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### Article

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# Carefully supporting autonomy – learning coaching lessons and advancing theory from women's netball in England.

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## **Carefully supporting autonomy – learning coaching lessons and advancing theory from women’s netball experiences in England.**

Back to Netball (B2N) is an initiative that encourages women, whose engagement has lapsed, to return to regular Netball participation. This study explores what aspects of coaching practice within B2N are perceived to be effective. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 28 B2N participants and 6 coaches was undertaken. Analysis identified four pertinent themes; 1) participants personalising sporting experiences through choice, 2) coaches facilitating and / or directing participants to relevant opportunities, 3) critical considerations of autonomy; a need for balance, 4) caring as a coaching ethic. The subsequent discussion considers autonomy and care as two relevant theoretical explanations. Within the discussion, it is posited that autonomy supportive behaviours and caring relationships may be symbiotic features of successful coaching. A novel interdisciplinary theoretical contribution is therefore made by connecting Self Determination Theory with the burgeoning recognition of coaching as a caring practice.

Keywords: coaching, netball; care; Self-determination theory; autonomy;

### ***Introduction***

Between April 2015 and March 2016, netball participation in England as measured by individuals playing at least once a month and once a week increased by 8.17% and 7.98% respectively (Sport England, 2016). The dramatic increase upon 2015 figures is to be welcomed because physical activity is associated with positive influences on individual health (Sigal, Kenny, Wasserman, Castaneda-Sceppa, & White, 2006; BPS Obesity Working Group, 2011; Maddison, et al., 2016). At a societal level, literature in the U.K. (e.g. Speake, et al., 2016) has claimed benefits including a reduced burden on healthcare services, reduced sickness absence, increased productivity, and

greater social capital to the point where a 1% annual reduction in inactivity has been hypothesised to save £1.2 billion. Given the above, (re)engagement in regular sport and physical activity is an area worthy of study.

Coaches are powerful influences upon sport and physical activity experiences. The coach has long been portrayed as a source of motivation and instruction (e.g. Duda, 2013; Mageau and Vallerand, 2003; Smoll & Smith, 1989). Paradoxically, through maladaptive behaviours, coaches have also been deemed to be negative influences upon sport and physical activity experiences (Raakman, Dorcsh, & Rhind, 2010). In extreme cases, reports have detailed how coaches utilised their positions to orchestrate and implement sexual and emotional abuse (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Lang & Harthill, 2015; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Coaching practice, and its effects on participants, should therefore continue to be the subject of academic consideration for both positive and negative reasons. In the UK, where this study is situated, such consideration is particularly warranted because coaching practice is ubiquitous<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, an ‘army of community coaches’ (Cronin & Armour, 2015a, p. 1) are tasked with realising the benefits of mass participation cited above. That said, despite the prevalence of coaching activity in the UK, and the powerful influences (both positive and negative) coaches have upon individuals and wider society, coaching in mass participation settings and more specifically netball coaching, remains underexplored in academic literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Sports Coach UK, (2015) estimate that there are 1.1 million regular coaches in the UK and given that 76% of these are voluntary it is likely that a significant number work in community settings such as local sports clubs, schools and leisure centres.

The under exploration of netball coaching reflects, to some extent, the marginalisation of women in sport. Coaching and coaching research remains a male-dominated venture (Kubayi, Coopoo, & Morris-Eyton, 2017; Norman, 2013). Additionally, despite success with some recent campaigns e.g. This Girl Can, the gap between male and female sport participation levels in the UK remains substantial (Sport England, 2016). The causes of this underrepresentation are multifaceted and complex e.g. ecological, social, economic (Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2016). Nonetheless, understanding the relationship between coaching and women's participation in physical activity is important for understanding how to increase participation levels. To that end, some research indicates that women rely more on coaching when engaged in physical activity (North, 2007). For example, case studies suggest that social support, acknowledging the challenges that women face, and reinforcing the benefits of physical activity to women are important coach behaviours in participation focused settings (Women in Sport, 2016; Park Run and Women in Sport, 2017). That said, the extent to which coaching facilitates participation in women-only sports activities remains unclear (Kubayi et al., 2017; Norman, 2013; Stevinson & Hickson, 2014). In the context of continued widespread underrepresentation of women, this is thus an area that warrants academic consideration. Accordingly, this study capitalises on the recent increase in netball participation by aiming to explore the experiences of women who have engaged in a 'Back to Netball' (B2N) initiative, which was designed to move individuals from sedentary lifestyles to regular netball participation. The objectives of the study are to;

- 1) Explore the experiences of women who participated in the B2N programme.
- 2) Critically analyse experiences of coaching on the B2N programme.

- 3) Advance theoretical considerations of coaching practice in community settings.

The paper proceeds with a description of Back to Netball, before introducing two theoretical frameworks that are relevant to the analysis. Following this, the methodology used to collect and analyse the women's experiences is reported. Subsequent to the methodology, four thematic findings which are relevant to the women's experiences are outlined. Literature from the theoretical frameworks accompanies these findings and also informs a distinct interdisciplinary discussion that raises theoretical considerations for future research.

#### *What is 'Back to Netball'?*

Netball is the fourteenth most widely-played sport in England by individuals over the age of 16. Netball is also a popular activity in countries such as Australia, Jamaica and South Africa. In Sport England's recent audit, 164,100 individuals reported participating in netball at least once a week (Sport England, 2016). Furthermore, in England, netball is played by the majority (96%) of school-age children (Department for Education, 2010). As with many forms of physical activity however, individuals over the age of sixteen years old engage less frequently than their younger counterparts. Consequently, England Netball developed the "Back to Netball" (B2N) programme that aimed to reengage adult women whose participation has lapsed. B2N involved over 15,000 women in 2016 and has been associated with improving social, physical and mental wellbeing. England Netball's (2015) review of B2N, involved 1296 participants, demonstrated that the majority (69%) of participants were aged 26-44, and 93% defined their ethnicity as White British or White Other. Thus, the B2N programme appears

effective at engaging some hard to reach groups, e.g. women with lapsed participation levels, but is not a panacea for all who are underrepresented in sport e.g. ethnic minorities (Withall, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Yancey, Ory, & Davis, 2006).

In practice, Back to Netball typically involves coaches reinforcing basic skills and concepts of the game, including passing, footwork and shooting over a 12-week programme of sessions. All coaches on the programme have level 2 UKCC/England Netball qualifications<sup>2</sup> and the coaches are provided with a B2N resource pack and formal mentoring. These resources are administered by England Netball development officers with the aim of ensuring that coaching on B2N is tailored to participant needs in order to facilitate the large scale development of habitual physical activity. Following the 12-week programme, England Netball hope that B2N ‘graduates’ will maintain their netball participation within local clubs and thus will have successfully reengaged with physical activity.

### ***Theoretical Frameworks***

Two theoretical frameworks are relevant to the study. Although unusual, this is warranted because Armour (2017) illustrates that all sport activity is interdisciplinary. Indeed, Armour and Chambers (2014) make a strong case that integrated research perspectives can be an effective means of understanding interdisciplinary experiences and thus informing theory and practice. To that end, Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) (SDT) is the first framework utilised herein. SDT is a psychosocial

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<sup>2</sup> For international readers, England Netball are the governing body for Netball in the UK and the UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) is somewhat akin to an accreditation or quality mark for their coach education programmes.

framework composed of five sub-theories that considers the interaction of personal and environmental characteristics as determinants of behaviour. Whilst not used exclusively in research concerning sport, SDT's Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) suggests that motivation can be classified along a continuum from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. SDT's Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) postulates that the basic psychological needs such as autonomy (and others such as competence and relatedness), need to be met in order to facilitate the development of self-determined motivation. Coaching has been found to facilitate a strong sense of autonomy by allowing players to have choice and input into the delivery of a session (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007). Furthermore, coaches can also enable players to feel more competent, for example by helping them develop new skills, and providing constructive feedback (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003). Finally, coaching has been found to promote social interaction, through the coaches themselves providing social support and being more relatable to players (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003).

Care theory is an additional theoretical framework that is relevant to this study. In an evocative autoethnographic exploration of youth coaching, Jones (2009) recognised the importance of care in coaching by skilfully juxtaposing his own desire for a caring coach with his own actions as coach of an age group football (soccer) team. Upon reflection, Jones (2009, p. 388) declared youth coaches should provide athletes with "attention, our engrossment, our care". Cronin and Armour (2015b) similarly argued that care is an essential aspect of coaching. Both these studies, and indeed literature in more established caring activities such as nursing and teaching, have utilised the seminal work of Nel Noddings (2005) to understand care. With a maternal notion of care in mind, Noddings (2005) argues that care occurs in reciprocal



relationships based on dialogue, and where the carer is devoted to serving the needs of the other. These behaviours are consistent with two key care concepts. Firstly, Noddings (2005) argues that care is composed of engrossment, where individuals are focused upon understanding the needs of the cared for. Secondly, Noddings (2005) argues that care also involves motivational displacement that requires the carer to act with an intention to serve the cared for. Noddings is an appropriate framework to use during this study because Knust and Fisher (2015) have illustrated that care is a prevalent feature in adult coaching. That said, Knust and Fisher's study is situated in elite NCAA competition and thus an examination of coaching in a Back to Netball context remains warranted.

### ***Methodology***

To explore the experiences of those women who have engaged in a 'Back to Netball' (B2N) initiative, an inductive cross-sectional study was designed. England Netball's database of B2N participants and coaches was utilised as a basis for sample recruitment and a largely inductive qualitative approach was undertaken. This methodological decision ensured that; a) a purposeful sample who had experience of the phenomenon in question was efficiently recruited; b) a variety of perspectives (participants, past participants and coaches) were accessed; and c) in depth accounts of experience could be gathered that would reveal and appreciate the personal experiences within situated B2N contexts. Thematic analysis was utilised to gather and derive insight from the participant experiences.

Thematic analysis is an approach which advocates a thorough examination and interpretation of the ways in which "events, realities, meanings and experiences"

operate in society (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). The process expects the researcher to collect, transcribe and reread whole interview transcripts numerous times in order to obtain a sense and understanding of the complete data set (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Following these initial steps, thematic analysis has further stages which guide researchers' interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The strengths of thematic analysis, and the rationale for its use herein, lie in providing researchers with a flexible yet structured framework that can holistically interpret data across a numerous participants. Conversely, researchers using thematic analysis have been criticised for not transparently documenting the interpretive process (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Accordingly, this methodology section will report the data collection and analysis procedures undertaken in detail, but will proceed initially by explaining the sampling strategy, and will conclude by considering rigour, ethical issues and the limitations encountered.

### ***Participants***

Participants (n=34) were purposefully sampled via an England Netball database based on meeting one of three criteria; 1) they were current participants within the B2N programme (n=14), 2) they were former participants who had previous experience of the B2N programme (n=12) , or 3) they were coaches who delivered B2N sessions (n=6). This ensured that all participants had experience of the phenomenon under investigation. As the study proceeded, deviant case sampling was purposefully employed to ensure alternative perceptions were examined (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). More specifically, women were recruited (n=2), who had reported negative experiences of B2N in a related evaluation. This step was taken in order to explore negative

experiences of coaching on B2N, and ensured a somewhat varied sample of participants.

All participants were female, but participants ranged in age; 18-21 (n=1), 22-24 (n=3), 25-29 (n=5), 30-34 (n=6), 35-40 (n=4), 41-49 (n=12), 50-64 (n=3). Given the purposeful and deviant case sampling utilised, the authors of this study do not claim that the participant sample is a statistical representation of all B2N experiences. It is important therefore, that readers are cautious about generalising from the sample. Nonetheless, the purposeful sampling ensured that these women all had experience of coaching on B2N, and their experiences remain a potentially valuable source of learning for practitioners and fellow researchers.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected through 34 telephone interviews. Interviews lasted between 26. minutes and 70. minutes ( $M = 28.10$ ,  $SD = 15.26$ ), and took place between July 2016 and August 2016. Several arguments have been made to support the use of telephone interviews. For example, it has been suggested that there is an opportunity for researchers to make contact with potential participants and establish rapport prior to a telephone interview (Burke & Miller, 2001). This rapport building process was undertaken when we contacted the participants to schedule the interview. In addition, it has been suggested that when compared with face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews may reduce the anxiety and unease a participant may feel (Rahman, 2015; Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor, & King, 2007). To a degree these arguments are specific to the studies cited and generalisations should be cautious. Nonetheless, within this

study, telephone interviews enabled the timely access to an appropriate sample and no challenging ethical issues such as anxiety ensued or were reported.

The interview schedule comprised of open questions that were administered in a semi-structured fashion. Questions were predominantly informed by an intention to explore the lived experiences of participants e.g. Can you tell me about your first (early) Back to Netball experience? Can you tell me what a typical Back to Netball session is like now? These questions were designed to provide time and space for the participants to recount their lived experience. Subsequent to the descriptive questions, more analytical discussions were elicited e.g. If you were to share advice about Back to Netball what would you say? Thus, a largely inductive approach was taken with the ensuing conversation informed by the grounded responses of participants and collaboration between interviewer and interviewee rather than any predetermined theory. This is not to say that the interviews were value free or that interviewers were sterile contributors. Rather, it is to say that where possible, researchers were led by participants (Kvale, 2007).

Data saturation was reached when no new information seemed to emerge from the interviews (Saldaña, 2013). Wray et al. (2007) argue that saturation can never be fully achieved due to the distinct nature of individuals and experiences. Nonetheless, Morse (2007) recognises that saturation does not entail the exact replication of data between interviews, but occurs when the characteristics of each account are intuitively similar if not identical. This point was reached after 32 interviews. Subsequently, two final interviews were completed with both a participant and a coach. These interviews raised no new information and confirmed an intuitive sense of saturation.

## ***Data Analysis***

The analysis process involved a search for themes across the full data set. A theme indicates a pattern of responses across the sample, or alternatively may be an important finding from within the data that is relevant to the following research objectives; 1) explore the B2N experiences of participants, 2) analyse coaching practice on B2N, and 3) advance coaching theory. With these conceptions of themes in mind, Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulate that themes are not necessarily identified through quantifiable measures or prevalence, but instead should be viewed in relation to the research aim, importance, and what the theme represents. Themes therefore did not ‘emerge’, but were derived from an interpretivist process whereby the authors of this paper have considered data in order to understand the experiences of participants and the phenomenon in question. This does not mean that data analysis was unsystematic. On the contrary, analysis followed the recommended procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) which began by;

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data: reading and re-reading entire transcripts, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.

At this stage a book of codes<sup>3</sup> were derived based upon participant responses. For example the following quote was coded as ‘Mismatched competition levels’;

We have had a previous Back to Netball group. They have gone into the domestic league and they have now gone into the county level league and they found it a really difficult step up because there is a massive difference between

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<sup>3</sup> N.B. codes are “short phrases that symbolically assign a summative, salient, essence capturing, and /or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3)

the Back to Netball and then going into that sort of league. So I think the women I play with, we're not quite ready for that next level.

Once developed, the coding book was reviewed and considered by a co-researcher. Collaborative coding is supported by Saldaña (2013, p. 34) as it allows a “dialogic exchange of ideas” that support interrogation and discussion from multiple perspectives. Following this critical review, the coding book was amended and definitions of codes established. As new codes were encountered, these were also reviewed by the co-researchers for cognisance. This involved interrogating the coding, establishing definitions, revisiting source material in a back and forth, and adding to the coding book if appropriate. Once the entire data set was coded the researcher continued Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) procedures by:

- 3) Searching for themes<sup>4</sup>: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

For example, the above code (mismatched competition) was collated into a potential theme named ‘choosing your competition’. Following, this stage, two more phases took place before writing up;

- 4) Reviewing themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2) by generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
- 5) Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme

(Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

### ***Rigour***

During data analysis described above, fellow authors acted as critical friends to ensure fit between data and themes (Costa and Kallick, 1993). The ‘critical friends’ asked challenging questions to support clarity and critique the interpretation of data. Such a process was necessary in order to reflect upon the subjectivities of the researchers. To

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<sup>4</sup> Themes as oppose to codes are a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes (Saldaña, 2013, p. 14)

that end, it is important here to acknowledge that all researchers have experiences of coaching other sports (basketball and football), and experiences of participating in recreational netball. That said, none of the researchers are practicing netball coaches or participated in the B2N programme. Thus, the research team were keen to prioritise the experiences of the sample and sought to do so through critically reflexive discussions that questioned the data analysis. In keeping with the relativist epistemology that guided the study, the critical friends and critical discussions did not seek to verify objective truth, but sought to ensure that data collection and analysis were plausible and defensible (Smith & McGannon, 2017). This process resulted in more precise themes and indeed still occurred during the peer review stages, where reviewers further questioned and clarified the verisimilitude of the findings.

### ***Ethical issues***

An institutional committee provided ethical approval for the study as part of a wider evaluation of the Back to Netball programme that was commissioned and funded by England Netball. As stakeholders, England Netball provided access to a participant database via a secure server. This raises issues of participant's rights and thus participants were contacted in accordance with data protection procedures. Participants were contacted via electronic communication and this included a participation information sheet (PIS). The PIS emphasised the purpose of the study, procedures, participant's right to withdraw, and right to anonymity. For those, who responded by electronically consenting to participate in telephone interviews i.e. opt in, additional informed consent was verbally gained prior to telephone interviews commencing. Throughout this process researchers were cognisant that participants' stories involved other individuals such as coaches and fellow netball players. With a relational ethic in mind, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity of any individuals mentioned. This

was a primary ethical consideration and the point was emphasised as part of informed consent process. Specifically, participants were assured that pseudonyms were used for their details and those that may be relevant e.g. name of their fellow participants, coach or club. Thus, consent was sought both prior to telephone calls (electronically) and at the time of the interview (verbally), whilst also ensuring participants had opportunities to clarify any concerns.

## **Limitations**

Interview methodology is traditionally characterised by an ability to build rapport through observation of visual behaviour. Non-verbal communication and information conveyed through gestures or actions are invariably lost when employing telephone interview methods (Novick, 2008). This may have influenced data collection. Additionally, it is important to recognise that single ‘one off’ telephone interviews with participants were completed. The data collected is therefore temporal i.e. provided at a given moment. We also acknowledge that the sample within the study is purposeful and not representative. Moreover, the accounts provided herein are relativist and a double hermeneutic has taken place i.e. the researchers have made sense, of the participant’s own sense making. With these considerations in mind, readers should be cautious and act as connoisseurs when using their own natural attitude to generalise from the forthcoming findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). We therefore, once again remind readers of the contextual nature of the study; i.e. a study of women’s netball participation in England as part of a governing body structured programme.



## ***Findings***

This section will use empirical data to highlight the four key themes derived from the previously espoused methodology. These themes will be briefly explained with reference to the two theoretical frameworks previously introduced i.e. Self Determination Theory and Care Theory. Following this brief explanation, a more critical and in-depth discussion section uses data from B2N to advance theoretical understanding of coaching in adult recreation contexts.

### *Theme 1: Participants personalising sporting experiences through choice*

Participants personalised their netball engagement through choices. These choices manifested most noticeably, though not exclusively, with reference to competition intensity. For instance, 10 of the 14 participants who graduated from B2N chose to continue their participation through a range of competition options including formalised leagues, ad hoc tournaments, and training opportunities devoid of institutionalised competitive structures. B2N participants considered the playing standards and their own competitive ambitions when making these choices;

I think there have been enough opportunities in our group at least. I know, our group is kind of mixed so there are some people that want to play competitively and some people that really aren't interested at all in taking part in tournaments. So I think it is quite good that they aren't pressured into it. They can just play at their own level whereas some people can take it further if they want to.

(Participant 18)

I have chosen a recreational session. The whole thing is about, you go if you want to and if you don't want to, it doesn't matter. It is so relaxed and laid back. I think if it was stricter about attendance then I probably would have got a bit fed up with it.

(Participant 10)

I have joined a team following Back to Netball. I would be letting down the rest of my team mates if, if I don't go. It is a commitment to other people. My job is quite busy. I have a full time job and I have two fairly young children. But I will change my working day around so that I can try and get to games. I've cancelled meetings in London so I don't have to be down there, so I can come home

(Participant 8)

From a psychological perspective, the choice that Back to Netball participants exercised is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Indeed, the choices and experiences of B2N participants reinforce the SDT postulate that participant autonomy is a key aspect of motivation;

She asked us what we want to get out of it? Sometimes she does fitness with us, which we don't like at all. But she'll say 'What do you want me to do ...?' We know that we're not as quick as some of the other teams, and it is us saying we want it. You know, so she asks us what we want, and we'll say what we want.

(Participant 22)

Thus Theme 1 reinforces Self Determination Theory by illustrating that choice can be a powerful motivational influence within the B2N setting.

#### *Theme 2: Coaches facilitating and / or directing participants to relevant opportunities*

Whilst theme 1 demonstrates that B2N participants can personalise their activity through choice, it would be wrong to assume that B2N participants are 'left to their own devices'. On the contrary, theme 2 demonstrates that coaches have informed these choices and / or directed participants to relevant participation opportunities;

The coach we've got is the one who has really pushed us. She has kind of recognised that there are some players who have got the ability and the desire to play at a, I'm not going to say a higher level, but maybe play more competitively. So she's kind of facilitated us being able to play in leagues and stuff as well.

(Participant 7)

Again, this facilitation is most apparent in the experiences of women who upon 'graduation' from B2N were encouraged to engage in formal competition;

I do definitely think that if it wasn't for the coach then some people may have left because it wasn't competitive enough for them. She has been such a driving force into getting us to do it more competitively and it has made a massive difference.

(Participant 8)

From a theoretical perspective, the functional significance of autonomy-supportive climates is that individuals feel their behaviour originates from their own needs, as opposed to being a response to external pressures or demands (i.e. controlled) (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007). Accordingly, SDT informed models such as the coach-athlete relationship motivational model (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), posit that autonomy supporting coaching behaviours (e.g. avoiding overt control) positively enhance athlete participant intrinsic motivation. Thus, at first glance, the direction provided by the B2N coaches appear to be contradictory to well established autonomy principle within SDT and theme 1.

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) however, also postulated that in addition to autonomy, increased feelings of competence and relatedness can contribute to motivation.

Consistent with these elements of SDT, it appears that Back to Netball coaches have recognised that for *some* participants, motivation will be increased through feelings of competence and relatedness that may come from being involved in more or less formal competition structures. Indeed, knowledgeable coaches who are embedded within local netball infrastructures signposted participants to opportunities at local clubs that they

deemed appropriate and this is for the beneficence of some participants. These clubs offered a variety of commitment models that ranged from ‘drop in’ sessions to ‘committing to a netball family’, thereby meeting the competence or relatedness needs of participants;

What worked for one lady was my knowledge of the local teams. I knew a team that would fit her so when she came to me and said ‘I want to join a team’. I thought right okay, we’ve got quite a few options of different nights, leagues that run on different nights and so I said ‘what nights suit you?’ and ‘could you do a Thursday night which is when one of our leagues runs?’ I knew there was a team in this league that would suit her and she said ‘yes, yes’ and so I said ‘you should try and phone Dolphins because they’re a social, fun team, they’re not a serious competitive team’. I knew they were really, really friendly and I knew they would suit her and yeah, I think that helped.”

(Coach C)

By offering selective opportunities whilst ultimately allowing participants to choose, coaches are ensuring participants’ competence and relatedness needs are considered, in addition to their autonomy needs (see Theme 1). Thus, from Theme 1 and 2, it appears that when successful, the B2N coaches strike a balance between facilitating or directing participants to appropriate opportunities (Theme 2), whilst simultaneously ensuring athletes choose their own participation pathway (Theme 1). Participant choice and coach intervention can therefore be complementary rather than contradictory. Indeed, it could be argued that the coaches are acting with a utilitarian ethic in mind, in which they carefully consider the amount and type of direction they provide in order to benefit the individual. While easily said however, straddling the juxtaposition between athlete autonomy (theme 1) and coach intervention (theme 2) is a difficult task (Jones, 2015);

It is quite difficult because I look at people and see stuff that I want to go and tell them about. You know, how to get your footwork right and get into like techie stuff. But actually what they’re there for, what they’re really here for is just to run around and have a bit of fun. So I’m really here just to give them some of the information that *they* (author’s emphasis) want to have. It can be hard to refrain and just do that.

(Coach A)

In sum, Theme 2 suggests that coach intervention can be a valuable means of meeting competence and relatedness needs of participants, and such action can complement and facilitate rather than contradict the choices of participants.

*Theme 3: Critical considerations of autonomy; a need for balance*

Although predominantly a positive experience for the B2N participants sampled (25/28 B2N participants and coaches were overwhelmingly positive), the investigation also illustrated an under recognised complexity of athlete autonomy; micro-political relations between participants. More specifically, a small number of women (n=3) recounted negative experiences. Although, this is a minority of participants and influenced by the critical case sampling strategy, it is appropriate to explore these important experiences. This is in keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2006) view that themes are not necessarily related to frequency but the research question at hand.

The three women in question, recounted episodes when coaches attempted to facilitate democratic decision making within sessions. During these episodes, some participants exerted disproportionate influence upon the B2N programme and this negatively impacted other participants;

The first session I did, maybe the first 2-3 sessions actually, I really enjoyed it and it met my needs. But then people, said that they were going to get into competitions with other Back to Netball people. So people signed up for that and some people brought along their friends. Sometimes somebody brought along a few people who were currently in netball teams and were really good. They kind of took over a bit. They didn't want to do the drills and they were quite strong. I suppose the classes were changing to the needs of most of the people. It didn't really work out for me.

During these episodes when players of higher status exercised power and took initiative, individuals with lower playing abilities felt marginalised;

I hadn't played netball before. Well, I played at school but not in the team or anything so I didn't really know how to play. So I was more up for learning and going for fitness. But, for me, it didn't work out because a lot of people started coming who were quite good. A few people used to be in teams or hadn't played in a netball team for about a year so were coming to get their hand in again. Then the coach let a few people in who used to play in teams together. They really knew what they were doing and then they said in the class that they would rather just do the games and get on the court and stuff like that. So, it more went to, kind of hard core netball rather than learning and I still didn't really know how to play.

Such experiences are similar to that when coaches display a laissez faire or permissive, rather than an autonomy-supportive style of coaching<sup>5</sup>. In such instances athletes may not benefit from their coaches' experience or interactions and coaches may portray messages of indifference (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Consistent with this work, the experiences of a minority of women experienced, suggest that maladaptive experiences can occur when other participants autonomously dominate the sporting context.

This critical consideration of autonomy has largely been absent from coaching literature. Indeed, sport psychology literature has tended to be more concerned with the perils of 'controlling support', where coaches jeopardise their athletes' motivation by restricting their opportunities to take initiatives and be creative (Sheldon & Watson, 2011). In contrast, Jones and Standage (2006), provide a critical problematisation of shared leadership by drawing on educational literature. Specifically they highlight that; 1) power may be given away, but can also be taken back; 2) sharing leadership is not

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<sup>5</sup> For clarity, readers are reminded that only three participants recounted these instances. This data also does not provide evidence that these coaches were permissive or laissez faire and further investigation is required to explore this.

always desirable in certain contexts e.g. safety; 3) participants may not want to engage in autonomous decision making, but would rather participate in directed activity; and 4) sport coaching has a historical culture of authoritarianism that may be expected by participants and difficult to overcome. Additionally, philosophy of sport literature has critically argued that autonomy should not be facilitated without due consideration of justice, equality and interpersonal responsibility (Goodwin, Johnston, & Causgrove Dunn, 2014). Similarly, writing from a western medical philosophy perspective, where patient autonomy is championed and facilitated, Woodward (1998, p. 1046) argues that practitioners should not facilitate autonomy if it “confuses and suppresses beneficent intervention”. Throughout the article, Woodward (1998) cautiously reasserts the need to respect the autonomy of individuals. Nonetheless it is also argued that concern for individual autonomy should be considered against the value of action which is consistent with the expertise of practitioners and for the benefit of *all* individuals. Autonomy is culturally relative and situated (Elliott, 2001), and community coaches may be less likely than medical professionals to encounter dramatic situations where grievous or fatal harm can occur. Nonetheless, the extracts from B2N illustrate everyday situations where attempts to facilitate the autonomy of individuals have harmed the sporting experiences of other participants. With Woodward’s (1998) arguments and the literature from education and philosophy of sport in mind, perhaps coaches should conceive of an interdependent rather than permissive view of autonomy. From this perspective, coaches could endeavour to balance the autonomy of individuals with the wider beneficence of an inclusive community coaching setting.

#### *Theme 4: Caring as a coaching ethic*

There are many occasions of B2N coaches engaging in caring acts with the needs of new participants in mind (16 instances from 11 different participants). For instance,

Coach F states:

I'll make a point of meeting two or three of them (new participants) in the car park to walk them in. I think that walk in is difficult, because you have to walk through a whole school, I mean secondary school. That's a big distance, from the car to the sports hall and I think that is where people can get 'lost'.

Similarly, Coach G reports caring for a player, Paco, who is:

An asylum seeker and comes from Africa. She should be playing at a much higher level to be honest with you but I'll be honest; the club supports her and she doesn't pay any money. She wants to play netball, she's brilliant and she hasn't a bean. She is penniless because she just gets a very basic income from the Government at the moment. While she is trying to work out her status, I make sure that our club covers her subs (fees). I pay for her affiliation because I think she needs to play. You know what I mean? She's really brilliant, she's too brilliant and too young to be in a country where she doesn't speak the language very well. But she can play bloody good netball. It is obvious that she used to play it when she was back home. She has been in the country for 2 ½ years. To be honest she has a pretty miserable life. So she comes to netball to escape and we help her with that.

These accounts illustrate that coaches may meet the needs of individuals through caring (i.e. empathy, and acting on behalf of and with the needs of the other in mind). This nurturing approach to coach-athlete relationships is consistent with literature that has highlighted the importance of care (e.g. Annerstedt & Eva-Carin, 2014). Moreover, it is also congruent with the work of Noddings (2005). Noddings writes from a feminist perspective and has argued that individuals have an innate need to be recognised and understood by others. From this perspective, Noddings asserts that pedagogical relationships should be based on authentic reciprocal dialogue so that the cared for can inform, receive and acknowledge care. Theme 4 illustrates that the B2N coaches also described engaging in caring dispositions which are based on dialogue, authentic listening, servitude, and respect for the needs of the other;



When they turn up we always have a little conversation. We have another girl in the club, she kinds of welcomes them in and has a little chat with them and finds out what it is they want and how long it has been since they played. This means we can be quite hands on with people that might look like they're feeling 'ooh, this is a bit much'. We can actually just go round and chat to them and make sure they are ok. If needs be, we will do something with them just to kind of bring them up and so they don't feel like this is way too much for them. Again, I always say 'if you want to drop out, sit down, or whatever, just do what you want to do, do what you think you can do'.

(Coach A)

From the above it is clear that caring dispositions such as empathy, listening, and dialogue help coaches to connect with individuals in the B2N sessions.

As soon as you meet the coach you will be, you will feel completely comfortable. She makes it really accessible and really easy and not to be concerned about it. The teacher, the coach, sorry, Emma, knew everyone's names by the end of the first session and she obviously has a great ability to recall them, people's names and so I don't know, by the end of the first session I just, yeah, I kind of felt like it was alright and I could go back with or without a friend.

(Participant 32)

In turn, we hypothesise that this positively influenced participants' perceptions of relatedness. Moreover, from within a caring relationship based upon dialogue, genuine listening, and empathy, we tentatively contend that coaches are well placed to understand, and therefore balance, the autonomy and competence needs of participants.

Further exposition and empirical research is however needed to generalise from the theme and data presented here. Nonetheless, the perspectives of the B2N coaches and participants reinforce the work of Knust and Fisher (2015) and Cronin and Armour (2015) who highlighted that care is a feature of coaching. More specifically, Theme 4 illustrates that care was a feature of coaching in an adult recreation context, which is

very different to the high-performance contexts in those prior studies. Additionally, Theme 4 provides exemplars which are consistent with the work of Noddings (2005) in that the B2N coaches cared through empathy, dialogue and genuine listening, and this may inform future studies of caring coaches.

***Theoretical Discussion: A future research agenda exploring the relationship between an Ethic of Care and Self-Determination Theory.***

The coexistence of two constructs, autonomy support (theme 1, 2 and 3) and care (theme 4), in B2N could appear somewhat contradictory. For instance, autonomy is typically associated with athlete independence, the assertion of individual power, and athletes who are free from interference (Goodwin, Johnston, & Causgrove Dunn, 2014). Conversely care can be conceived as a relationship between a powerful interventionist carer (e.g. the coach), and a less powerful cared for individual (e.g. the athlete) (Knust & Fisher, 2015). These constructs are further delineated by distinct theoretical and methodological paradigms. In coaching research, autonomy is typically associated with sport psychology and has been measured using quantitative questionnaires associated with post-positivist concepts such as validity and reliability (e.g. Fenton et al., 2017; Gillet et al., 2010; Amorosa & Anderson-Butcher, 2007). In contrast, care theory has been informed by philosophical arguments (Jones, 2015), a legal framework (Partington, 2017), and a small number of interpretivist qualitative case studies (e.g. Annerstedt & Eva-Carin, 2014). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that to date, coaching researchers have not considered if and how autonomy and care relate to each other. Prompted by the findings from B2N however, this discussion considers the relationality between participant autonomy and coach led care. This consideration is particularly

important because Armour (2017) has recently reminded us that physical activity practice is always interdisciplinary<sup>6</sup>.

We continue the discussion by acknowledging that facilitating autonomy can be a powerful conduit for developing participant's motivation (see theme 1 and 2). We also recognise that autonomy can be problematic (see theme 3). For instance, attempts to facilitate autonomy in B2N, resulted in the alienation and exclusion of some, less powerful, individuals. Related to this, Ahlberg, Mallet and Tinning (2008) emphasise that facilitating participant autonomy may present significant challenges for coaches. From a coach's perspective Byrne (2010) reports contradictions between developing competence through structured practices and providing autonomy supporting leadership opportunities for athletes. Byrne (2010) also reports a concern about exhibiting non-controlling coach behaviours and a negative perception from athletes who may perceive this as the behaviours of a disinterested coach. In Byrne's case study, this point is explicitly emphasised by an athlete who states categorically "if you (the coach) don't care, why should we". Thus, while B2N findings (theme 1 and 2) and SDT promote autonomy supporting coach behaviours (e.g. providing opportunities for choice), this discussion proceeds on the basis these behaviours are not wholly unproblematic.

Following consideration of the B2N data, we tentatively speculate that caring relationships (Theme 4), which are authentically dialogical and genuinely empathetic, may add value to coaches who aspire to meet participants' self-determined needs. The

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<sup>6</sup> We are mindful that by drawing on literature from a range of disciplines that the discussion could be critiqued for a lack of depth from any one perspective. That said we feel the interdisciplinary perspective adds value by raising issues for future exploration.

genesis of our proposition, which stipulates that caring may be a useful addition to SDT, is hypothesised in some coaching literature (e.g. Goodwin, Johnston, & Causgrove Dunn, 2014). Additionally, Hobson and Maxwell (2017, p. 168) recently illustrated in the case of early career teachers that the “three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for optimising the well-being of early career teachers”. Rather, within their study, data from a variety of sources demonstrated that caring interactions with others are also a contributing factor in supporting individuals. Specifically, Hobson and Maxwell (2017) illustrate that feelings such as, others respecting your voice and others are concerned about you, helped early career teachers flourish. This data is consistent with care theory such as Noddings (2005) engrossment concept. Additionally, feelings such as these and the behaviours that elicit them are somewhat linked to the SDT concept of relatedness. Therefore, Hobson and Maxwell (2017) argue that care is a complementary and valuable addition to SDT that may support individuals.

Evidence for the proposition that caring relationships are a closely linked and useful extension of SDT also emanates from the care that B2N coach’s exhibit. For example, as suggested in theme 4, coaches’ care may be a precursor or contributing factor to the B2N participants’ basic psychological need of relatedness. Although somewhat neglected in existing literature in comparison to concepts such as autonomy and competence, it is posited that relatedness i.e. a sense of connection with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000), also contributes to intrinsic forms of motivation. Moreover, the social support that coaches provide has been shown to predict athletes’ relatedness need satisfaction (Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004). Sarason et al., (1990, p119), provided an early definition of social support by stating that “knowing that one is loved

and cared for may be the essence of social support”. With this definition in mind, it is logical to suggest that overt caring dispositions (e.g. listening, empathising, respecting the voice of others) and caring concepts such as engrossment and motivational displacement are likely to be experienced as social support, and this may lead to increased feelings of relatedness that ultimately benefit athlete motivation.

Further support for the proposition that care is a linked, yet useful addition to SDT is provided by Rees and Hardy (2000). This research emphasised the importance of coaches providing athletes with specific supportive interactions including; 1) emotional, 2) esteem, 3) informational and 4) tangible support. Within these dimensions ‘moral support’, ‘people care’ and ‘someone to listen to you’ were all emergent themes. This data again overlaps with care theory concepts such as engrossment and motivational displacement (Noddings, 2005). The data from Rees and Hardy’s (2000) study is also similar to the behaviours of ‘caring’ coaches (Knust & Fisher, 2015). The similarity between Rees and Hardy’s support and Knust and Fisher’s care is noteworthy because research has found a relationship between the four dimensions of support (emotional, esteem, informational and tangible) and higher levels of self-confidence (Freeman, Coffee and Rees, 2011). In turn, and as well established by SDT research (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000), feelings of competence are linked to athletes’ motivation. Again, more research is needed in this area, but the links between these concepts and studies, once again suggests that caring dispositions may contribute to participants’ motivation.

Notwithstanding the findings from B2N that suggest a link between SDT and care theory, it is important to clarify that caring relationships are not a panacea for every

problem a coaching practitioner will encounter. Indeed, caring, such as when a powerful individual (e.g. a coach) acts on behalf of a less powerful individual (e.g. an athlete) is not unproblematic. Caring has been associated with dependence, domination and smothering paternalism (Fine & Glendinning, 2005). Indeed, caring in a domineering manner may have detrimental liberty limiting effects for individuals. For example, paternalistic characteristics such as authoritarianism are associated with athlete disempowerment and burnout (Liou, Tsai, Chen, & Hwa Kee, 2007).

The maladaptive implications of paternalistic care have long been recognised in the established field of biological and medical ethics (Woodward, 1998). In response, medical professionals promote a deontological position in which a duty of care is accompanied by ethical principles such as respecting the autonomy of individuals, and a concern for non-maleficence. These principles should manifest in medical practices that are characterised by informed consent, shared decision making, and patient choice. Such practices have much in common with SDT concepts such as autonomy and relatedness. Moreover, within the medical ethics field it has been argued that recognising the autonomy of participants, may mitigate the paternalistic behaviours of authoritarian practitioners who act in a domineering manner ‘because they care’ (Fine & Glendinning, 2005). Thus, practices from medical ethics suggest that autonomy supporting behaviours (e.g. facilitating choice, informed decision making), can be congruent with care, and in fact may be a useful balance that mitigates smothering paternalistic care. That said, domain specific research is needed, to further explore these issues in coaching.

To conclude this discussion, we surmise that caring for individuals may be a useful extension of SDT. For example, caring dispositions that involve empathy, dialogue and genuine listening (Noddings, 2005), may support athletes' feelings of relatedness. Reflexively and conversely, respecting individual autonomy, through providing choice, asking about and acknowledging participant feelings, enabling participants to take initiative, and providing non-controlling feedback (Amorosa & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), may alleviate the negative aspects of paternalistic care. From this perspective, this discussion posits that SDT (theme 1, 2 and 3) and care (theme 3) may be symbiotic concepts that complement and assuage the limitations of the other.

## ***Conclusion***

The argument in this article is clear. When B2N worked well; participants exercised autonomous choices (Theme 1); coaches used their expertise to provide direction for the beneficence of participants (Theme 2); and coaches engaged in caring acts, which were empathetic, dialogical and devoted to serving the needs of individuals (Theme 4). The thematic analysis also identified theme 3) some critical considerations of coaching practice. In particular, athlete autonomy combined with what could be laissez faire coaching or permissive autonomy had negative implications for some participants whose needs were not served by the actions of more dominant group members.

The above themes have elicited considerations for coaching practitioners. Coaches should be aware that in this specific population and context;

- 1) Facilitating participant autonomy and providing structure can be complementary rather than contradictory.
- 2) Coaching behaviours that empower some participants may be detrimental to others.
- 3) Authentic caring dispositions (dialogue, empathising, listening) may be an effective means of engaging and retaining individuals in community sport.

The study also makes a novel, interdisciplinary, theoretical contribution that is beyond the considerations above and should be of interest to wider researchers. Specifically, the discussion makes an original contribution by considering how Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be coupled with an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005). It is posited that caring relationships may be an antecedent to serving and balancing individual participant's needs and therefore improving sport experiences.



Interdisciplinary considerations are valuable contributions because sport experiences always involve physical, psychological and social factors. A call for further interdisciplinary research is therefore made to investigate our insinuation that engaging in caring relationships with athletes may be a mechanism that helps coaches to meet and balance the relatedness, autonomy and competence needs of individuals. To that end, this study makes a significant contribution by integrating two disparate theoretical frameworks. Further studies should investigate if these constructs are linked in alternative contexts e.g. different sports, and alternative populations e.g. males. In the meantime, the findings from Back to Netball have advanced our theoretical and practical understanding by illustrating that an ethic of care and balancing participants' feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness enables individuals to flourish in community sport settings.

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