61-minutes (min. 37-minutes; max. 91-minutes) and the total volume of data generated was 1097-minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants, organisations, and any other individuals mentioned. The first interview sought to discuss the interview guide topics. The second interview took place approximately three-weeks later. This interview sought to cover any remaining questions/topics that were unable to be explored in the first interview due to time constraints and/or ask 'follow-up' questions based on our analysis of the first interview.

Building on Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer (2021), we note several benefits of two-to-one interviews. In the context of this study, these interviews assisted our understanding of sport coach mentors' experiences by allowing us to a) develop the plurality of our questioning, b) have greater

time to actively listen to and reflect upon their experiences to inform more meaningful probes and follow-up questions, and c) enable different interpretations of their experiences, which generated multiple lines of inquiry and the ability to check, confirm, or challenge one another's sensemaking during the interview. This latter point, in particular, reflects how shared knowledge and meaning-making are developed through dialogue and negotiation in the social constructionist interview (Koro-Ljungberb, 2008).

Data analysis

For this investigation, we drew upon the principles of Tracy's (2018) *phronetic iterative approach* to qualitative data analysis. This approach is appropriate for a social constructionist frame because it enables the analysis of individuals' experiences in relation to a specific issue, as well as the mechanisms that underlay and shaped their behaviours, views, and perspectives (Tracy 2018). This analytical approach was therefore aligned with our ontological and epistemological assumptions as it facilitated rich interpretations of how sport coach mentors made sense of the mechanisms underpinning the development of trust and trustworthiness at that time and in the context of their mentoring duties.

To enact iterative data analysis in practice, we moved back and forth between four key steps: 1) data generation; 2) deductive theorising; 3) inductive analysis; and 4) writing. Data generation involved conducting the two-to-one semi-structured interviews, using a flexible interview guide built on theory and research objectives, and analysis of previously undertaken interviews. Deductive theorising involved consulting theoretical ideas about the social construction of trust and trustworthiness (Hardin 2002, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999) and existing sport coach mentorship literature (e.g. Alexander and Bloom 2023, Potrac 2016), as well as our guiding research questions, to develop multiple early analysis tables with pre-coded category headings. For example, we produced a table relating to 'the importance of trust in sport coach mentor-mentee relationships' with category headings entitled 'positive internal inducements', 'negative internal inducements', 'positive external inducements', 'negative external inducements', 'cost of distrust', and 'cooperation/continued relationship'. We then read and reread the interview transcripts, made individual and collective notes, and engaged in dialogue to identify participant quotes that evidenced these categories in action.

However, as Tracy (2018, 63) recognises, these sensitising concepts served as 'lenses', not as 'hammers', and we avoided imposing past research or concepts onto data that challenged or negated these interpretive devices. Our inductive analysis, therefore, involved the constant editing of tables with additional categories being added as well as existing ones being removed or refined where data conflicted with or challenged theory. For example, while there were many similarities between the strategies outlined by our participants and Hoy's facets of trust framework, there were some key points of departure. These included the role or manifestation of honesty in trust(ing) relationships, where sport coach mentors reported a need to temper their honesty to the needs and personality of individual mentees, rather than always making truthful statements about their coaching.

Writing was a crucial step in our analysis, helping us to transition from a series of column headings in a table, and the quotes beneath them, to the research findings and analysis presented below. This was an active process of jointly examining, discussing, writing, and rewriting about the interconnections, relationships, and boundaries between categories. This included thoughtful and reflective engagement with theory and previous literature to develop a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the data. In doing so, we identified three core themes, which we felt reflected the data content well and addressed our research questions in ways that readers would deem useful and interesting. Each theme was supported by a number of subthemes and/or analytical points, which reflected the nuances of the theme itself.

What follows, then, are our deductive and inductive interpretations of trust and trustworthiness in sport coach mentor-mentee relationships. In line with the constructionist approach adopted, we recognise that this reading is our interpretation influenced by our respective paradigmatic, practical, and theoretical dispositions (Denzin 2017), and is, therefore, open to multiple [re]interpretations.

Research findings and analyses

Through our iterative analysis, three interconnected themes were constructed: a) the importance sport coach mentors placed on being trustworthy to satisfy internal and external inducements; b) how mentees' cynicism towards NGBs meant that the sport coach mentor-mentee relationship often started from a position of distrust; and c) those interactional strategies employed by mentors to overcome this distrust, but also to develop trustworthiness more generally.

Importance of being trustworthy

Consistent with sport coach mentoring literature (e.g. Chambers 2015, Jones, Harris, and Miles 2009), as well as mentoring research across other fields including business (Baker et al. 2019) and healthcare (Fleig-Palmer, Rathert, and Porter 2018), sport coach mentors in this study argued that trust and trustworthiness were essential to foster mentee motivation, learning, and engagement:

> It's everything really. Not only is it important just in terms of building a working relationship, it's also important in terms of motivation and aspects of safety. So, I think, really, for me, it's probably the fundamental thing in trying to create a successful mentoring relationship [. . .]. With trust, both parties are prepared to engage more and explore more.
>
> (Charlie)

> Earning their trust is really, really important and I feel like without it you get off to a non-start and there can be a lot of barriers put up [. . .]. Without that trust, you very rarely get to know the person, which then makes it very difficult to support their coaching development [. . .]
>
> (Freddie)

Consistent with Hardin's (2002) encapsulated interest model, our participants explained how various incentives underpinned their desire to be trustworthy. Some mentors were motivated by internal inducements, either positively, by a moral compunction to care for and help others, or negatively, by the desire to avoid being personally hurt and labelled as untrustworthy or uncaring. For example, Riley explained how his determination to be trustworthy was a core value, whereas Danny was induced by a desire to not experience the personal pain associated with being regarded as an unsupportive mentor:

> For me, it's part and parcel of being an honest person. I guess it's my personality really: I just went in [to the role] wanting to help. Because I believe I can support people, it's a deeper thing. I've just wanted to support and help because I'm in a very privileged position.
>
> (Riley)

> I've always got the best intentions of [mentees]. So, if they then saw me as somebody who didn't have their best interests at heart, didn't care about them, or I didn't want to support them, you know, on a personal level, probably far more than a professional level, that would really hurt.
>
> (Danny)

For other mentors, the motivation to be trustworthy was driven by external inducements (Hardin 2002). These individuals spoke about the fear of professional networks placing [in]formal sanctions on them (e.g. loss of work, career stagnation). They also referred to potential rewards of being trustworthy (e.g. additional mentoring work, promotion). Nested within the above motivations, the biggest driver for these participants was the need to protect their professional reputation (Hardin 2002). Because of the repeated nature of interactions, the mentees became

woven into the mentors' professional networks. The participants, then, recognised that their mentees had the ability to exploit this network to harm their reputation if they proved untrustworthy during their interactions:

> I think all mentees can damage your reputation [. . .]. Mentees will go back to [your NGB] through questionnaires and surveys, and it will come back to you. If you're doing a really good job and you're getting lots of good feedback from various coaches and clubs, then you could become a Senior Mentor and sort of look after the [junior] mentors. If you aren't doing what's expected, they [the NGB] could just remove your hours. So, there are detrimental effects that could happen if you're lacking trust [which would] have an effect on your career going forward.
>
> (George)

Other participants too, such as Parker, noted the 'very close network' of sport coach mentors and the danger of 'tarnishing my reputation', which could not only 'limit my opportunities to develop and grow', but also lead to 'my line manager [not wanting] to keep me on'. It could be argued that the participants' determination to protect their reputation, then, was heightened by their insecure employment conditions and the increasingly prominent audit culture within formalised sport coach mentoring environments (e.g. through monitoring, evaluation, and surveillance by NGBs; Colley 2005, Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2018). Considering the influence of these broader social structures within which many sport coach mentoring programmes operate (Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2018), the participants were perhaps more heavily influenced by the external inducements to be trustworthy. This may be explained by the fact that they were performing similarly precarious work (e.g. casualised, metric-led and audit-driven) to many other employees in community (e.g. Ives et al. 2021) and elite (e.g. Gilmore, Wagstaff, and Smith 2018) sport.

Starting from a position of organisational distrust

In the previous section, it was constructed that mentors needed to be seen as trustworthy, which was grounded in their desire to continue the relationship with mentees for [non]material reasons. While George – consistent with Leeder and Cushion (2020) – recognised that representing his NGB could help to initially develop a sense of trustworthiness 'because, to work for the [NGB], you must have certain qualifications, experiences, and backgrounds', he and all other participants also spoke of mentees' cynicism towards NGBs as organisations:

> I think people have always had their opinions on the [NGB] and unfortunately again most of the time it's not even within our context. [But] all of a sudden, the mentor is a horrible human being [. . .] and you know you hear the terms of, 'Old [NGB] police are here'. [As a mentor] I'm not a policeman [sic], I don't have handcuffs, you know? But you do hear that because unfortunately that is still the perception. [. . .] That badge is going to be that barrier; going to cause almost a standoff kind of relationship.
>
> (Danny)

> I love working for the [NGB], but [. . .] they don't have the greatest reputation. [. . .] Walking in at times from the [NGB], you can sometimes have that barrier put up. Kind of deemed as a know it all, I suppose, or just to check-up and quality assure, and not support.
>
> (Freddie)

Consistent with Hardin (2002), it could be argued that the sport coach mentors in this study felt unable to escape what they perceived to be the mentees' inevitable 'suspicion of distrust' during initial interactions. For Hardin (2002), distrust comes more easily than trust because it can be built on limited behaviour or information and is not necessarily grounded in specific contextual experiences or repeated interactions. Similarly, Adams, Highhouse, and Zickar (2010) have argued that distrust of an organisation may be informed by hearsay or propaganda, but also by a predisposition to distrust organisations in general. This may be especially true for organisations of influence (e.g. NGB's), where distrust in authority has been argued to be an effect of the increasing emphasis on auditing, control, and formalised accountability in Western society (Giddens 1990), including in sport coach mentoring

environments (Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2018). For example, Colley (2005) discussed the duplicity in the audit culture of formalised mentoring programmes, which preach transparency and trust but, in practice, act under a 'veil' of artificial trust that can actually distort or block the development of trusting personal relationships between mentor and mentee. For the participants in this study, this audit-driven culture drove an (initial) standoffish and formal mentor-mentee relationship that was difficult, yet important, to overcome.

Strategies to develop trustworthiness

Deformalising relationships

In light of the undefined cynicism towards NGBs highlighted in the previous section, participants recognised that 'barriers do exist', and the initial aim was often 'about trying to break them down and build a relationship' (Freddie). To do this, all participants sought to purposefully deformalise initial mentor-mentee interactions. This was frequently achieved by meeting coaches in neutral, relaxed, and friendly environments such as 'the local pub' or 'cafes' to facilitate conversations that established common ground and rapport (George). In light of their specific context and power relations recognised above, participants arguably saw benefit in purposefully attempting to *informalise* the formal nature of their NGB mentoring scheme. These practices fall in line with existing work in sport coach mentorship, which suggests that formalised learning episodes have relatively low impact when compared to informal forms of development (Nelson, Cushion, and Potrac 2006). However, it is important to recognise that 'informal does not necessarily equal good and formal equal bad, nor is the opposite always true [...] the outcome depends very much on the purpose, context, and power relations' (Colley 2005, 40).

To further deformalise the mentor-mentee relationship, participants made sense of their deliberate decision to wear casual attire:

> I want people to recognise me as a person, so [I started wearing] my jeans and t-shirt, smart casual attire. And they [mentees] gain that trust, that additional trust, through the discussions we have, through getting to know them as people. So, I don't turn up in the latest, our brand-new kit, the NGB logo anymore. I just don't know, it's I'm a person, I am not a product of a governing body. I don't want [mentees] to think, by me wearing the governing body logoed t-shirt, it puts me on a pedestal, where all that's going to happen is they [mentees] are going to get shot down [i.e., criticised]
>
> (Marley)

> When we meet in an environment away from it [i.e., their sports club], I tend to [go] in my own clothes. If I feel like there's going to be barriers initially put on, it's one less barrier that they [mentee] face when they first meet me. And I hope they will just see me for me, and not the guy in the [NGB] tracksuit.
>
> (Freddie)

These findings fall in direct contrast with the previous work of Leeder and Cushion (2020), which suggested that some sport coach mentors purposefully choose to wear the [NGB] badge and branded clothing as a form of objectified cultural capital and to provide a sense of legitimacy. One might argue that deformalising of the relationship in the current study was a starting point for the development of trust by creating a sense of care and benevolence (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). In the sport coach mentoring milieu, Alexander and Bloom (2023) reported the need to really get to know the person beyond the mentee to create a trusting environment. Similarly, participants in this study explained how they used these informal meetings to 'spend time getting to know them, their history, about what they're experiencing, coaching [and] why they kind of do it', and how they would 'try and find some common ground [...] talking about stuff that you [sic] have both got in common' (Freddie). These informal interactions helped to create feelings of connectedness, progress and nurture the mentor-mentee relationship, and determine how the mentee would receive support (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). The mentors' behaviours sought to establish a spirit of goodwill and a willingness to support the personal and professional development of mentees (Tschannen-

Moran and Hoy 2000). This sense of benevolence can help to promote trust relations as it creates confidence and security that the mentor will not allow the mentee to come to any harm (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). However, the perception of benevolence alone may not be enough to establish a trusting relationship. As Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) noted, there is an important distinction between trust and affection, and liking a mentor does not necessarily mean you will trust them in the longer term. Further facets of trustworthiness must also be present.

Demonstrating reliability

The sport coach mentors identified how they sought to demonstrate reliability to create trustworthy impressions (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). In part, this was rooted in dependability, or a consistent willingness to always 'be there' for mentees and provide them with support (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000). Mentors did this through consistent contact, providing feedback in a desirable format, and through maintaining confidentiality. Such practice was believed to give mentees a sense of confidence that their needs would be met positively and that mentors would consistently act in ways that would benefit them:

> I take every step or measure to live up to [the mentee's expectations], and just make sure that I deliver on that. [. . .] I've made repeat calls, meet up with people when they expect me to spend time with them. [. . .] The aspect of confidentiality is [another] critically important element of trust in itself. You know, that you feel you can share information with each other without it being shared with anyone else.
>
> (Charlie)

> To be there whenever, you know, they may need me. [. . .] So whether that be, you know, text, phone, email, voice-note, call, or face-to-face. I think being consistent and provid[ing] feedback in a way that they most want it – typed, written, or voice recorded. Showing that you can do that consistently over weeks, over a season, or seasons is really important – that you're always around as and when they need you.
>
> (Danny)

In keeping with Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), reliability for our participants was about more than just dependability and must be combined with a sense of benevolence or care:

> We [mentors] have to listen a lot. I feel that's the most important trait that we have to show. I mean, it's really *actively* listening to the problems that the coaching workforce go through. The real reason why I feel that's the most trustworthy [trait] is because we're almost a counsellor in that sense, where they need to vent off these frustrations that they're potentially having. They want somebody to *really* understand the situation that they're going through, and the problems that they have. But ultimately, nobody cares how much you *know*, until they know how much you care. That's one of the biggest things that I've kind of come across is that I need them to understand that I care.
>
> (Parker)

Similar to the sport coaching work of Cronin and Armour (2019), the sport coach mentors in the present study largely sought to demonstrate reliability by adopting an ethic of care. Specifically, to present their practice in this way, the participants attempted to ground relationships in empathy and authentic dialogue, where they listened to and understood the needs, feelings, and experiences of mentees. By moving beyond merely demonstrating dependability to this ethic of care, mentors felt that they were more likely to form a close bond with mentees, advancing the relationship from 'weak' or 'impersonal' trust towards 'thick' trust (Jones 2012). Thick trust may be defined as a genuine 'faith' that the trusted (e.g. mentor) *will* meet the needs of the truster (e.g. mentee) in positive ways, rather than the trusted simply wanting to be *seen* as trustworthy because of external inducements (cf. Hardin 2002).

Using mutually beneficial lies

The sport coach mentors also cited the need to be 'honest' when communicating with, and providing feedback to, mentees. For example, Parker explained how 'it's incredibly important to be open and honest because you don't want to tarnish your relationship with them'. Likewise, scholars (e.g. Bellucci, Molter, and Park 2019) see honesty – the tendency to share truthful information – as a pivotal feature of trustworthiness. Indeed, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) argue that

honesty is *assumed* when we think of trust. However, in-keeping with some sport coach mentors in Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom (2017), participants in this study constructed 'honesty' to be a more sophisticated and subtle concept that could be withheld and/or manipulated through the information they shared, especially when providing feedback:

> No one likes negative feedback, so sometimes I have to dress it up. When I'm trying to build trust, I just focus on the stuff that went well, just to get them on board. So, a little bit like boosting their ego as such. So, they feel that, you know, 'I'm really good.'
>
> (Riley)

> I think what you try and gauge is how much honesty they can take. Certainly, on a more constructive level, how much they can take in a particular moment or a particular time. So, if you're, I guess, if you're too heavy-handed with the critique, certainly early in a relationship, it can cause them to sometimes shut down and maybe view you as someone who's just trying to tell them what to do.
>
> (Danny)

Contrary to Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) theorising, then, being 'honest' for our participants did not necessarily involve making statements about 'what really happened', but rather was the ability to temper their honesty to the situation and based on a judgement about the needs and personality of individual mentees. From the perspective of Levine and Schweitzer (2015), it could be argued that our participants engaged in *mutually beneficial lies*, which are defined as 'false statements that are *beneficial for the liar* and are made with the intention of misleading and *benefitting* the target' (p. 89 *original emphasis*). As the sport coach mentors referred to above, prosocial dishonesty served a number of purposes for the mentor-mentee relationship, including a) securing mentee buy-in, b) providing interpersonal support, and c) building mentee confidence and self-esteem. While Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom (2017) concluded withholding knowledge is a potentially problematic micro-political strategy that can threaten the open and honest environment required for effective sport coach mentoring, participants in this study suggested that mutually beneficial lies, including withholding information, could in fact be used in a positive regard.

Illustrating fallibility

Despite the need felt by the mentors to sometimes engage in mutually beneficial lies, they maintained a keen desire to be 'open' in other areas of their practice. For Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999, 188), openness is the 'extent to which relevant information is not withheld; it is a process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information with others'. To do this, mentors shared errors or mistakes that had been made in their own sport coaching careers:

> I share my honest experiences of, like, when I have [had] a really bad session [or] I've done something poor. And I think that sort of builds that relationship. Because they [mentees] see that you've done it, so it's okay for them to do it. You've just gotta be honest and tell them that everyone makes mistakes. So, I don't go in there and pretend that I know everything, and I'm the best coach in the world. I give them examples of what I've done wrong. I think that shows vulnerability and shows that you are human. And probably just showing empathy, because I feel like I've been in a position where a lot of coaches [mentees] are.
>
> (George)

> I think the biggest thing from a professional perspective is explaining to them [mentees] about how I've messed up in practice design previously or in my own mannerisms. I always explain to them about my first coaching session and [how] it was an absolute car crash. It was horrendous. And I use that now almost to laugh at myself, to show that vulnerability as a coach, and to explain how I've learned from those things. I think sharing that story and [saying,] 'Look, we've all had that [i.e., difficult coaching sessions].'
>
> (Danny)

Similar to ideas shared by Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, and Block (2020), the mentors felt it was worthwhile to risk sharing previous challenging situations and mistakes from their own coaching practices. Divulging these experiences, according to our participants, may not only help mentees to navigate similar issues, but, importantly, help to create an environment where the mentees feel safe and secure to make their own mistakes, thereby strengthening the mentor-mentee relationship. Drawing

on such principles of openness can help sport coach mentors to challenge the traditional hierarchical power dynamic and, instead, position mentors and mentees as co-learners who can challenge, develop, and refine each other's practice (Leeder, Russell, and Beaumont 2022).

Navigating competency

Illustrating fallibility, however, may be a dangerous tactic because competency is also constructed to be an important facet of trust, especially when some level of skill is involved in fulfilling expectations (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999). Existing sport coaching research (e.g. Nash 2003) has shown that both mentors and mentees rank coaching knowledge and experience as highly important elements of successful mentorship. In particular, Leeder and Cushion (2020) have argued that sport coach mentors purposely model 'best practice' coaching sessions in an effort to showcase their coaching expertise and secure credibility and mentee buy-in. Similarly, some of the mentors in this study explained how modelling sessions was a core strategy to foster positive relations with mentees:

> If they know that you are actually a good coach, then I think that will build the relationship and the trust. [If] you can showcase that you know how to work with a certain age group, you know how to deal with certain challenging behaviours, and they see that happening. And then going forward, you offer some advice, they will trust that advice and take it onboard going forward and actively include it into their coaching sessions.
>
> (George)

In stark contrast to this, however, the majority of mentors sought to actively avoid the advertisement of their own skillset via practical demonstrations. When asked why they did this, participants explained how flaunting their skills, knowledge, and expertise could have negative connotations for the mentor-mentee relationship:

> I just think that, for me, [excessive practical demonstrations] don't encourage this element of trust. All it demonstrates is fear, bravado; 'Look at me, I'm really cool. I'm really good'. That just turns me off. [...] And I'm like, [mentees] don't need to know your heroic tales and heroic stories, they want to know you as an individual. So, it was my experience of being a mentee that turned me off being a mentor who was all self-advertised.
>
> (Marley)

> I would argue what I try to do is establish and develop the relationship, rather than demonstrating my own competence. That's just not my style. It's not who I am. That's not why I'm there. Yes, I need to demonstrate sufficient competence to be credible, but beyond that, it's about focusing on what they [mentees] want and need out of the relationship.
>
> (Zion)

While the decision whether to model 'best practice' coaching sessions was contentious, something that was important for all participants was their ability to enact competence as a mentor (i.e. improve the practice of others). They largely attempted to do this through the tool of empowerment. Rather than employing more didactic forms of pedagogy, mentors frequently saw value in developing knowledge and practice through questioning and reflection:

> Asking open-ended questions is incredibly important. So, you know, [...] it's important that I'm not giving them the answer as such, but I'm asking another question that's going to lead to the next one, and so on [until] they come to their own conclusion. [...] Eventually, they have all the pieces of the jigsaw to answer all of their own questions. As a mentor, we have to [...] drip feed the information that they need, and make sure you give them the opportunity to own their own feedback and ask questions.
>
> (Parker)

> I think from my role in mentoring with the clubs, it's almost I feel [I want] to make myself redundant. If I'm not empowering them to learn or empowering them to reflect on their sessions, or whatever it is that I'm trying to help them with, there's a very good chance they become reliant on me – and I just become part of the furniture. And in two years' time, yeah, they might have learned loads, but it's because I've told them. So, if I step away, potentially, they've not been empowered to do it on their own, and it might revert back to faults. So, I try to make myself redundant, so they can go off and do it on their own. So, by asking them questions and getting them to think will help them understand it better, understand their situation, and what they're trying to achieve.
>
> (Freddie)

Thus, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) notion of competence may need to be adapted when applied to the sport coach mentor-mentee relationship. In this context, developing mentees' competencies, through encouragement and empowerment, is more important than showcasing one's own competency as a coaching practitioner. These findings resonate with research in education, which demonstrates that teachers who a) feel empowered, b) report significant autonomy, and c) are able to substantially influence their working role and context, have higher levels of interpersonal trust in principals (Zhang, Bowers, and Mao 2021). Whilst participants in the present study reported the use of autonomy as a positive strategy to develop productive relationships with mentees, published sport coach mentoring research has highlighted how mentors may use the guise of 'empowerment' or 'autonomy' to encourage obedience and conformity among mentees (Zehntner and McMahon 2014). We thus advocate that researchers and sport coach mentors themselves carefully and critically reflect on the espoused, hidden, and often unconscious agendas behind the use of empowerment.

Conclusion

Despite trust being recognised as a critical facet of sport coach mentorship (Alexander and Bloom 2023, Sawiuk, Taylor, and Groom 2017), the literature base is yet to engage with detailed examinations of this concept and associated interpretations in context as well as how these relate to broader structural and economic forces (e.g. neoliberalism). The significance of this work, therefore, lies in illuminating the importance of interpersonal trust and creating trustworthy impressions for sport coach mentors who work in, and are influenced by, neoliberal policies and environments. Simultaneously, the implementation of two-to-one interviewing has helped to advance research methodologies in the field of sport, exercise, and health by demonstrating how a different and less utilised interview form may be used to construct new knowledge about a particular social phenomenon (McGannon et al. 2021, Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer 2021). For us, this approach provided a more critical space – coherent with principles of social constructionism – in which interviewers were able to listen more actively, share experiences, and more effectively reflect on their own and others' positions to inform further questions and probes.

The research findings demonstrate the clear importance that coach mentors attach to the dynamics of trust within the mentor-mentee relationship and the need to create trustworthy impressions. If NGBs and other [non]sporting bodies are to best equip sport coach mentors, they must provide dedicated training and ongoing support that reinforces the pivotal role of interpersonal trust and supports the development of context-specific strategies that foster trustworthy impressions (Leeder, Russell, and Beaumont 2019, Leeder and Sawiuk 2021, Potrac 2016). Specifically, the findings from this study suggest that coach mentor education should facilitate a *critical* understanding of how, when, and why principles of autonomy, empowerment, benevolence, reliability, fallibility, deception/honesty, and competence can be employed to cultivate trustworthiness in and through deformalised mentor-mentee relationships.

Whilst realising the potential significance and reach of our findings above, we also recognise some limitations of our study, which was conducted with a relatively homogenous sample of nine White British sport coach mentors representing two sports. Therefore, we suggest future research includes an intersectional examination of how sport coach mentors of different demographics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, social class, disability) seek to develop trust relations with mentees. Future research would also benefit from a critical examination of the ways different mentoring models or approaches (e.g. natural, engagement; Colley 2005) impact trust and trustworthiness between mentor and mentee.

While we have explored trust and trustworthiness in a traditional dyadic mentor-mentee relationship, we acknowledge that sport coach mentorship may incorporate multiple mentors alongside informal developmental networks to develop coaching practice (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Therefore, we urge future research to investigate how mentors work as part of performance teams (Goffman 1959) to gain the trust and buy-in of mentees. Moreover, we would encourage researchers to investigate mentees' interpretations of the importance of trust as well as how they judge the trustworthiness of sport coach

mentors. This could be achieved, for example, through multiple-method studies (e.g. interviews along-side [video] observations) that examine practice and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (on the same practice) in-situ (McGannon et al. 2021, Nichol et al. 2023).

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Disclosure statement

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