

Psychological safety, interpersonal trust and personal flourishing: what's in it for coaches?

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In light of the limited research revolving around interpersonal environments and coaches' wellbeing, this study aimed to explore the associations between psychological safety, interpersonal trust and flourishing among coaches operating in artistic gymnastics. A total of 53 gymnastic coaches participated and completed a multi-section questionnaire to measure coaches' perceptions of psychological safety and interpersonal trust within a coach-athlete relationship, as well as perceptions of personal flourishing. Employing structural equation modelling, it was found that coaches who feel psychologically safe with a designated athlete and trust that athlete are more likely to experience high levels of personal flourishing reflected in a rewarding, meaningful and optimistic life. It was revealed that a coach's perceptions of psychological safety increase their personal flourishing, when trust in the athlete is strong. Quality coach-athlete relationships where trust is high, plays an integral role in the interpersonal exchanges necessary for coaches to perceive they are psychologically safe to express freely themselves within the context of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship; this experience, in turn, increases coaches' flourishing. This study adds to the growing evidence that demonstrate the contributions psychological safety and quality relationships make to the creation of environments that benefit coaches and athletes alike. Importantly, it highlights the power of the interpersonal environment to coaches' personal outcomes. The discussion provides links between theory, research and practice.

KEY WORDS: Coaching, Gymnastics, Performance, Wellbeing, Collaboration.

In sport, coaching has been at the centre of scientific inquiry across diverse disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, pedagogy) spanning several decades (e.g., Corsby & Edwards, 2019; Lyle, 2002; Potrac et al., 2013). One

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important strand of this research has acknowledged that coaching is an interpersonal affair (Lyle, 2002) where at its core lies the coach-athlete relationship (Cronin & Armour, 2018; Jones et al., 2011; Jowett, 2017). Guided by this research, Jowett and Slade (2021) recently explained that a combined coach-athlete-centred approach to coaching captures more accurately what goes on between coaches and athletes, than either a coach-centred or an athlete-centred approach to coaching (see Kidman, 2005). This alternative approach embraces the joint contributions a coach and an athlete make and underlines that the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship has the capacity to determine the effectiveness of coaching, as well as a coach and an athlete's growth and development (Jowett & Slade, 2021). Nonetheless, while there is ample evidence to indicate that quality coach-athlete relationships benefit athletes' performance and wellbeing (see e.g., Davis & Jowett, 2014; Felton & Jowett, 2017; 2013; Lafrenière et al., 2011; Phillips et al., 2023; Shanmuganathan-Felton et al., 2022), there is dearth of evidence to indicate the degree to which coaches' performance and wellbeing benefits from developing good quality relationships with their athletes (see e.g., Davis et al., 2023; Jowett, 2008). This study aimed to add to the limited research by exploring whether coaches' experiences of an interpersonal environment characterised by trusting relationships and psychological safety predict their wellbeing through perceptions of flourishing in sport and life.

Carson et al. (2018) explained that in the recent years mental health and wellbeing have become a focal area with athletes being central to the research that has been conducted, as well as policies and initiatives. While coaches have received less attention, it is important to focus on their mental health and wellbeing too, for at least three reasons: (a) coaches are faced with multiplicity of stressors (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2016, 2017; Norris et al., 2017; Olusoga & Thelwell, 2017; White & Bennie, 2015), (b) a coach is as much as a performer as an athlete (Carson, 2019; Cropley et al., 2019; Gould et al., 2002; Thelwell et al., 2010) and (c) coaches and athletes are highly interdependent (Jowett, 2007, 2017). Most of the research studies conducted to-date involving coaches' wellbeing, employ motivational theories such as self-determination theory (SDT) and its mini-theory of the three basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). Correspondingly, coaches who create environments that promote autonomy (offer choice, allow decision-making) versus control (punish, penalise, threaten) are more likely to satisfy athletes' and coaches' basic psychological needs, leading to healthy and fully functioning individuals.

For example, employing SDT, Stebbings and her colleagues (2015) found that higher perceptions of coach wellbeing predicted coach be-

haviours that supported athletes' choice, decision making, and individual effort (autonomy) while lower perceptions of coach wellbeing predicted coach behaviours that emphasised intimidation and punishment (control) toward athletes. In a similar vein, Lafrenière et al. (2011) revealed that athletes who perceived their coaches to support their autonomy by giving choice and inviting them to take decisions within the coaching process experienced better-quality coach-athlete relationships and higher levels of happiness, while coaches who were perceived by athletes as controlling did not predict quality coach-athlete relationships nor athletes' happiness. This growing evidence is consistent, showing that coaches who create autonomous-supportive environments have significant positive effects on themselves and on their athletes' outcomes (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009).

Moreover, Alcaraz et al.'s (2015) study reported a positive association between the satisfaction of the psychological need for relatedness and psychological wellbeing whereby this association was mediated by greater levels of self-determined motivation, in a sample of development coaches. This is in line with McLean and Mallett's (2012) qualitative findings whereby the satisfaction of coaches' psychological needs appeared to promote their motivation and effectiveness, on one hand, and impede signs of burnout and stress, on the other hand. Alongside self-determination theory and its mini-theory, achievement goal theory (see e.g., Duda & Balaguer, 2007) has been employed to examine whether the motivational climate created by the coaches affect coaches' wellbeing (Solstad et al., 2018).

Solstad and colleagues concluded that a task-involving climate created by coaches in an effort to facilitate athletes' personal improvement and expand learning combined with a autonomy-supportive climate aiming to encourage athletes to make decisions and choose among alternatives, contributed positively to the coaches' wellbeing and their feelings of personal competence. This research finding highlights that a task-created environment is not just good for athletes (Duda & Balaguer, 2007) but also good for coaches' outcomes.

More recently, Davis and her colleagues (2023) employed the Closeness, Commitment and Complementarity (3Cs; see Jowett, 2017) model of quality relationships and found that coaches who experience high quality coach-athlete relationships, coaches who connected with their athletes by trusting, respecting, appreciating, committing, investing, collaborating with them, perceived higher levels of positive affect (e.g., excitement, enthusiasm, determination, inspiration), vitality (e.g., activation, energy) and personal satisfaction with their performance as a coach. This research provides initial evidence that coaches who develop a relational environment by focusing

on building quality relationships impact significantly not only their athletes' wellbeing (e.g., Davis & Jowett, 2014; Felton & Jowett, 2017; Henderson et al., 2022; Jowett & Shanmugan, 2016; Shanmuganathan-Felton et al., 2022) but also different aspects of their own wellbeing (Davis et al., 2023). As interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) will have it, coaches and athletes' outcomes (performance, wellbeing) depend on each other's actions (see also Jowett, 2007). Collectively, the evidence underlines that interpersonal environments characterised by task, mastery and learning (e.g., striving to improve, learning from mistakes) and autonomy (e.g., being responsible, making decision, having choices), as well as quality relationships (e.g., trust, respect, commitment, collaboration) positively impact the individuals these environments were intended (athletes) but also the individuals (coaches) who orchestrate or shape such environments (cf. Gagne & Ryan, 2005).

While psychological safety is a relatively newly introduced concept in sport and coaching (e.g., Rice et al., 2022; Vella et al., 2022), it has a long history in organisational psychology. For example, Schein and Bennis (1965) were amongst the first to explore the importance of creating psychological safety whereby individuals feel secure and capable to change their behaviour especially during a period of organisational change. The construct was subsequently re-introduced by Amy Edmondson in 1999. Accordingly, psychological safety captures the interpersonal environment as perceived by people who work together and is defined as a belief that taking interpersonal risks such as, expressing one's own ideas, asking for help, speaking up, raising concerns, asking questions and admitting to mistakes is safe (Edmondson, 1999, 2019). Edmondson has explained that in psychologically safe environments individuals within their work teams do not feel fearful, embarrassed, or intimidated about freely expressing themselves, their knowledge, skills, ideas and opinions and thus learning, innovation and progress occur more effectively and efficiently. Moreover, in psychological safe environments, interpersonal risky behaviours are invited and rewarded.

Research in work and sport (e.g., Garrick et al., 2014; Senel et al., 2025) has shown that when individuals within their place of work feel psychologically safe, performance and wellbeing increase. A psychologically safe environment would seem to share characteristics with (a) a task-created environment where the emphasis is on striving to improve, offer ideas and learning from mistakes, and (b) an autonomy supportive environment where the emphasis is on being responsible for one's own actions including contributing ideas and making decisions (see Edmondson, 1999, 2019).

Edmondson and colleagues (2004; May et al., 2004) have acknowledged the importance of quality interpersonal relationships in psychological safety.

They have highlighted that interpersonal trust and psychological safety are interrelated constructs – as they both contain a degree of risk and vulnerability; however, they have explained that they are distinct psychosocial states. Edmondson (2004) hypothesised that “interpersonal trust is likely to be an essential prerequisite for team psychological safety” (Edmondson, 2004, p. 266). Trust lies at the heart of stable relationships and underlines the predictability (consistency of other), dependability (confidence in other) and faith (caring and responsiveness in other) of relationship members within a dyadic relationship (Jowett & Felton, 2024; Rempel et al., 1985). Trust essentially signals whether the other in the relationship is trustworthy (e.g., “I can rely on *you*”) and psychological safety signals whether the interpersonal environment created is safe enough to take interpersonal risks (e.g., “I can share information and ask for help”). Accordingly, when individuals have an emotional connection with the leader, characterised by interpersonal trust, it provides them with a higher degree of psychological safety, allowing them, for example, to be more open to share information (e.g., personal, feedback) and ask for help (e.g., advice, support).

In organisational settings, recent research has found positive associations between interpersonal trust, psychological safety and outcomes such as well-being and satisfaction (e.g., Mitterer et al., 2019; Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023). In sport settings, there is emerging research to indicate the existence of these associations by highlighting that high levels of psychological safety promote positive outcomes for the athlete (e.g., Cooke et al., 2024; Fransen et al., 2020; Gosai et al., 2023; Jowett et al., 2023; Maughan & Jowett, 2024; Senel et al., 2024b). However, what remains less clear is whether good quality, trusting coach-athlete relationships are an antecedent or a consequent variable of perceived psychological safety. For example, Jowett et al. (2023) found that athletes' perceptions of psychological safety predict good quality coach-athlete relationships while Senel et al. (2024a) found that athletes' perceptions of good quality coach-athlete relationships predict psychological safety. Thus far, these research findings suggest that good quality coach-athlete relationships could serve as both an antecedent and consequent variable to psychological safety.

There is no research to date examining the associations between interpersonal trust, psychological safety and outcomes (wellbeing) from a coach's perspective. Coaches as leaders are expected to create an environment within which their athletes grow and progress. However, coaches form an integral part of this environment and as such they themselves can positively or negatively be affected by the created environment (e.g., Davis et al., 2023; Solstad et al., 2018; Stebbings et al., 2015) as much as their athletes (e.g., Cooke et al., 2024; Gosai

et al., 2023; Lafreniere et al., 2011). This study sought to explore whether the coaching environment created by coaches where psychological safety and trusting relationships with their athletes are central elements to it, promote coaches' wellbeing, reflected in coaches' perceived levels of flourishing (Diener, 2009; Seligman, 2011). Personal flourishing is viewed as a global wellbeing indicator and is defined as a person who perceives to be leading a purposeful life, able to forge rewarding relationships, capable to engage in daily activities and be part of others' happiness while being respected and optimistic for the future (Diener, 2009). The choice of perceived flourishing as a measure of coaches' wellbeing in this study was based on Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being where flourishing was conceptualised as a state in which people experience Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Gymnastics was chosen as the specific sport context for this study because gymnastics is an individual sport, where regular one-to-one coaching moments between a coach and a gymnast are more likely and naturally to occur in training and competitions (see Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). The hypothesis formulated and tested was that interpersonal trust positively would positively mediate the association between psychological safety and coaches' flourishing.

Method and Research Design

A quantitative approach using correlation and mediation was the most effective way to test the assumption (Edmondson, 2004) of the effect that trust has on psychological safety and personal flourishing. A benefit of correlational study is that variables are assessed without altering outcomes as they naturally occur (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015). Mediation, using structural equation modelling, focuses on the mechanism that functions between two predictor variables and an outcome and researchers have used mediation to determine the effect one variable has on another. For example, the effect of relationship quality on coach behaviours and psychological safety (Senel et al., 2024), the effect of psychological safety on communication and relationship quality (Jowett et al., 2023), the effect of psychological safety on leadership and flourishing (Gosai et al., 2023), and the effect of teamwork on psychological safety and team resilience (Fransen et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to expand this research and advance the findings while assessing whether coaches' perceptions of trusting relationships with their gymnasts mediates the association of psychological safety and the impact this has on their personal feelings of flourishing and success. The mediator variable is trusting relationship with a specific gymnast of the coaches' choice, the independent variable is psychological safety within their dyadic relationship and the dependent or outcome variable is flourishing in sport and life.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 53 coaches (38 or 71% women and 15 or 29% men), aged between 18 and 66 years ($M = 34.26$; $SD = 13.17$) with a career in coaching averaging 12.45 ($SD =$

9.71) years. Coaches from various countries were recruited, most from the United Kingdom (75.5%); the rest of the coaches worked in Switzerland, Australia, Norway, Singapore, America, Dubai, Denmark and France. Coaches reported being mostly white (92.5%) and held the following roles in their teams: coach (54.7%), head coach (32.1%), assistant (7.5%), and head of the department within a club setting (5.7%). It is noteworthy that 73.6% of coaches reported training women's artistic gymnastics 13.2% reported training men's and 13.2% reported training athletes of both sexes.

PROCEDURE

Once ethical approval was granted by Loughborough University's ethical committee, prospective participants were approached to participate either through direct correspondence or via posts on online social media platforms and forums. Purposive sampling was used to deliberately target individuals who coached in artistic gymnastics (Etikan et al., 2016). In the first instance, the second researcher (former gymnastics coach) utilised their own network to identify potential participants. The objectives and expectations of the study were supplied to prospective participants. The inclusion criteria for participation included holding an artistic coaching qualification in the country that they coached in; they were also required to coach for at least 12 months. It was also made clear that participation in the study was completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Prior to data collection via an online survey, participants were asked for their informed consent.

Instrumentation

*Psychological safety (PS) scale*¹ (Edmondson, 2019) was employed to measure a coach's perception of psychological safety with a designated gymnast. A modified version of Edmondson's seven-item PS scale was employed for the purpose of this study and included.

Example of items included, "It is safe to take interpersonal risks (e.g., provide critical feedback) with my gymnast", "Working with my gymnast, my unique skills and talents (e.g., technical, analytical) are valued and utilised", and "My gymnast and I are able to bring up problems and tough issues (e.g., concerns, fears)". Variations of Edmondson's original scale, while maintaining the essence of the seven items, have been used in sport by several researchers including Jowett et al. (2023) and Fransen et al. (2020) demonstrating sound psychometric properties. The alpha coefficient or reliability score for this sample was .68 which is slightly below the cut-off point of .70 (Nunally, 1978).

Interpersonal trust scale (Rempel et al., 1985) was employed to measure a coach's perceptions of the level of trust they expect and experience with a designated gymnast. The original scale contains seventeen items. For this study, 8 items were chosen to measure perceptions of interpersonal trust and included, "My gymnast behaves in a consistent manner" (predictability emphasises stability; total of 3 items), "I sometimes avoid my gymnast because he/she is unpredictable, and I fear saying and doing something which might create conflict" (faith revolves around feelings of caring when there is uncertainty; reverse item, total of 3 items) and "Even

¹ The Questionnaires used for this study are available upon request from the first author.

when my gymnast makes excuses which sound rather unlikely, I am confident that he/she is telling me the truth" (dependability focuses on placing confidence in the other in the face of potential harm; total of 2 items). The alpha coefficient or reliability score for this sample was .69 which is slightly below the cut-off point of .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Flourishing scale (Diener et al., 2009) was used to measure coaches' self-perceived levels of flourishing within areas of their life. These areas contain aspects revolving around their self-esteem, optimism, relationships, and purpose. The 8-item scale included such items as "I am optimistic about my future", "I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others", "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life". This scale has been used by researchers in sport (e.g., Gosai et al., 2023). The alpha coefficient or reliability score for this sample was .84 which is above the cut-off point of .70 (Nunnally, 1978). The items of the aforementioned scales were anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5) and participating coaches indicated their level of (dis)agreement.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics (Means, Standard Deviations, Bivariate Correlations) including internal consistency reliability were calculated for all scales of the three instruments administered to participants. Intercorrelations among psychological safety, interpersonal trust, and flourishing were estimated using Pearson correlations. The proposed path analysis model was tested using structural equation modelling software (Amos 25.0; PASW Statistics,

Chicago) using maximum-likelihood method of parameter estimation. This method allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple direct and indirect predicted paths and provides global indices of the fit between the theoretical model and data (Holmbeck, 1997).

We used several fit indices to assess the fit of the measurement and structural models according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendations: chi square (χ^2), Normalized Chi-Square (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and its associated 90% Confidence Interval (CI). CFI and TLI values close to or above .95, RMSEA values close to or below .08, and the lower end of 90% CI of the RMSEA containing the value of .05 represent an excellent fit to the data for the hypothesized model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Fit quality for the path analysis model was also assessed through its factor loadings (FL) and item's individual reliability. Based on Kline's (2016) recommendation, the reference for path interpretation included small effect below .20, medium effect between .20 and .49, and large effect above .50 ($p < .05$).

Results

Table I presents the intercorrelations, means, standard deviations and reliability estimates for 3 main variables of the study. The mean scores on the 1 to 5 response scale revealed that coaches perceived relatively high levels of psychological safety (PS; $M = 4.05$). Correspondingly, trusting coach-athlete relationships revealed that coaches perceived relatively moderate to high trusting coach-athlete relationships ($M = 3.98$) and personal flourishing was relatively high ($M = 4.22$) on a 1 to 5 response scale. The alpha coefficients showed accept-

TABLE I
Summary Of Bivariate Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations And Reliability estimates.

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|--------------------------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. Psychological Safety | - | .61** | .48** |
| 2. Trusting Relationship | | - | .56** |
| 3. Personal Flourishing | | | - |
| Mean | 4.05 | 3.98 | 4.22 |
| Response Range | 1-5 | 1-5 | 1-5 |
| Standard deviation | .45 | .44 | .46 |
| Alpha coefficient | .68 | .69 | .84 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

able levels of internal consistency ranging from (.68-.84; see Nunnally, 1978). All variables correlated positively and as expected. The strength of the associations was relatively moderate to strong ranging from .48-.56 (see Cohen, 1988).

To examine the overall fit of the hypothesised model, we tested the model shown in Figure 1. The fit of the model reported acceptable fit indexes [$X^2(26) = 1.139$; $p = 0.286$; $X^2/df = 1.139$; $CFI = 0.99$; $TLI = 0.99$; $RMSEA = 0.022$; $P(rmse < 0.05) = 0.325$]. Specifically, path analysis model showed that psychological safety positively predicted trusting coach-athlete relationship ($\beta = .60$; $R^2 = .37$) and in turn psychological safety and interpersonal trust positively predicted personal flourishing ($\beta = .43$ and $\beta = .45$; $R^2 = .35$).

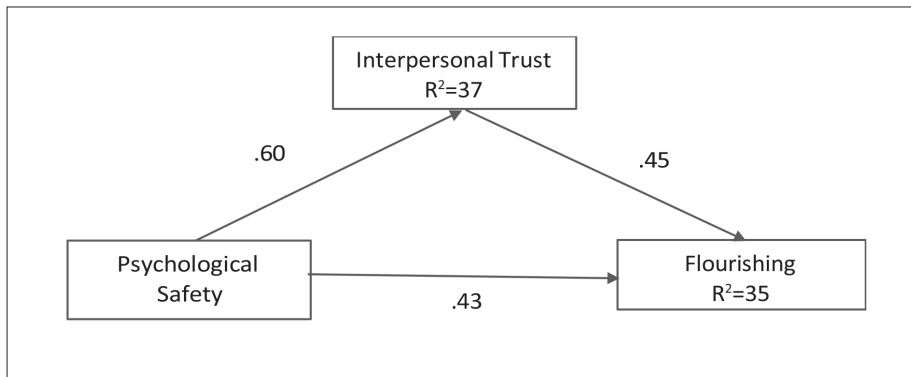


Figure 1. - Path Analysis model of Psychological Safety, Interpersonal Trust, and Personal Flourishing. Standardized coefficients, $p < 0.05$.

TABLE II
Standardized Direct And Indirect Effects For The Final Path Analysis Model.

| Parameters | | | β | 90% CI | |
|-------------------------|----|---------------------|---------|--------|-------|
| | | | | Lower | Upper |
| <i>Direct effects</i> | | | | | |
| PS | -> | Interpersonal Trust | .60 | .40 | .81 |
| PS | -> | Flourishing | .43 | .23 | .66 |
| Trust | -> | Flourishing | .45 | .28 | .64 |
| <i>Indirect effects</i> | | | | | |
| Dyadic PS | -> | Flourishing | .27 | .11 | .39 |

Note: = standardized coefficient; CI 90% = Confidence Interval at 90%.

Subsequently, we examined the indirect path, where psychological safety was an independent variable predicting personal flourishing (outcome variable) via trusting coach- athlete relationship (a mediator variable) (see Table II). This indirect path was found to be significant suggesting interpersonal trust is a significant predictor of flourishing and plays a mediating role in the association between psychological safety with personal flourishing.

Discussion

Guided by the literature, the hypothesis tested was that coaches' perceptions of interpersonal trust would mediate the association between psychological safety and coaches' flourishing. Descriptive statistics showed that the three main variables examined, namely, coaches trusting their athletes, perceiving psychological safety in their interactions with their athletes, and coaches' flourishing, were positively associated. Such positive associations between these constructs are in line with previous research findings albeit with athlete data (e.g., Senel et al., 2024, 2025; Fransen et al., 2020; Jowett et al., 2024) and theoretical assumptions around psychological safety (e.g., Edmondson, 2019). In addition, inferential statistics showed that coaches' perceptions of psychological safety and interpersonal trust predicted coaches' personal flourishing. The model tested found that psychological safety did have a direct and indirect effect on personal flourishing supporting our hypothesis that interpersonal trust would mediate the variables of psychological safety and personal flourishing.

Over the years, research has focused on the impact the interpersonal environments coaches create has on athletes' performance and wellbeing (e.g., Coatsworth, & Conroy, 2000; Gosai et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2022; Lafraniere et al., 2011; Maughan & Jowett, 2024) however, this research examined the impact these interpersonal environments have on coaches themselves. Overall, this study examined coaches' perceptions of interpersonal environments that have been purported to foster learning, openness, autonomy and relationships via the constructs of psychological safety and interpersonal trust (Edmondson, 2004; May et al., 2004) and found that such environments benefit coaches' outcomes as much as, previous research has shown, benefit athletes' outcomes (e.g., Cooke et al., 2024; Gosai et al., 2023; Jowett et al., 2023; Senel et al., 2024, 2025). In addition, this result supports Rice and colleagues' (2022) assumptions that psychological safety is integral to athletes and coaches' wellbeing and mental health – though we acknowledge that psychological wellbeing and mental health are subtly different concepts (Trainor & Bundon, 2023; see also the work by Keyes, 2007). It is also consistent with research that has found that high-quality coach-athlete relationships promote athletes' and coaches' wellbeing (Davis et al., 2023; Felton & Jowett, 2017; Shanmuganathan-Felton et al., 2022). In line with interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; see also Jowett, 2007), it can be said that in trusting relationships where there is a sense of connection, consistency and predictability coupled with psychological safety where mistakes are allowed, diversity is embraced, openness is expected and contributions are welcomed without fear of retribution, rewards are maximised and costs are minimised, leading coaches (and athletes) to feel happy, positive, optimistic and fulfilled (personal flourishing).

To date, limited research has investigated the effect of interpersonal environments coaches create for their athletes on themselves. This study's findings add to the limited evidence (e.g., Davies et al., 2023; Solstad et al., 2018) and offer important implications for practice. First, the findings underline the important role of psychological safety as performance enabler in the sport organisation (in this case gymnastics) within which coaches (and athletes) operate. Second, coaches that emphasise the importance of psychological safety can affect their own personal flourishing and effectiveness as a coach. Third, trust is an essential relational property of good quality relationships, leading to personal flourishing.

By fostering psychological safety and building quality relationships, coaches create an environment in which both athletes and coaches flourish. Good quality relationships between coaches and athletes create mutual respect, commitment, and collaboration. A psychologically safe environment

signals that sharing and expressing ideas is welcomed and that failing and making mistakes are parts of the development and learning environment. Subsequently, sport organisations should encourage their coaches to develop quality relationships with their athletes and create psychologically safe coaching environments. Similarly, coaches who are looking for ways to improve their practice while achieving much healthier and more functioning ways of working, they would do well to understand how they can lead relationally and embody a psychosocially safe leadership. Professional development for coaches that enhance awareness and cultivate the skills, behaviours, and attitudes needed to foster interpersonal climates of trust, respect, openness, support, inclusiveness, and authenticity offer a dual benefit; they promote coaches' own well-being while simultaneously supporting the well-being of their athletes. Therefore, we would recommend that coaches have access to such development programmes, either integrated into their coaching qualifications and practice licenses or included as part of their ongoing professional development.

Overall, the findings of this study and others (e.g., Cooke et al., 2024; Senel et al., 2024, 2025; Gosai et al., 2023) speak to the notion that interpersonal environments characterised by psychological safety and good quality relationships can be beneficial for coaches and athletes alike. Our findings suggest that coaches experience work and life in a meaningful way, when they actively create a safe and trusting interpersonal sport environment. Such environments allow everyone, either as a leader or as a follower, involved in sport coaching to voice opinions, share ideas, input in the decision making, try new or different ways to learn or perform, exert effort, make contributions and improve, while failing or making errors is expected, accepted and welcomed. These interpersonal environments are more aligned with the combined coach-athlete centred approach to coaching where openness, autonomy, collaboration, connection and mutual learning preside (Jowett, 2025; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Jowett & Slade, 2021). Subsequently, such interpersonal environments seem far remote from coaching that is characterised as one-way, known as “command and control”, or hierarchical where power struggles, fear and silence dominate (see Kerr et al., 2020; Sterling & Kerr, 2013; White et al., 2015; see also, Whyte, 2022) and closer to coaching that is flourishing, fully functioning and fulfilling grounded in psychologically safe and high-quality coach-athlete relationships (cf. Simpson et al., 2023).

The findings showed interpersonal trust and psychological safety increase coach flourishing. However, there are limitations in this study. The sample size was small, and data was collected from a specific sport, namely, gymnastics. The small sample may have affected the results (e.g., alpha reliabilities and

the coefficients; Charter, 2003). However, the aim to explore a specific sport was intentional because it is based on one-to-one interactions both in training and competition settings and includes individual instruction, reinforcement, feedback and support. While, the specific sport chosen and its unique characteristics may impact the generalisability of the results, there are many other individual sports like gymnastics, such as swimming, tennis and athletics that the findings of this study could apply to. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study design would need to be addressed in future research. For example, research that employs both the coach and the athlete would allow the examination of both actor and partner's effects in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs. Longitudinal and experimental research designs would help establish the direction of causality between psychological safety and trusting relationships – as cause-and-effect relationships between these variables remain empirically unexplored. Multi-level analysis would also enable the testing of more complex hypotheses concerning interactions between characteristics of the contexts (e.g., different sports, clubs, teams or groups, cultural backgrounds) and of individuals (e.g., athlete-/coach-role, age, gender, education, experience) and capturing variations in outcomes (e.g., performance, wellbeing). Moreover, research designs that move away from self-reports to combining such data collection methods as observations and interviews would add to the generated knowledge.

Acknowledging the important role coaches play and that retaining good coaches is not always easy, especially, in less-than-ideal working conditions (e.g., remuneration, work-life balance, multiple stressors associated with high performance sport), sport organisations, and importantly coaches, themselves need to be aware of the impact the environments they create for their athletes have on themselves. Davis et al. (2023) reported that good quality coach- athlete relationships marked by trust, respect (closeness), commitment, and collaboration (complementarity) increase coaches' wellbeing. The findings of this study demonstrated the role of coaches' trusting relationships with their athletes alongside psychological safety in their own flourishing. When coaches' feel psychologically safe and trust their athletes, they are more likely to experience happiness and fulfilment. However, what happens when both psychological safety and trust is low, would coaches feel less happy and engaged, less respected and valued, less fulfilled and rewarded, less optimistic about the future? It is plausible that in such environments, and under such conditions, coaches feel disengaged and separated with their athletes and sport organisation (e.g., team, programme, club). It is possible that coaches will languish, struggle and suffer in the same ways their athletes will do in environments where interpersonal relationships are poor (e.g., conflict,

lack of trust, power struggles) and where there is lack of psychological safety (e.g., fear, silence, self-censorship) (cf. Jowett & Maughan, 20024). While this conjecture requires investigation, the findings of this study would seem to suggest that coaches would do well to understand the type of attitudes and behaviours required, as well as develop strategies and methods that promote interpersonal environments that are characterised by psychological safety and quality relationships with each one athlete in their team, group or squad.

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