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Exploring the concept of multiple mentors in elite formal sports coach mentoring programmes

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Abstract

Background: Within the context of sports coaching and coach education, formalised mentoring relationships are often depicted as a mentor-mentee dyad. Thus, mentoring within sports coaching is typically conceptualised as a one-dimensional relationship, where the mentor is seen as the powerful member of the dyad, with greater age and/or experience (Colley 2003).

Aims: To explore the concept of a multiple mentor system in an attempt to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of sports coach mentoring. In doing so, this paper attempts to build upon the suggestion of Jones, Harris and Miles (2009) which highlights the importance of generating empirical research to explore current mentoring approaches in sport, which in turn can inform meaningful formal coach education enhancement. The significance of this work therefore lies in opening up both a practical and a theoretical space for dialogue within sports coach education in order to challenge the traditional dyadic conceptualisation of mentoring and move towards an understanding of ‘mentoring in practice’.

Method: Drawing upon Kram’s (1985) foundational mentoring theory to underpin a multiple mentoring support system, 15 elite coach mentors across a range of sports were interviewed in an attempt to explore their mentoring experiences. Subsequently, an inductive thematic analysis endeavoured to further investigate the realities and practicalities of employing a multiple mentoring system in the context of elite coach development.

Results: The participants advocated support for the utilisation of a multiple mentor system to address some of the inherent problems and complexities within elite sports coaching mentoring. Specifically, the results suggested that mentees sourced different mentors for specific

knowledge acquisition, skills and attributes. For example, within a multiple mentor approach mentors recommended that mentees use a variety of mentors, including cross sports and non-sport mentors.

Conclusion: Tentative recommendations for the future employment of a multiple mentoring framework were considered, with particular reference to cross sports or non-sport mentoring experiences.

Keywords: Sports coaching, coach education, mentoring, multiple mentor, formal coach learning, elite coach development.

Introduction

As an educational approach to facilitate practice, mentoring is widely acknowledged as a valuable tool to support a range of competencies and attitudes, such as the development of knowledge and skills, working practices, role clarity and role satisfaction, and to assist the development of a professional identity across a range of contexts (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Higgins, Dobrow and Roloff 2010). However, the lack of clarity surrounding the functional role of the mentor has been well documented (Kram 1985; Ragins and Kram 2007). In an attempt to remedy this issue, a key recommendation from the work of Ragins and Kram (2007) is for future work to further examine the role function of mentors across different domains. According to Kram (1985), mentor functions typically consist of two primary support roles: career-related and psychosocial. Career-related support specifically focuses on the mentee's career advancement and desire to remain in an organisation, self-efficacy, perceptions of career success and optimism (Higgins, Dobrow and Chandler 2008; Higgins *et al.* 2010). Thus, career-related mentoring support typically encompasses interactions that include increasing the exposure and visibility of the mentee within the organisation, career-related protection (i.e. understanding 'the rules of the game') and providing challenges to current practices (McManus and Russell 1997). Alternatively, a mentor who provides psychosocial guidance typically provides support regarding role modelling, role acceptance, role confirmation, and counselling and friendship, which can increase a mentee's efficacy (Ensher and Murphy 1997; Scandura 1992). However, the mentor's role function will vary depending upon the career stage and needs of the mentee (Higgins *et al.* 2010). Typically, during the mentee's early stages of career development both psychosocial and career support may be provided.

Within the context of sports coaching and coach education, formalised mentoring relationships are often depicted as a mentor-mentee dyad (Cushion 2006; Nash 2003). Thus, mentoring within sport is typically conceptualised as a one-dimensional relationship, where the

mentor is seen as the powerful member of the dyad, with greater age and/or experience (Colley 2003). Conversely, the mentee is often depicted as being a relatively powerless entity waiting for knowledge to be bestowed on them (Colley 2003). Here, the more experienced individual (i.e. the coach mentor/coach educator) willingly shares their knowledge with the less experienced individual (i.e. the athlete mentee/coach learner) through a relationship involving mutual trust (Clutterbuck 1991). As a result, the sports coaching literature has tended to treat mentoring in practice as an uncomplicated and one-dimensional dyad, encompassing a naïve portrayal of knowledge sharing (Bloom 2013; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke and Salmela 1998; Chambers 2015; Cushion 2006; Griffiths and Armour 2012; Jones *et al.* 2009; Nash 2003; Wright and Smith 2000).

Alternatively, within the business literature, researchers have begun to reconceptualise ‘mentoring in practice’ as consisting of either a *multiple mentor* (Higgins and Kram 2001) or a *developmental network* (Higgins, Chandler and Kram 2007; Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy and Kram 2011) support system as opposed to a singular dyadic relationship. Within this literature, the discussion of the concept of multiple mentoring precedes the introduction of developmental networks. The concept of multiple mentoring can be traced to Kram’s (1985) foundational mentoring theory, which suggests an individual could utilise support from multiple sources. Specifically, a multiple mentor approach consists of different mentors providing different *amounts of* and *types of* support (Higgins and Kram 2001; Higgins and Thomas 2001). Within a multiple mentoring framework, mentors would be an influential individual from the mentee’s working environment, with an advanced level of knowledge or experience that can provide the mentee with what they require for upward mobility (Baugh and Scandura 1999). As a result, multiple mentors often represent a relatively small number of key individuals from inside the mentee’s working environment, or consist of a larger number of individuals from outside the mentee’s organisation (Baugh and Scandura 1999; Meziar and Scandura 2005). For example,

within sport a netball coach's multiple mentoring support system might include a mentor who is currently positioned within the organisation and who can provide career-related technical and tactical support alongside other mentors (e.g. a strength and conditioning coach and an experienced coach from another sport). Each of the mentors in this example possesses specialist knowledge that is useful for the mentee, although each would provide varying levels of context (or sports specific) understanding. Importantly, a mentor from outside the sports domain with an advanced level of knowledge and experience might offer guidance on general 'good practice' and personal or professional support with a different perspective away from the political workings of the context (i.e. the sports organisation).

A developmental network consists more broadly of individuals who actively take *an interest in* and *actions to develop* the protégée's career and provide them with direct assistance (Higgins and Kram 2001; Dobrow *et al.* 2011). A key component of the developmental network approach encompasses a *social network lens* (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve and Tai 2004; Granovetter 1973, 1983), which considers the *network diversity* (i.e. range of people or sources providing support) and *strength of ties* (i.e. emotional closeness and frequency of interactions). Therefore, developmental networks can consist of a wider range of people from both inside and outside an individual's organisation. For example, the developmental support a tennis coach might receive could include a developer from the sport of tennis (i.e. from inside the organisation), a developer from the sport of badminton (i.e. from inside the context of sport but outside the sports organisation), a developer from an educational institution (i.e. from outside the context of sport and also outside the sports organisation), and a developer that assumes a more social connection with the coach, such as a family member, a peer or friend.

This increased interest in and understanding of mentoring in practice has, at least in part, been driven by the influence of globalisation, and the increased access to and functionality of computer technology reflects a change of practices within the workplace. For example,

Byrne and Keefe (2002) have suggested that mentoring often occurs online (e-mentoring) through the use of modern technologies such as email, Twitter[®], Skype[®] and Face Time[®]. Indeed, Ragins and Kram (2007) outlined that a multiple mentor system can help a mentee cope with changing environments, the globalisation of the workplace, technological innovations, and changes in organisational structure and/or demography. However, such theoretical advancement regarding ‘mentoring in practice’ in our understanding of mentoring from mainstream mentoring research is yet to be explored within the sports coaching literature. Consequently, there is a paucity of research within the field of sports coaching that directly explores ‘mentoring in practice’. In particular, currently no empirical work exists within sports coaching that explores the efficacy of multiple mentoring. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the concept of a multiple mentor system, in an attempt to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of sports coach mentoring. In doing so, this paper attempts to build upon the suggestion of Jones *et al.* (2009), which highlights the importance of generating empirical research to explore current mentoring approaches in sport, which in turn can inform meaningful formal coach education enhancement. The significance of this work therefore lies in opening up both a practical and a theoretical space for dialogue within sports coach education in order to challenge the traditional dyadic conceptualisation of mentoring and move towards an understanding of ‘mentoring in practice’. As such, this work aims to critically consider *who is* and *who could be* a mentor in sports coaching (c.f. Haggard, Dougherty, Turban and Wilbanks 2011).

Methodology

Philosophical stance

The present research falls within the interpretivist research paradigm (Potrac, Nelson and Jones 2014), aligned to a relativist ontology (i.e. the nature of social reality), which recognises that multiple perspectives and realities exist for each of the participants within the research process, and subjectivist epistemology (i.e. the relationship between the inquirer and the known), which recognises the interaction of the authors within the research process in an iterative reciprocal manner (Groom, Nelson, Potrac and Smith 2014; Smith, Sparkes and Caddick 2014; Sparkes and Smith 2009), thus rejecting epistemological foundationalism (i.e. ways of knowing where techniques can sort out trustworthy from untrustworthy ways of interpreting reality) (Smith *et al.* 2014; Sparkes and Smith 2009). Furthermore, the present paper follows the traditional representational prose of the dominant form of representation within qualitative research, the 'realist tale' (i.e. we as authors deploy a neutral voice, writing in the third person (Groom *et al.* 2014)). However, it is important to recognise that this is a textual strategy and a decision made by the research team, rather than a *true* or *real* account of the complexity of the lived experiences of the participants (Groom *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2014; Sparkes and Smith, 2009; Taylor 2014), and the theoretical interpretations are offered as a potential analytical framework as a sense making tool (Nelson, Potrac and Groom 2014).

Participants

A purposeful sample was used to access 15 participant elite coach mentors from a variety of different formalised mentoring programmes that operate across different sporting contexts. The participants had experience of mentoring within different sports and in some cases within different operational contexts (e.g. business, education and nursing). Participant coach mentors were classified as elite in accordance with set criteria: (1) the highest formal

coaching award within their sport, (2) a minimum of 10 years' practical coaching experience, and (3) working as a coach mentor for a minimum of three years.

Procedure

Following ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participant elite coach mentors either face-to-face ($n = 13$) in a private location close to the participants' place of work, or, where the participants were unable to meet in person, via the phone ($n = 2$). Follow-up interviews were then conducted on the phone, and they focused specifically on multiple mentoring nuances ($n = 3$). All of the interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and were then selectively transcribed by the author.

The interviews ranged from 35 to 105 minutes; interview questions were open ended in nature and delivered in a flexible manner (Purdy 2014). Elaboration probes were used when required to uncover 'rich' data surrounding the *what*, *why* and *how* of the elite coach mentors' practices (Purdy 2014). The construction of an interview guide ensured that questions to remain focused on the topic of investigation in the present study. Specifically, the interview guide explored the participants' experiences of multiple mentoring, the influence of organisational politics in mentoring and the potential benefits of a multiple mentoring support system. All questions were followed up by elaboration and clarification probes. Pseudonyms were used within the text which enabled the participants' identities and names to remain anonymous, although the participants' primary sport/s are provided to give some context to the data extracts.

Data analysis

A data-driven thematic analysis technique was employed which enabled the first author to stimulate useful comparisons between themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information, which follows a unique encoding procedure (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis has been described as a foundational method for qualitative analysis for ‘thematizing meaning’ from theory by reporting patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). The thematic analysis followed an inductive protocol, to develop key themes within the interview transcripts.

The thematic analysis process followed a six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) the generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes within the codes; (4) reviewing the themes; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) producing the research report (Boyatzis 1998). First, the researcher familiarised herself with the data sets through engaging in the process of selective transcription and by repeatedly listening to the audio recording of the interviews, which has been described as a key phase of data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The raw data sets were explored by assessing the commonality of articulated themes, thus creating the categorisation of the three focused key themes: (1) experience of multiple mentoring; (2) micro-political nature of elite formalised mentoring; and (3) benefits of using a multiple mentoring system. Secondly, individual occurrences were explored across the first order themes to identify comparisons within the data sets (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006).

Data analysis was viewed as an iterative process between data and theory, although it is important to acknowledge the researcher’s role in the thematic analysis. Specifically, the researcher made decisions on the data, the codes and categories within the present study; that is, the themes did not simply ‘emerge from the data’ but rather should be considered a result of the on-going analysis, interpretation and critical reflection.

Results and Discussion

Experience of multiple mentoring

The mentoring role traditionally encompasses an individual who guides and supports the personal or professional development of a mentee, although this perspective implicitly assumes a single mentor has all the answers (Bloom 2013; Bloom *et al.* 1998; Chambers 2015; Cushion 2006; Griffiths and Armour 2012; Jones *et al.* 2009; Nash 2003; Wright and Smith 2000). However, sports mentors within the present study explain the existence of different strategies: ‘I just don’t think one mentor has all the answers, I have different mentors who I would access for different developments points’ (Sarah – Multi Sports Mentor). Further, Mark (Football Mentor) adds, ‘I think a good mentor will be able to mentor and signpost effectively, depending on the mentee’s needs.’ Some of the coaches also suggested that different sports have different levels of openness and engagement when considering the concept of mentoring. For example, as Tony (Multi Sports Mentor) stated, ‘I think the reality is with accessing more than one mentor, it depends where the sport is.’ However, Emma (Hockey and Netball) notes, ‘If you’re going to point someone in a direction which could possibly conflict with current thinking you have got to be wary of that.’ In the following extract, Tony provides an example of when he would signpost a mentee in practice:

No single mentor can have all the answers; if a swimming coach came to me and said I need to develop my physiological understanding I would be passing them on to someone straight away. Yes, I know enough about adaptation but if you’re really wanting to develop that individual then go and put them in touch with another expert.

And maybe mentor that process; just because someone has expert knowledge doesn't always mean they can teach it, so having a learning mentor which sits alongside them becomes quite effective. (Tony – Multi Sports Mentor)

Similarly to the work of Kram (1985), and more recently Dobrow *et al.* (2011), the extract above highlights how the participant mentors would 'signpost' the mentee to other potential mentors when they did not possess the specific knowledge required to benefit the mentee. In the following extract, Alex highlights an example of a multiple mentoring system in practice in sports coaching:

I have four to five people I would go to regularly, for mentoring, if I needed something, to ask opinions, get knowledge of. But there's probably only one or two of them who act as a mentor who challenge you, provide you with some provocative questioning, whereas the other people you go to will provide you with feedback but won't necessarily challenge. This menu of support could perhaps take the form of people who can offer that at the centre, who are closer to the mentee, then three or four people on the outskirts of the structure who feedback and have areas of expertise the mentee will access as and when they need to. (Alex – Multi Sports Mentor)

Similarly, Bill recalled a scenario where he engaged in a multiple mentor system in sports coaching practice to support the bespoke nature of the coach mentee:

Sometimes you need more than one mentor. I did a session with somebody on wing play and I was working at a football club and next door there was a rugby club. I knew the coach so I asked them if they could put a session on around how they get their wingers to receive the ball in terms of timing, because in rugby you can't throw the ball forward. That was my out of the box thinking when you're mentoring and helping people. Now, my national governing body and whoever else might say well, you can't be doing that, that's not the sport, but for me that's working outside the box and using your network to help the mentee. (Bill – Football Mentor)

Drawing on Ragins and Kram's (2007) evolution of the traditional mentor-mentee dyad towards a 'multiple mentor' system, useful comparisons can be made between the 'multiple mentoring' theory (Burlew 1991; Kram 1985; Ragins and Kram 2007) and the view of 'mentoring in practice' within the present study in sports coaching. Indeed, whilst the potential practical and political problems in a traditional mentor-mentee dyad have been widely noted (e.g. sufficient expertise and the influence of institutional political agendas), the multiple mentor concept might address some of the current shortcomings of traditional mentoring approaches in practice. Indeed, Burlew (1991) suggested that the complexity of the mentoring process often requires the mentee to access different mentors. Moreover, recent advancements within the workplace have rendered the single master-apprentice mentoring model insufficient (Janasz and Sullivan 2004). Therefore, the adoption and expansion of multiple mentoring within sport might provide the mentee with a variety of mentors who possess different skill sets, knowledge bases and perspectives, and who can provide different mentoring functions and types of support (Ragins and Kram 2007). As a result, formalised programmes should consider the utilisation of a multiple mentor system, where a diverse set of individuals provide

needed developmental support to the mentee (Higgins and Kram 2001; Nelson, Cushion and Potrac 2013; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac and Groom 2014).

Micro-political nature of elite formalised mentoring

Micro-politics within sports coaching encapsulates the ‘political interactions that take place between social actors in different organizational settings’ (Potrac and Jones 2009a, p. 225). Furthermore, micro-politics refers to ‘the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals’ (Blasé 1991, p. 11), which influences tension, conflict struggle and rivalry (Ball 1987; Blasé 1991). At times, the micro-politics ‘at play’ within these schemes had a negative impact on the open nature of the mentoring process; for example, as Jamie (Shooting Mentor) explained, ‘sometimes mentors are like my secrets and it’s very difficult to break that taboo down, particularly when you are in a professional arena or you are trying to earn a living at it’. Moreover, Gary (Athletics Mentor) suggested that ‘mentors engage in withholding knowledge’, and Rhys (Athletics Mentor) added, ‘we find the coaches much prefer to be mentored by somebody who doesn’t have an agenda in their sport.’ Thus, Kevin (Multi Sports Mentor) concludes ‘so as soon as you have that there’s no trust so the mentoring doesn’t happen’. Kevin continues:

Mentors and mentees engage in knowledge shielding, using knowledge as a shield; you know, when coaches compete for the same athletes, like in athletics, why would anyone share anything with anyone? Because they might ‘nick it’. Now if coaching is your livelihood why would you want to share it? (Kevin – Multi Sports Mentor)

Here, Kevin describes how mentors and mentees engage in ‘micro-political strategies’ and use ‘formal power’ in an attempt to foster their personal agenda or interest. Such strategies are adopted by the mentor or mentee to reflect the contextual situation or individuals in practice. Tony discusses the strategy of being diplomatic instead of honest:

Yes, we have actually tried mentors from healthcare. We have one lady who was the chief executive of a national health hospital trust who mentored two people in cricket and did a brilliant job. They said to me they found it much more beneficial, and said she is so good she doesn’t talk to us about cricket she talks to us about us; she’s got no agenda, she’s not a spy, all she cares about is us. She’s wonderful and she is, she is very good. It was an older lady mentoring younger lads, it was a different sport, different gender, everything. (Elliot – Cricket and Rugby Mentor)

At an institutional level, individual sporting Governing Bodies (GBs) may be seen to apply pressure to mentors to ‘give back’ to their own sport. The following data extract highlights the pressure that mentors can face from within the GB of their own sport:

Cross sports mentoring can at times have a political influence on the varying sports who are interested in it; for example, some mentors who had been mentoring mentees from a completely different sport were receiving pressure and criticism from their respective GBs. Things like, why are you not investing and giving back to your own sport? So, I think there needs to be a generic buy-in from all sports, so all sports can receive the benefits and less sports would feel threatened. (Sophie – Multi Sports Mentor)

Within these elite formalised sports mentoring schemes, the political landscape of the sport can be seen to impact the mentoring process in two principal ways: firstly through the social and political control the institution has on the workforce (i.e. coach mentors and mentees) and secondly in how mentors might use their power to withhold knowledge (cf. Ball 1987; Blasé 1991). Such findings mirror the work of Potrac and Jones (2009b) who outlined that coaches, similarly to people in positions of influence, engage in strategic micro-political actions demonstrating *micro-political literacy* (i.e. reading the political landscape of their contexts), constantly forging and re-forging alliances with relevant contextual stakeholders to secure their objectives. Further, Hoyle (1982) suggests that individuals use strategies and tactics within a formal setting to further their own interests. With this in mind, the participant coach mentors clearly illustrated the ‘micro-political realities’ of mentoring in practice when mentoring within the elite sports context in which they operate. However, the concept of multiple mentoring offers a potential avenue to further supporting mentoring in practice, particularly within the highly political context of formalised elite coach mentoring schemes.

To further understand the micro-political dynamics, considerations should accommodate the meaningful interaction between an individual and a group, and the context in which the interaction takes place (Kelchtermans 2005). Although there is a dearth of research exploring the notion of ‘micro-politics’ in sports coaching, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a, 2002b) developed the concept of micro-political literacy within the profession of teaching. Here the teacher was encouraged to interpret and understand the dynamics of ‘power’ and ‘interest’ by deploying ‘seeing and reading’ strategies (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002a, 2002b). Mentors described scenarios where they ‘read’ the situation through a micro-political lens, which enabled them to understand the context and effectively implement coping strategies (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002a, 2002b). Not only do individual mentors employ micro-

political strategies, but GB institutions often align mentoring schemes and the deployment of the mentors with their own personal agendas. Some sporting institutions attempted to prevent mentors from engaging in cross sports mentoring or multiple mentoring strategies, through fear that these mentors would not have a sufficient amount of time to give back to their sport. If a cross or multiple mentoring strategy is to be utilised in these formalised schemes, such schemes should seek to obtain a generic buy-in to these approaches to maximise the benefits for the bespoke mentor-mentee pairings.

Benefits of using a multiple mentoring system

Participants within the current study frequently outlined the benefits of a multiple mentor support system in practice. For example, as Alex (Multi Sports Mentor) outlined, ‘sometimes it makes mentoring simple; if you know the person you’re mentoring or you work in the same sport or organisation, I find myself asking if I am ethically best placed to work with you.’ Jamie (Shooting Mentor) suggests ‘accessing mentors from another country or sport is about sharing expert knowledge, keeping it in sport and not losing it when people finish their role in sport’. Further, Michelle (Athletics Mentor) states, ‘If I wanted a conversation around the technical detail in my sport I would have somebody who I would go to; if I wanted to explore my coaching style I would speak with a mentor with an educational background.’ Participants highlighted numerous benefits of multiple mentors within elite sports coach formalised mentoring schemes:

Yea, we have quite a lot of mentors who are formally executive coaches in business; their skill set is excellent. We have one lady who is a chief executive of a national health

hospital trust who mentored two people in cricket and did a brilliant job. They said to me they found it much more beneficial and was so good because she didn't speak to them about cricket, she spoke to them about them; she's got no agenda, she's not a spy, all she cares about is us. It was a different sport, she was very good. (Elliot – Cricket and Rugby Mentor)

Elliot suggests that mentors who are paired with mentees from outside the mentees' primary sport or sporting context utilise an approach with a reduced micro-political influence.

Emma adds:

Cross sports mentors, I think they're knowledgeable enough about coaching. They have no interest at all in the sport itself other than developing me as a coach to maximise my performance so there's not a threat, but a feeling that they could do the job better or they're judging, not me. They also don't have all that political baggage so you can actually be honest; that's the key thing, that honesty. If it's not honest it's not going to work. (Emma – Hockey and Netball)

Here, Emma outlines the benefits of a multiple mentoring system, which includes mentors from outside the mentee's primary sporting context, for example, who also have less 'political baggage', which enables the relationship to be open and honest within the mentoring relationship. Further, as Sophie outlines:

It's far better if the mentors are not from your sport; if they are from your sport they will start to have an opinion about what you're doing. In many ways mentoring isn't about having an opinion about their technical aspects, it might be about having an opinion about how they're coaching, but as soon as you have someone from your own sport you start talking about the sport ... Whereas mentoring is about talking about the person, so if your sport's football and I have nothing to do with football, I can't talk to you about football but I understand sport. I am going to talk about you and that we find is far more powerful. (Sophie – Multi Sports Mentor)

Similarly to the work of Allen and Eby (2011) within business and education, multiple mentoring approaches encompass a variety of benefits, although there is a need to acknowledge the contextual sensitivity of the sporting environment and the contextual expertise required for a mentoring role (Lyle and Cushion 2010). Multiple mentoring approaches in practice were utilised in elite formalised schemes by drawing upon mentors from different sporting backgrounds or non-sporting backgrounds to assist with the development of the mentees. Multiple mentoring aligns itself with the idea that one primary mentor within a sport may no longer be realistic or desirable, which mirrors the wider mentoring literature (Baugh and Scandura 1999; Higgins and Kram 2001; Kram and Higgins 2009). The findings from the present study suggest the mentoring process within these formalised schemes, despite the contextual sensitivity, is most effective when the mentee has access to a portfolio of mentors (Higgins and Kram 2007). Moreover, this includes access to mentors from both inside and outside the context of sport and mentors with sport specific knowledge sets.

Participant coach mentors not only describe scenarios whereby a multiple mentor concept or a non-sport specific mentor was utilised within a formalised scheme but these

mentors further suggest that these strategies could reduce the micro-political nature or problematic nature of the institutional agenda. Mentors working in the sports context who came from the business or nursing sectors were praised for their lack of political sport baggage or dual agendas and because they were further focused on the bespoke needs of the mentee. Additionally, sports mentors working with mentees from a different sport possessed the relevant sport specific expertise to aid the mentee's development without engaging in micro-political strategies. Participants described situations where they could focus on the mentee without ethical considerations, political strategies or a personal agenda leading them to withhold information, and they could use an approach that was centred on being open and honest and that allowed the mentee to speak freely without feeling threatened.

Conclusion

This study aimed to address the dearth of empirical work exploring the realities of formalised elite sports coach mentoring. Specifically, this work sought to explore the concept of a multiple mentor system in elite formalised mentoring schemes, in an attempt to generate an empirical foundation for future research. Moreover, its findings can further inform meaningful practice and delivery within mentoring and coach education programmes (Bloom 2013; Bloom *et al.* 1998; Chambers 2015; Cushion 2006; Griffiths and Armour 2012; Jones *et al.* 2009; Nash 2003; Wright and Smith 2000). The thematic analysis resulted in the coding creation of four principle themes; this theme generation allowed for a rich exploration of the realities of the multiple mentor approach in practice.

Firstly, the mentoring process between the mentee and the mentor lacks a clear and consistent definition within the literature (Allen and Eby 2011; Bloom 2013; Chambers 2015; Jones *et al.* 2009). Thus, the formalised mentoring landscape fails to adopt either a universal

definition or a practical guideline for mentoring in practice. Moreover, not only does the mentoring process lack conceptual clarity but the role and mentor function within the context of sport are worthy of further exploration; for example, the ambiguity surrounding the role of ‘coach developer’ and ‘coach mentor’. Despite this reality the implementation of formalised mentoring schemes continues to grow as a viable strategy for the development of the coaching workforce (Bloom 2013; Bloom *et al.* 1998; Chambers 2015; Cushion 2006; Griffiths and Armour 2012; Jones *et al.* 2009; Nash 2003; Wright and Smith 2000).

Secondly, the mentoring process within these schemes has evolved from a traditional mentor-mentee pairing towards a multiple mentoring system (Burlew 1991; Ragins and Kram 2007). The utilisation of a multiple mentor approach was advocated within sports coaching practice, similarly to in business research (Allen and Eby 2007; Dobrow *et al.* 2011; Haggard, *et al.* 2011; Ragins and Kram 2007). With the dynamic climate of elite sport and coach development, often the mentee or mentor were part of a wider multiple mentoring system. As a result, the mentee could access different types of support and different amounts of support from a variety of mentors. Furthermore, mentors were limited by their own knowledge and at times needed to signpost the mentee towards a different mentor or expert.

Thirdly, from a micro-political perspective, elite sports coach mentoring schemes encompassed mentors who utilised strategies to gain social or political control over specific situations. Some mentors were seen to resist the development remit of such schemes in an attempt to further their own career opportunities (cf. Ball 1987; Blasé 1991; Potrac and Jones 2009a, 2009b). Mentors who engaged in strategic micro-political actions or micro-political literacy were often from the same primary sport as the mentee, which at times caused the mentee to feel threatened and thus reduced the open and honest relationship. Moreover, the agenda of the GB institution pressurised mentors to provide coach development within their primary sport before engaging in cross sports or non-sport mentoring. Despite, the

pedagogical value of mentoring within formalised schemes, the problematic nature of micro-political strategies continues to hinder the open and honest environment required for effective mentoring. However, the extent to which the multiple mentoring concept could reduce the micro-political influence on the mentee, from the mentee's perspective, remains an unexplored avenue available for future sports mentoring research.

Fourthly, the implementation and noted benefits of the multiple mentor system within sports coaching practice could in fact help to overcome some of the inherent micro-political problems within formalised schemes. Here, non-sport or cross sports mentors were suggested to provide bespoke and personal support to the coach mentees. As a result, mentees within the present study felt mentors were less threatening and judgemental, which enabled them to be open in their mentoring relationship. If the utilisation of multiple mentoring is to be a successful coach development tool, there is a need for the generic buy-in from all GBs. However, the extent to which a technical mentor from a sport could be useful for mentee development remains an unexplored avenue for future research.

In summary, this paper attempts to in part answer the call of Jones *et al.* (2009), Bloom (2013) and Nelson *et al.* (2013) for rich empirical work exploring the efficacy and merit of mentoring approaches in sports coaching practice. Furthermore, this paper highlights some of the 'issues' surrounding mentoring in practice, alongside providing 'evidence of support' and 'recommendations' for the delivery format of formalised mentoring in practice (Bloom 2013; Bloom *et al.* 1998; Chambers 2015; Cushion 2006; Griffiths and Armour 2012; Jones *et al.* 2009; Nash 2003; Wright and Smith 2000). Moreover, although acknowledging an all-encompassing, conceptually clear definition for mentoring is perhaps unrealistic, the value of this work can be seen by exploring how mentoring in practice can be a tool for workforce development. Whilst coach learning may remain, at least implicitly, the overarching goal of formalised elite sports coach mentoring programmes, consideration

should be given to the format of delivery. For example, this paper starts to make the case to move beyond the traditional mentoring approach in sport by utilising a multiple mentoring concept, to enhance bespoke mentee development (Ragins and Kram 2007). This paper advocates the potential of the multiple mentor concept to begin to address some of the inherent complexities and micro-political problems within the traditional mentoring perspective. Although empirical research exploring mentoring in the content of sport is scarce, this paper outlines possible future lines for enquiry surrounding the perspective of the mentee within these formalised schemes. However, we would like to acknowledge that this work offers merely a starting point for further investigation and the applicability of the findings of this paper to other contexts and mentor-mentee relationships should be treated cautiously.

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