

# The inducers of an elite handball coach's emotional experience during a season abroad. A longitudinal single case study

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*Elite coaches undertake intense emotional labor to navigate their high-stakes professional environment. Yet, little is known about emotional inducers (i.e.: situational cues triggering emotions in the situation experienced). This research aimed to analyze the inducers of an elite handball coach's emotional experience during a season abroad, which was suspended following the lockdown linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. From a situational psychological approach, we collected one weekly critical incident experienced by the coach. Interviews carried out after each period in the season allowed the coach to develop his explanation of the critical incidents experienced. Based on an inductive qualitative approach, six categories of positive inducers (e.g., relationship with the players) and four categories of negative inducers (e.g., relationship with managers) were highlighted through a validated data analysis process. Four stages in the coach's experience came to light (congruence, compensation, transformation, and break). These results emphasize the importance of considering the broader contextual factors – particularly the social system surrounding the coach – when examining emotions in elite sport coaching.*

KEY WORDS: Emotional labor, Emotional inducers, Coaching, Elite sport; Critical incident; Sport psychology

## Introduction

Sport coaching has been increasingly recognized as an emotion-laden context (Lee et al., 2015) generating intense emotional labor. According to these authors, coaches have to regulate multiple emotions, including joy and exuberance when winning a contest, grief and frustration when losing, anger at referees' decisions, disappointment with players' performance, and so on. Nevertheless, researchers have rather favored the analysis of cognitive dimensions such as decision-making (Collins & Collins, 2016). Coaches'

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emotions therefore remain little explored, especially in relation to their “inducers”, i.e., the situational cues triggering emotions in the workplace (Petiot et al., 2023a).

A better grasp of the emotional inducers perceived by coaches during authentically experienced critical situations in the workplace is particularly crucial to understanding more clearly the concrete sources of the daily emotional labor affecting coaches' personal consequences, such as job burnout or job satisfaction, as well as athletes' moods, motivations, and even team performance (Lee et al., 2015). Given that emotional labor is context-dependant (Grandey, 2000 & Melloy, 2017), coaches' cultural, familial, political, and organizational environments are likely to impact their emotional experiences. Nevertheless, a number of contexts remain underexplored from an emotional point of view, such as that of elite coach migration. In certain countries, elite coaches are often required to transfer outside their native country, if they want to assume leadership roles in high-level teams (Samuel et al., 2021). On this subject, a recent inquiry into the working conditions of elite French coaches dedicated a section to the “internationalization of the labor market” (Burlot & Delalandre, 2019). According to these authors, the international transfer of coaches is becoming increasingly common and warrants further investigation. Previous research has suggested that job-related factors (e.g., salary), social factors (e.g., family support), competitive factors (e.g., training environment), and the prospect of new experiences (e.g., discovering a new culture or language) may influence coaches' decisions to migrate (Orlowski et al., 2016). The present study therefore focused on the emotional inducers emerging during the critical situations experienced during the migration process.

#### THE INDUCERS OF COACHES' EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN A SITUATIONAL APPROACH

Emotional labor research comes from the sociology of emotions (Hochschild, 1983) and refers to “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (p. 7). In other words, evolving in a professional context requires interactions with other people and implies conformity to explicit or implicit display rules. To regulate their emotions, professionals can adopt two positions. First, the “active position” when they force themselves to control their emotions, which can be illustrated by two strategies: “Surface acting” (e.g., simulating expected emotions and therefore creating a dissonance between the emotions expressed and those actually felt) and “Deep acting” (e.g., modifying the emotion felt to

adapt to the situation). Second, the “passive position” can be seen when professionals spontaneously and effortlessly feel and express the emotions required in the situation experienced. This passive position led to the definition of a third strategy, called “genuine expression” (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993). From the earliest conceptualizations of emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) therefore emphasized the role of context in the analysis of emotions at work.

As an alternative to sociological research on emotional labor, Grandey (2000) developed a psychological model defining emotional labor as a form of regulation based on “situational cues” perceived within the context: “the situation acts as a cue from which emotions may result. (...) Both the chronic and the acute situational factors may impact the emotion regulation needed” (p. 102). More recently, Grandey and Melloy (2017) developed a model representing a multilevel and dynamic way of addressing the management of emotional expression as part of one’s job. The model shows that surface and deep acting are not always beneficial nor harmful, as the paths followed are moderated by the higher order person and context effect. However, it is challenging to distinguish between the context level (i.e., the cultural, familial, political, organizational context) and the event level (i.e., the situational cues inducing the felt emotion and the enacted forms of emotional labor). In other words, while Grandey and Melloy’s model (2017) points to the key role of the event level, little empirical research has focused on the salient cues or stimuli that require professionals to employ emotional labor in the situations they experience.

In the fields of sports and physical education, Petiot et al. (2023a, 2023b, 2024) studied the coupling between professionals and situational demands by highlighting the inducers perceived during critical incidents. At the event level, these authors developed a model of emotional labor using a situational approach, entitled Situational Emotional Labor and Devance (SELAD; Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025; Figure 1) model. This model includes three components. First, the coach perceives “emotional inducers” in the environment, which trigger an emotional experience. Second, the “emotional experience” emerges and can be characterized in terms of intensity (more or less intense) and valence (positive or negative). Third, “emotional regulation” is undertaken to modulate the expression of emotions (surface acting), the feeling of emotions (deep acting), or to authentically express the emotions experienced (genuine expression). This emotional labor can, in turn, influence the environment, and more particularly the perceived inducers.

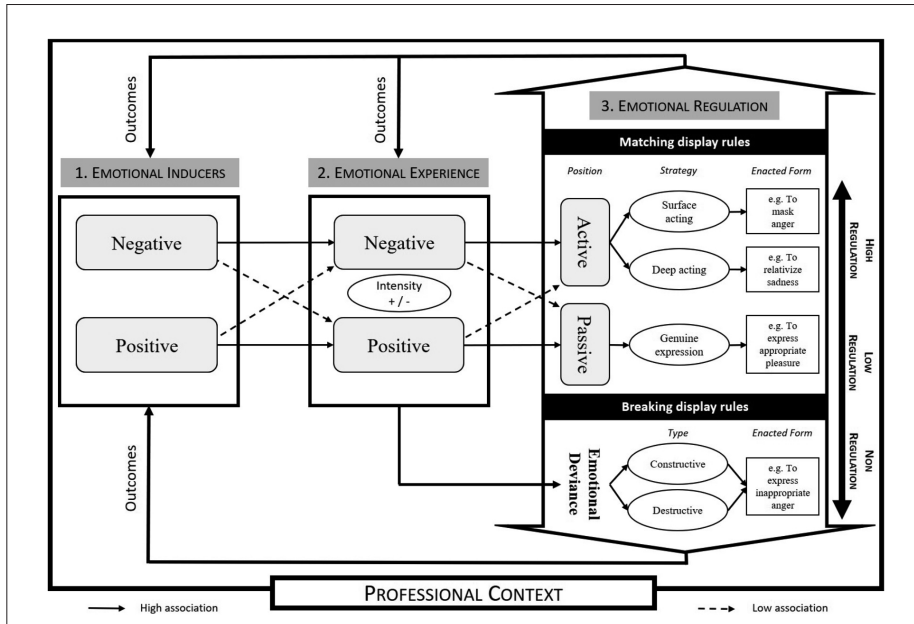


Figure 1. The Situational Emotional Labor and Deviance model (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025).

#### RESEARCH ON THE INDUCERS OF COACHES' EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

At the highest level of performance, various elements of context are likely to severely test the coach's emotions (Lee et al., 2015). Examples of these negative emotional inducers include the difficulties encountered in exploiting the full potential of an athlete, juggling coaching with family life (Sisjord et al., 2022), and understanding cultural differences (Samuel et al., 2021). Several authors adopting a sociological approach analyzed the negative emotions experienced by sport coaches, like fear, anger, and loneliness (Potrac et al., 2021).

As a result, various inducers of negative emotions were identified. Ives et al. (2018), for example, highlighted four elements related to the anger of two coaches: (1) relationship with participants who frequently engaged in various forms of anti-social behavior; (2) performance expectations associated with their community coaching role; (3) feelings of unpreparedness when attempting to deal with such incidents; and (4) perceived need to regulate their displays of anger so as to avoid negative performance evaluations from those participating in and overseeing the project. Adopting a more psycho-

logical approach, Martinelli et al. (2016) explored coaches' experiences of guilt in the context of athlete injury. In-depth interviews revealed that not only was guilt a commonly felt emotion, it was also one that the participants attempted to regulate.

On the contrary, the empirical studies allowing to identify the inducers of positive emotional experience are very limited in number. Previous research on related concepts such as stress (Norris et al., 2022) and motivation (Strebings et al., 2012) suggests that contextual elements – particularly social support – can play a key role in shaping coaches' emotional experiences. For example, Norris et al. (2022) used semi-structured interviews to show that sport coaches draw on various forms of social support to cope with stress. Social support consequently appeared as a positive inducer from their point of view. More precisely, informational support for advice, ideas, and feedback on training sessions, new job roles, and player development was used most regularly across the different time points. Second, Strebings et al. (2012) conducted a study based on the self-determination theory, which consisted in collecting the perceptions of 418 sports coaches. They concluded that greater job security and opportunities for professional development, as well as lower work-life conflict, were associated with psychological need satisfaction which, in turn, was related to an adaptive process of psychological well-being and perceived autonomy support toward athletes.

Finally, the inducers of coaches' positive and negative emotional experience are likely to evolve throughout their experiences. Indeed, coaching is a long-term dynamic phenomenon, with various emotional experiences across an entire season (Christensen, 2011). For example, a longitudinal quantitative study revealed that a coach's risk of burnout increases during the second part of the season when contract renewals are negotiated, followed by a notable drop in winter when coaching pressures fall (Ruddock et al., 2019). Thus, Norris et al. (2017) asserted that future research should fill gaps in the existing literature by using models of longitudinal studies to explore the dynamic of elite sport coaches' emotional experience, which seems to be relevant in the context of an increasing number of international transfers for coaches. Beyond the need for further longitudinal research, there is also a significant gap in understanding the broader contextual factors that induce emotions in coaches. Much of the existing research focuses predominantly on individual psychological characteristics (Lee et al., 2015), often overlooking the social and environmental systems surrounding the coach – such as support networks, organizational pressures, and cultural factors – which play a crucial role in shaping emotional experiences. Addressing these contextual elements

would provide a more comprehensive understanding of coaches' emotional lives and better inform both research and applied practice.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

In summary, despite the fact that limited research has been conducted on the emotional aspects of coaches' experiences (Collins & Collins, 2016), several studies have aimed to enhance understanding of the contextual factors that generate emotions in sports coaching, in line with recommendations made by Potrac et al. (2017). Two types of research have been identified. First, we identified studies conducted with a sociological approach and according to a qualitative design. They consisted in exploring the diversity and complexity of the contextual elements influencing coaches' emotional experiences at a macro and political level (e.g., Ives et al., 2018). Second, studies conducted with a psychological approach and based on a quantitative person-centered design. These studies focused on the relationship between coaches' emotions and psychological consequences such as stress or burn-out (e.g., Ruddock et al., 2019), as well as on emotional inducers like social support (e.g., Norris et al., 2022). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the inducers generating coaches' emotional experience at a situational level, especially throughout the migration process. For this reason, it is necessary to adopt a situational approach, focusing on the contextual elements perceived by coaches during authentic, clearly circumscribed, and emotionally significant situations (Petiot et al., 2023a, 2023b).

The objective of the present study was therefore to analyze the emotional inducers experienced by an elite handball coach during a season abroad, which was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, we aimed: (1) to identify, categorize and prioritize the inducers of the coach's positive and negative emotional experience during the season; and (2) to construct and characterize the dynamics of these emotional inducers throughout the successive stages of a handball season at the highest level of performance. Consequently, this study also aims to contribute theoretically to the situational approach to emotional labor in sport coaching, by examining how contextual factors shape emotional experiences (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025). From a practical perspective, a better understanding of these emotional dynamics may inform coach training programs by providing context-sensitive recommendations, in line with previous contributions in elite handball (Petiot et al., 2023a).

## **Methodology**

### PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

this study is grounded in a critical realist paradigm, which provides a coherent philosophical foundation for exploring the complexity of emotional inducers in elite sport coaching. Critical realism combines ontological realism – the belief that events and structures exist independently of our perceptions – with a constructivist epistemology, viewing understanding as socially and historically situated (Ryba et al., 2022). The SELAD was explicitly anchored in this approach (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025). Methodologically, critical realism is compatible with qualitative methods such as the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), where researchers seek to capture meaningful, participant-reported emotional experiences. Following this qualitative-dominant approach, quantitative analyses can enrich the results, in accordance with a SELAD-compatible mixed methods approach (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025). This pragmatic stance balances positivist and constructivist perspectives, aiming to produce useful knowledge for both theory and practice.

In line with this philosophical approach, single case studies – a significant aspect of sport coaching, especially in applied sport psychology – may offer a framework for assessing coaches' activity over time (Barker et al., 2013). Numerous single case studies have been conducted in sports science, examining interventions such as goal-directed self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2016), strategies employed by coaches to support co-regulation and athletes' self-regulation (Collins & Durand-Bush, 2014), and decision-making in elite sport (Le Menn et al., 2019). The single case study design has also given rise to an analysis of emotional inducers in elite sport (e.g., Petiot et al., 2023a; Petiot et al., 2024), based on the SELAD, since this design allows naturalistic generalizations to other cases to be made. Replication of such observatories can lead to a deeper longitudinal understanding of emotions in the sports field (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025).

### PARTICIPANT

A highly experienced French handball coach participated in this study. At the time of the research, he was a 62-year-old male who had spent his entire coaching career in France before accepting a new position abroad. He had led top-level teams over several decades, including one with which he reached the final of a major European competition in the late 2010s. Known for his long-term involvement with elite athletes, he has worked with numerous internationally recognized players. He is widely regarded as a leading figure in French handball, a sport with strong national success and visibility, particularly since the early 2000s.

In 2019, after a contract dispute, the coach took charge of a European team outside of France for the first time. The study began when he started coaching this new team. The squad consisted of 14 players, aged 18 to 38. It was the most successful handball team in its country, having won 21 national championships and 15 national cups. It was also the first national club to win two European cups in the last decade. The previous season, the team finished second in the national championship and reached the knockout stage of the Champions League.

## DATA COLLECTION

Two types of data were collected: (1) one written critical incident each week; and (2) supporting information on critical incidents emerging in interviews.

### *Weekly written critical incident*

The critical incident (CI) technique was initiated by Sir Francis Galton in the 1880s. It may be situated in the continuity of studies carried out as part of the aviation psychology program of the United States Air Force during the Second World War. Flanagan (1954) was the first to explicitly speak of the "CI technique". It consists in describing a brief event, a significant incident, which results in a misunderstanding or a conflict between people. This episode includes facts, and the emotions and behaviors of the actors involved. Several researchers have used this technique to analyze emotional inducers in sport and educational contexts (e.g., Petiot et al., 2023b). In this more recent research, the notion of "critical incident" was defined, in a broader sense, as an emotionally impactful event that may have consequences for the coach and their environment. Thus, the CI technique is situational and relies on the real situation experienced by an actor.

In this study, we collected a critical incident experienced by the coach each week. He took over his new team on July 23. From this date, every Sunday, he emailed us the story of a short experience, answering the following question: "Can you tell us about the most significant event you experienced this week?" The coach therefore had the choice of telling a positive or negative CI. Moreover, the broad wording of the question was intended not to induce a specific response from the coach. We wanted him to feel free to report the most significant event, regardless of the content of this event.

Figure 2 presents the chronology of the season experienced by the coach. After arriving in the country on July 23, he began coaching the team in training sessions and friendly matches. The championships started in September and continued until December. After a two-week break, training and the championships resumed in January. The season was stopped just before the playoffs due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 34 CIs were collected during the season. Only the two weeks of the Christmas break and the weeks of lockdown linked to the Covid-19 pandemic did not allow a CI to be collected.

### *Critical incident extension during interviews*

The coach agreed to an interview at the end of each part of the season to expand on the written Critical Incidents (CIs) he had sent weekly. The first interview took place on January 4 and lasted 4 hours 25 minutes. It focused on the 22 CIs collected from July to December and was conducted in two sessions with a break in between. The second interview occurred on June 16, lasted 1 hour 46 minutes, and covered the 12 CIs collected from January to March, before the COVID-19 lockdown. This interview was conducted in a single session. The timing and format of the interviews were based on the coach's availability and preferences. Both interviews were conducted face-to-face and supported by a chronological timeline of all CIs collected during the period. Each CI was linked to the date and matches played during the week. The timeline helped focus the discussions on actual experiences and encouraged the coach to recall past situations more easily.

During each interview, we reviewed each CI in chronological order. For each week, we



two emotional inducers. Finally, 25 positive emotional inducers and 13 negative emotional inducers resulted from this step.

In a fourth step, we tested the trustworthiness of the coding grid by a two-step validity process. First, the principal researcher re-categorized all the CIs in the grid that he had drawn up fifteen days previously. Second, a different researcher, expert in content analysis and not involved in the previous steps of the analysis or stages of data processing, had the task of placing all the CIs in the grid drawn up by the principal researcher. At each step, no discrepancies were found, which attests to the robustness of the first version of the grid developed by the researcher.

In a fifth step, a figure representing the categories and subcategories was used to represent the categorization obtained for positive and negative CIs (Figure 3). This figure also includes a quantification of each inducer category and subcategory. Such quantification is consistent with our philosophical assumptions (Ryba et al., 2022) and aligns with the recommendations of Petiot & Kermarrec (2025), who highlight the benefits of mixed methods approaches, such as the quantification of qualitative data emerging from single case studies, to enhance interpretation and *practical relevance*.

### *Construction and characterization of emotional inducers dynamics*

To analyze the dynamics of the CIs collected, a figure was produced to show the distribution of the categories of inducers and their valence (positive or negative). This step allowed different periods during the coach's season to be identified. Each period was inductively named as part of a process to characterize the coach's emotional experience.

## METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR

The present study meets the four quality criteria for qualitative research established by Charmaz and Thornberg (2020): credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Its credibility is ensured by its grounding in a recent and innovative situational approach to emotional labor (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025), the use of the well-established Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), and the application of grounded theory to guide data analysis, all widely recognized in sports sciences. The study's originality lies in its unique contribution to the literature, as it follows a world-renowned handball coach throughout an entire season – a rare opportunity that offers new insights into the coaching profession beyond the usual focus on training sessions or competitions (Petiot et al., 2023a). Resonance was achieved through the interpretive process that allowed the coach to reflect on his experiences and emotions over time, giving new meaning to critical incidents and offering perspectives that may also resonate with other coaches. Finally, the study proves useful by highlighting the emotional complexity of coaching, the value of emotional expression for self-understanding and regulation, the specific challenges of international mobility at the elite level, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on high-performance coaching.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The coach volunteered to participate in this research. We explained the purpose of the research to him and presented the methodology by ensuring that this process made sense to him and was compatible with the requirements of his profession. The anonymity of the par-

ticipant is sought in the way we presented him. We took care not to provide any information that could lead to his identification. However, the coach was informed that, since he was a renowned elite coach in France and in the field of handball, there was the possibility of him being identified. He was therefore able to examine the article and formally agreed to its publication. Finally, during the research, we were constantly assured of the voluntary participation of the coach. This study therefore followed the ethical recommendations of the ethics committee of the researchers' university.

## Results

The results are structured in three parts: (1) positive inducers of the coach's emotions; (2) negative inducers of the coach's emotions; (3) dynamics of the positive and negative emotional inducers.

### POSITIVE INDUCERS OF THE COACH'S EMOTIONS

Figure 3 presents the categories of positive emotional inducers identified by the analysis. The six categories are presented and illustrated with an example of a CI narrated by the coach.

#### *Relationship with the players*

Almost 30% of positive emotional inducers reported by the coach were related to the relationship with the players. This was the case of the first four CIs mentioned by the coach. During the interview, he explained the importance of these first meetings with the players. As a former PE teacher, he made the link with the first face-to-face with the students, at the start of the new school year: "It's a phenomenon that has always marked me in my career. I was a teacher, it's like going back to school, you're going to see your students, you know that the first contact, you can't miss it (...) when you resume the preparation, you hope to get on with the players". For example, the second CI related to a face-to-face with the players in a training session. The coach tried to make himself understood using English, being careful not to show any special connection with the only French player on the team.

#### *Potential return to France*

Six positive emotional inducers perceived by the coach related to a possible return to France. For example, during the 27<sup>th</sup> week of the season, the coach began to think about breaking his contract with the club. This was associated with a positive emotional inducer named "potential return to

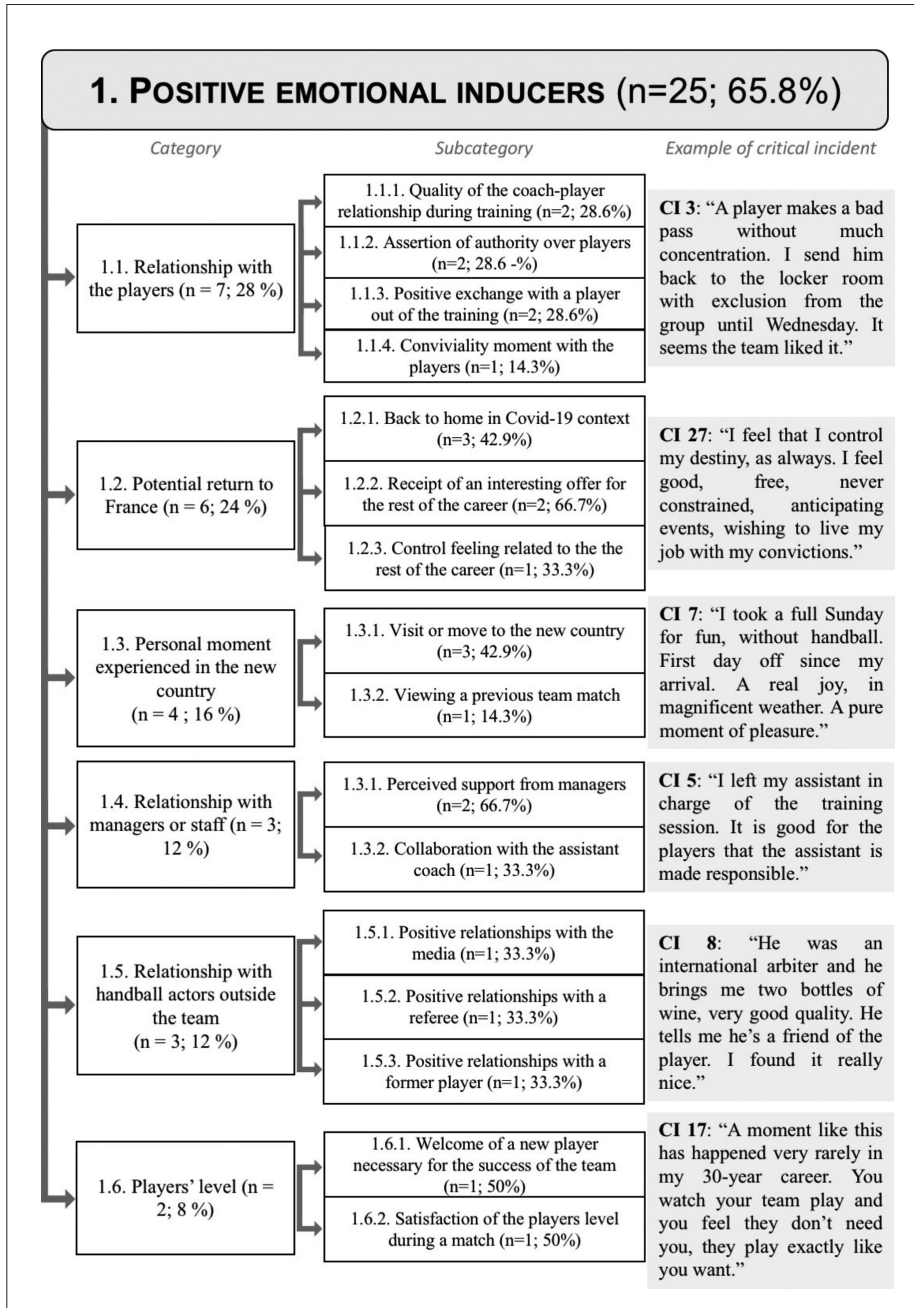


Figure 3. Categories and subcategories of positive emotional inducers.

France”. The coach was particularly satisfied about keeping control of his future: “I feel that I’m in control of my destiny, as always”. His emotions were therefore particularly positive. During the interview, he explained: “I feel good, free, not tied down, anticipating events, wishing to live my job according to my convictions”.

#### *Personal moment experienced in the new country*

Four positive emotional inducers were linked to a personal moment experienced during this season in his new country. The seventh critical incident was related to visiting the new country, when the coach gave himself a day off and went walking in the city: “I took the whole Sunday off for fun, without handball”. During the interview, he explained the emotions he felt during this moment, evoking “real joy” in a particularly favorable context: discovery of a new place with magnificent weather.

#### *Relationship with managers or staff*

On three occasions, the emotional inducer of the critical incident narrated by the coach was linked to the relationship with managers or staff. For example, during his fifth week with his new team, the coach suggested his assistant take charge of the training. This moment went very well from the point of view of the coach and generated positive emotions: “I left my assistant in charge of the training session. It is good for the players when the assistant takes responsibility for the session”. During the interview, the coach underlined the “confidence” he perceived between himself and his assistant during this moment.

#### *Relationship with handball actors outside the team*

Three times the coach reported an event involving a relationship with somebody outside his team involved in handball. For example, during a trip to the Champions League occurring during the eighth week, the coach received a gift from a former player he used to train at his previous club: “He was an international referee and he brought me two bottles of wine, very good quality wine. He said he was a friend of the player”. During the interview, the coach expressed the fact that he had found this gesture “very nice” and that he had felt a certain pride: the player is one of the best players in handball history.

### *Players' level*

Finally, on two occasions, the coach was impressed by what he perceived as a very satisfactory player level. During a match held in the middle of the first part of the season, the coach appreciated the level of play of his team. He said he felt a moment of grace when his players applied the game plan perfectly and enjoyed exceptional success: "You watch your team play and you feel they don't need you, they play exactly how you want them to". During the interview, he explained that he had experienced very few moments like this in his career: "it is a very rare moment in a career at the highest level".

### NEGATIVE INDUCERS OF THE COACH'S EMOTIONS

Based on analysis of the CIs, four categories of emotional inducers were identified, as seen in Figure 4. Each category is described and illustrated with an example of a CI experienced by the coach.

### *Relationships with managers*

Almost half of the emotional inducers were linked to difficult relationships with managers. For example, during the tenth critical incident, the coach said that he had the very unpleasant surprise of finding out that the meeting for a trip to the Champions League had been scheduled at 3 a.m.: "My surprise when I learned that the meeting was not 3 p.m. but 3 a.m.! I learned that three days before. Unbelievable! The first time in my career. I was very upset and not happy." He clearly expressed his disagreement to the managers: "They understood, I believe, for the rest of the season... We adapt but I'm starting to put my foot down". Right after, the team lost the match. This organization, which was not very conducive to success, led to even more negative emotions being felt by the coach.

### *Players' level*

Nearly a quarter of the negative emotional inducers experienced by the coach were linked to a player level perceived as insufficient. In particular, the "observation of a low level of one player during a match" generated very negative emotions for the coach from the first part of the season. During the thirteenth week, he narrated: "He is a shadow of himself, as I feared. Not fit and not dangerous when shooting". During the interview, the coach raised the matter of a "big problem to be solved": the player will obviously not be able to take on the responsibilities that were planned for him in the team.

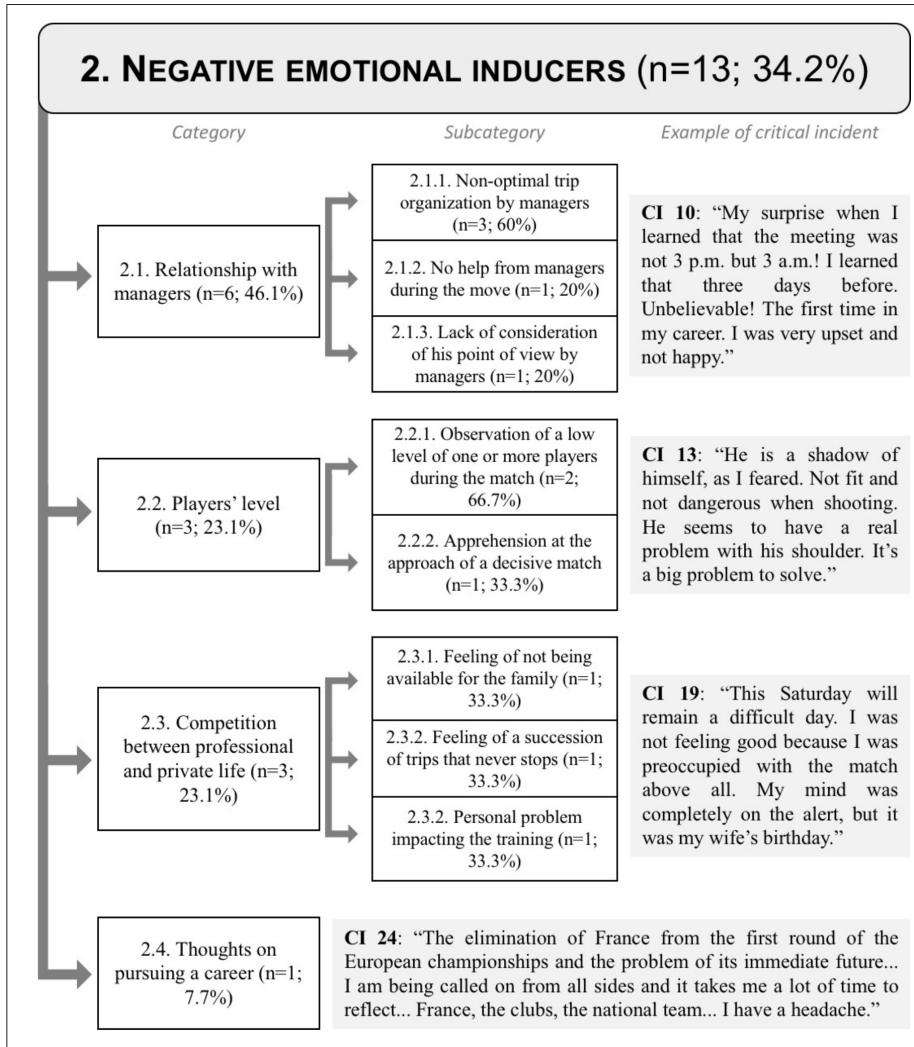


Figure 4. Categories and subcategories of negative emotional inducers.

### *Competition between professional and private life*

Three negative emotional inducers emerged from competition between his professional and private life. During the 19<sup>th</sup> week, the coach’s family came for the weekend to celebrate his wife’s birthday and he felt he was not very available for them: “I was above all preoccupied with the match. My mind was completely on alert, but it was my wife’s birthday”. During the

interview, he explained the negative emotions he felt in connection with this moment, speaking of a feeling of not fully making the most of being with his family: "It was a difficult day. I was not feeling good".

### *Thoughts on pursuing a career*

To conclude, one negative emotional inducer experienced by the coach was linked to his career perspective, which upset and distracted him. In January, when the French handball team experienced a difficult period during the European Championship, the coach was called upon from all sides (National Federation and French clubs). A very intense and anxiety-provoking period began, involving multiple doubts about the pursuit of his career: "I am being called on from all sides and I need a lot of time to think ... France, the clubs, the national team... I have a headache".

## DYNAMICS OF THE EMOTIONAL INDUCERS DURING THE SEASON

Figure 5 presents the distribution of positive and negative emotional inducers during the first and second parts of the season.

### *First period: Congruence*

During the first five weeks, the coach reported a positive CI. The emotional inducers were linked to the relationships that the coach had in his new club, primarily with the players. The first four emotional inducers were connected to this category. Although these events initially occurred collectively during group training sessions at the start of the season, over time they became more dispersed and manifested in more individualized ways throughout the following months. For example, during the second week, the coach's main idea was to show players what he wanted from them. According to him, each player should develop individual game intelligence, whether he has the ball or not, beyond the respect for collective playing strategies: "I am there in front of new players and I have to explain, in English, that the tactical act is the basis of the game for me and a necessity to access the highest level." This critical incident promoted positive emotions: "It's a hot situation, an exciting situation".

### *Second period: Compensation*

During this second period, the emotional inducers resulting from the critical incidents reported by the coach remained mostly positive. The relational

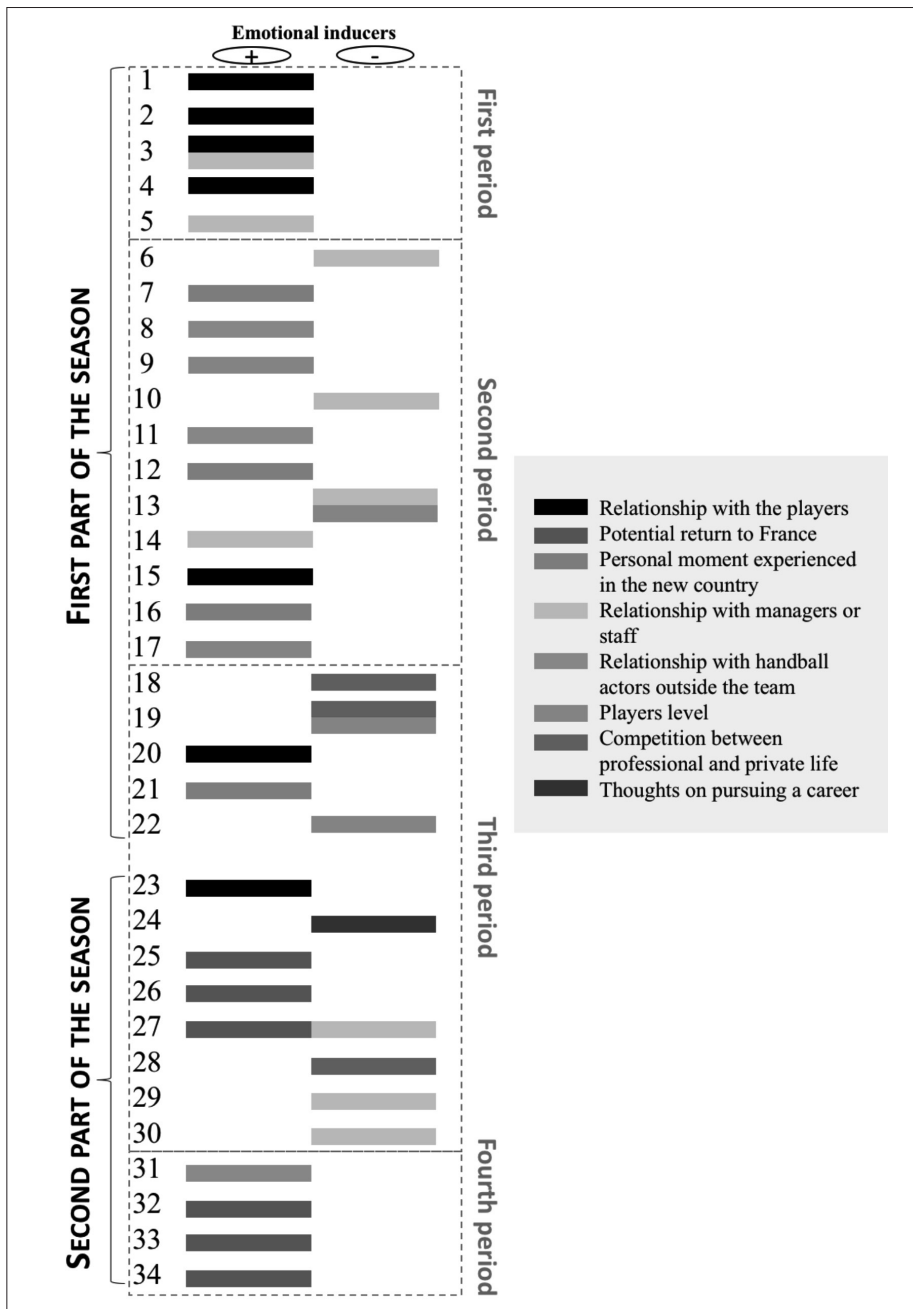


Figure 5. Distribution of critical incident categories during the season.

aspects of his work remained very pleasant. For example, during CI 20, the coach told of an individual interview with a player, whom he described as “not very communicative” during the training. But during this interview, he told the coach that he was pleased to have been appointed team captain, which produced positive emotions for the coach. However, some warning signs emerged during this period. The first three negative inducers were difficult relationships with managers. The succession of these events led the coach to perceive a lack of professionalism. Three times, the level of the players appeared insufficient and unstable, according to the coach. Two weeks later, the most significant event was the speech he made to the players following a defeat. This critical incident was positive according to the coach, as if he managed to turn negative events into positive elements related to the relationship with the players: “I had to say very important things, it had to be precise and direct. It was necessary for everyone to become aware of where I was, so that it could be corrected very quickly.” At this time of the season he said, “Something must happen. There has to be something that will hit people’s minds, make everyone think.” Successive critical incidents are therefore linked to each other.

#### *Third period: Transformation*

During the third period, several positive emotional inducers appeared in the critical incidents recounted by the coach. For example, for three consecutive weeks in January, the coach reported a positive critical incident related to requests for the rest of his career (CI 25, 26 and 27). These emerged following the defeat of France in the European championship: “I signed a three-year contract. Full power. A real project. All that I love” (CI 26). At the same time, the majority of critical incidents mentioned by the coach during this period refer to a negative emotional inducer. The relationship with managers, which already gave rise to negative emotions during the second period, also posed a problem in this third period. For example, the 29th incident was that the coach discovered, again, that the meeting time for the trip to the European Champions League was at 2.30 in the morning: “I am now determined not to stay here next year. These are the elements that started it all. A lot happened in January.” After this event, the coach decided to end his contract with the club because of the accumulation of several significant moments that spurred the turn in the coach’s career.

#### *Fourth period: Break*

At the end of the season, the coach chose to break his contract. During the previous three weeks, the emotional inducer had related to the coach’s

return to France, in the Covid-19 pandemic: “Week of lockdown and decision to return to France, my country. To be near my family. Handball is moving away” (CI 33). In the first part of the season, the positive inducers were linked to positive moments in the new country. But, at this end of the season, his satisfaction was linked to reuniting with his family, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic: “Even if it meant being in lockdown, I wanted to be in France”. Even if this return to France stirred up positive emotions in the coach, he did not heal his relations with the managers, who initially wanted the team and the staff to remain in place. The final break with the club was a source of relief for the coach. During the 34th critical incident, he said: “When crossed the border on my way back... the end of a trip, the feeling of coming home, the real conclusion of this story. A relief.”

## **Discussion**

The results are discussed in two stages: (1) the positive and negative inducers of coach’s emotional experience; (2) the dynamics of the coach’s emotional inducers throughout the season.

### THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE INDUCERS OF COACH’S EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

In previous research on emotion regulation (Lee et al., 2015), the focus was primarily placed on analyzing the antecedents and consequences of emotions in person-centered studies, as well as on the sociological dimensions of coaches’ emotional experience (e.g., Ives et al., 2018). We adopted a complementary and alternative situational approach, focusing on the analysis of the emotional inducers emerging during CIs experienced in daily work (Petiot et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024). At this event level, our results reveal facets of elite coaching previously little analyzed by sport researchers and shows that most of the CIs experienced by the coach are not directly linked to training or matches.

More precisely, the results highlight that the elite coach is impacted by a diversity of inducers which go beyond what is often taken into consideration as the heart of his profession (Lee et al., 2015). A qualitative and inductive situational approach was necessary to access these aspects. Six categories of positive inducers (Relationship with the players, Potential return to France, Personal moment experienced in the new country, Relationship with managers or staff, Relationship with handball actors outside the team, and Players’ level) and four categories of negative inducers (Relationship with managers, Players’ level, Competition between professional and private life, and Career

perspectives) were highlighted. These findings contribute to enriching the situational approach to emotional labor by adding results obtained in the context of elite sports coaching to those of studies conducted in the context of physical education teaching (Petiot et al., 2023b).

It is especially striking to note the place and the ambivalence of social relations in the critical incidents reported by the coach. Similarly to a recent study which focused on sports coaches' social support (Norris et al., 2022), our research highlights the importance of others in the coaching profession. In the coach's experience, family is especially significant, which corroborates the importance of reducing conflict between private and professional life (Sisjord et al., 2022). Our study also qualifies the positive impact of social relations by showing the complexity of their influence on the coach's emotions. In addition to being beneficial for performance (Phillips et al., 2023), the coach-athlete relationship emerges in our results as the first emotional inducer of the coach's positive emotional experience. Conversely, relationships with managers are the first negative emotional inducer. In the study of Ives et al. (2018), the anger of coaches was especially generated by the relationships with participants who frequently engaged in various forms of anti-social behavior. Social relationships therefore also emerged as an inducer of their negative emotions. In this respect, our results make it possible to identify the entire system of relationships around the elite coach (family, players, managers, and miscellaneous parties like the media). In line with Potrac et al. (2017), our study therefore contributes to examining how emotions are produced in, as well as through, the social relationships and interactions that constitute coaching and coach education practice.

This influence of social relationships on the coach's emotions seems exacerbated against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. The measures taken by European governments to fight the pandemic encouraged the coach to stop training and return to France before the end of the season. At that time, tension with managers intensified. As in the study of Taku and Arai (2020), athletes and coaches experienced a wide spectrum of emotional reactions such as disappointment, frustration, confusion, and relief during the Covid-19 period. More generally, our study highlights the complexity of the migration process. The results indicate that visa restrictions and loneliness were not negative inducers of the coach's emotion, contrary to the qualitative research of Samuel et al. (2021). The coach showed strong sensitivity and commitment to the European Champions League, which he considered a major objective of the season. However, he encountered resistance from the club's foreign managers, for whom the national championship was the clear priority. This divergence reflected underlying cultural representations

of handball, as the European competition held less symbolic and sporting value in the host country compared to its perceived importance in France. The study's anchoring in the situational approach to emotional labor (Petiot et al., 2023a) allows an alternative view to that of sociological research (Ives et al., 2018) centered on a macro analysis of emotion in the workplace.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF THE COACH'S EMOTIONAL INDUCERS THROUGHOUT THE SEASON

Analyzing the experience of a coach over an entire season is exceptional in coaching science research. The CI method, as described by Flanagan (1954), consists in recognizing the major impact of a significant event in someone's trajectory. It may be considered that analyzing only a single moment could be fragmentary, as was the case in previous research centered on one critical incident related by each participant (Petiot et al., 2023b). Yet, analyzing the dynamics of emotional labor gives a more complete picture of the coach's experience during a whole season. Four processes have been highlighted: congruence, compensation, transformation, and break. During the first weeks of the season, the coach's emotions were *congruent*, insofar as there was no competition between positive and negative inducers. The critical incidents reported by the coach were only positive. We can see how positive the migration experience was for the coach, who discovered new players, social support from managers, and a new rewarding context. The study of Samuel et al. (2021) has already shown that coaches have multiple motives for cultural transition, including a professional desire for career progress.

These motives are considered as push factors (which push coaches to transition away from their home countries) and pull factors (which pull coaches towards engagement in cultural transition to a new culture) (Orlowski et al., 2016). Following this, a process of *compensation* appears. Negative inducers are compensated by the mostly positive inducers, which are more numerous and more diverse. Beyond social relations, the coach is particularly marked by positive experiences in his new country. Positive inducers act as a form of emotional regulation, preventing negative events from having a detrimental influence on the coach's emotions. Gross et al. (2006) uncovered different modes of emotional regulation, which can be automatic or controlled, conscious or not. This regulation of emotions consists in reducing (negative regulation) or accentuating (positive regulation) the emotional feeling. In other words, emotional labor is at work in the coach's everyday life, in line with the study of Nelson et al. (2013). These authors showed that the experience of a head professional soccer coach frequently included

masking emotions in front of others. However, in our results, the idea of compensation indicates a “deep acting strategy” (Hochschild, 1983) characterized by the relativization of disagreement. During the following period, a “surface acting strategy” (Hochschild, 1983), consisting in masking negative emotions, is implemented.

At the beginning of the second part of the season, we note a *transformation* of the coach's emotional experience. Not only do CIs have more negative connotations, but also the positive moments experienced by the coach are linked to elements outside the team context (e.g., career prospects). The longitudinal study of Ruddock et al. (2019) revealed an increase in coaches' burnout and depression during the second part of the season, related to contract renewals. In our study, this aspect is very present but generates mostly positive emotions. Thus, the warning signs that appeared during the second period loom larger. They are no longer compensated by positive inducers as emotional regulation strategies are no longer sufficient (Norris et al., 2017). The disagreement with the managers that emerged during the 29th critical incident, which led the coach to state his determination not to remain with the club the following year, marked a decisive turning point in their relationship.

Finally, the season ends with a *break* between the coach and his club. At that time, the Covid-19 pandemic was giving rise to widespread uncertainty in Europe and each country was imposing restrictions to limit the spread of the disease. The world of sport was particularly affected. The analysis of the coach's emotional inducers reveals that this context finally convinced him to return to his country and to break with his club. Many researchers have analyzed the impact of the pandemic on performance in sports (e.g., Taku & Arai, 2020). To our knowledge, no study has analyzed the emotions felt by coaches in the daily work of their profession during this period. Our study demonstrates how the Covid-19 pandemic made the coach want to be back with his family, even if it meant exacerbating the differences in stance with the managers. The need to return home intensified his desire to terminate his contract, a decision that had been developing since January.

## **Recommendations for Sport Psychology Practice**

Building on previous research on the emotional inducers of an elite athlete (Petiot et al., 2024), the present study on an elite handball coach's emotional inducers during a season abroad allows us to propose concrete recommendations for coach training programs. From a situational psychological perspective, we identified multiple positive and negative emotional

inducers tied to the social and cultural context of coaching abroad, and how these influenced the coach's emotional labor across four distinct stages of his experience (congruence, compensation, transformation, and break). In line with the three major recommendations for sport psychology practice proposed for athletes (Petiot et al., 2024), we suggest that coach training could focus on the following propositions. First, informing coaches about the emotional inducers inherent to elite coaching, especially in cross-cultural and high-pressure contexts. Understanding the relational, organizational, and cultural cues that trigger emotions can prepare coaches better for the realities they will face, much like athletes benefit from being informed of their own emotional inducers. Second, promoting coaches' attentional focus on these inducers during critical incidents to enhance emotional awareness and regulation. Encouraging coaches to reflect on the situational cues affecting their emotions during moments of tension or conflict can facilitate adaptive emotional labor strategies, improving their responses to stressors such as cultural clashes or professional dilemmas. Third, engaging coaches in reflective analysis of critical incidents through writing and discussion, enabling them to explicitly identify emotional inducers and develop context-sensitive coping mechanisms. This process can help coaches manage dilemmas between private and professional life and improve their relational skills with players and managers, ultimately fostering resilience and well-being. By integrating these elements into coach education programs, training can move beyond technical and tactical preparation to incorporate emotional and relational competencies critical for success in elite sport environments, particularly when coaches work abroad under challenging circumstances (Samuel et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to analyze the emotional inducers experienced by an elite handball coach during a season abroad, based on weekly critical incidents collected throughout the season. More specifically, we aimed (1) to identify, categorize, and prioritize the inducers of the coach's positive and negative emotional experiences during the season; and (2) to construct and characterize the dynamics of these emotional inducers throughout the successive stages of a high-level handball season. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the importance of considering the event level in the analysis of emotions in elite sport coaching, complementing prior research on broader sociological and macroscopic dimensions (e.g., Ives et al., 2018). Our results contribute to a better understanding of the situational cues that

shape elite coaches' emotional experiences, in line with a situational psychological approach to emotional labor (Petiot & Kermarrec, 2025). Notably, social cues surrounding the coach emerged as a particularly crucial and ambivalent inducer within the migration process.

### Limitations and perspectives

Finally, it seems important to recognize some limitations of the design adopted in this study. Arguably, the greatest limitation is that it only provides a retrospective "snapshot" of the coach's experiences. While the methodological rigor is arguably a key strength of such an approach and the findings presented, it is not possible to confirm whether the accounts provided are fully representative of the coach's experiences as they occurred. Furthermore, although precautions were taken to minimize memory reconstruction of the situations (such as the type of questioning and the use of a timeline), it cannot be guaranteed that the elapsed time between the occurrence of the critical incidents and the coach's recollection (both written and oral) did not generate discrepancies. Nevertheless, deepening our understanding of coaches' emotional inducers during critical situations remains essential to better capture their complexity and to inform future practical applications.

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