You're just like me, so we must be great together": How similarity in narcissism impacts the quality of the coach-athlete relationship

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1 Running Heading: SIMILARITY IN NARCISSISM AND THE COACH-ATHLETE

2 RELATIONSHIP

3 **"You're just like me, so we must be great together": How similarity in narcissism impacts the**

4 **quality of the coach-athlete relationship.**

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1 **Abstract**

2 Narcissism has emerged as a highly relevant personality trait in sporting contexts, as its competitive

3 environment offers individuals numerous opportunities to pursue personal glory. However, little is

4 known about narcissism in the context of the coach-athlete relationship, and the extent to which

5 similarity in narcissism across coaches and athletes can influence relationship quality. This study

6 sought to explore how similarity in narcissism affects a coach's perception of their coach-athlete

7 relationship. Data from semi-structured interviews with 30 national and international coaches were

8 analysed using thematic analysis within a critical realist approach. Coaches were purposefully

9 sampled based on their Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire & Dark Triad Dirty Dozen

10 narcissism scores from Stanford et al. (2024). Four groups were then established: similar in trait

11 narcissism/high relationship quality (Sim-High), similar in trait narcissism/low relationship quality

12 (Sim-Low), dissimilar in trait narcissism/high relationship quality (Dis-High) and dissimilar in trait

13 narcissism/low relationship quality (Dis-Low), prior to any interviews. Using Wiltshire &

14 Ronkainen's (2021) three level framework of analysis, seventy experiential, eighteen inferential, and

15 five dispositional themes were generated. The dispositional themes were perceived relationship

16 perfection, high (perceived) self-awareness, breeding behaviors, relationship power and relationship

17 elasticity. This study offers an insight into the experiences of similarity in narcissism and the

18 subsequent influence on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

19 *Key Words:* Coaches, Critical Realism, Dyadic Relationships, Narcissist, Personality Traits.

1   **"You're just like me, so we must be great together": How similarity in narcissism impacts the**

2   **quality of the coach-athlete relationship.**

3   The coach-athlete relationship is one of the most valued dyadic relationships in sport because

4   both members depend on each other to achieve a collective goal (Jowett, 2017). For instance, a coach

5   will observe their athletes in a way they cannot possibly observe themselves, while athletes

6   experience sport in a way the coach cannot fully experience. This unique dyadic relationship has been

7   defined as a dynamic social situation in which coaches' and athletes' cognitions, feelings, and

8   behaviours are mutually and causally interdependent (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2017). The coach-athlete

9   relationship has been contextualized in terms of an individual's level of closeness (e.g., respect, trust,

10   appreciation), commitment (e.g., wanting to maintain a close relationship over time), complementary

11   behaviours (e.g., approachability and responsiveness), and an ability to work together with a co-

12   orientated approach (e.g., sharing of knowledge and understanding). This theoretical framework,

13   known as the 3+1Cs model (Jowett, 2007), has been used extensively to demonstrate how an effective

14   coach-athlete relationship can result in enhanced well-being (Davis et al., 2022), and improved

15   performance (Phillips et al., 2023). Examining the coach-athlete relationship through the 3+1Cs

16   model offers valuable insights into how the dynamic, reciprocal interactions between coaches and

17   athletes are shaped by key antecedent variables (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). This can include

18   the personalities of both coaches and athletes, as well as the degree of similarity or dissimilarity of

19   their personalities (Baudin et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2011).

20   The concept of personality similarity has long intrigued relationship researchers, both from

21   empirical (e.g., Byrne, 1971) and anecdotal perspectives (e.g., *Do opposites attract?* [Sample, 2023]).

22   In romantic relationships, personality similarity has been linked to various relationship benefits such

23   as decreased disagreements (Rammstedt et al., 2013) and relationship longevity (Arranz-Becker,

24   2013). In sporting research, Stanford et al. (2022) demonstrated that within successful elite coach-

25   athlete relationships, both members identified areas of how personality similarity helped them to align

26   their thoughts and feelings to each other. This process enabled them to increase their understanding of

27   each other and better predict their partner's behaviours. In addition, dissimilarity was also perceived

28   as a positive component of their elite coach-athlete relationship, allowing both coaches and athletes to

1 experience a sense of balance, be able to read each other more accurately, and facilitate better

2 communication. Yet, within a coach-athlete relationship, dissimilarity in personality traits can result

3 in feelings of disconnectedness, and a lack of belonging and care for each other (Jackson et al, 2011).

4 Overall, the possible positive and negative effects of personality similarity on the coach-athlete

5 relationship remains unclear. Furthermore, research in this area has generally focussed on broad

6 personality constructs such as the Big Five (i.e., Jackson et al, 2011). In recent years there have been

7 calls to move beyond the broad personality approaches (i.e., the Big Five) and to investigate other

8 personality traits that might be highly relevant to sporting contexts (Roberts et al., 2018).

9   One such personality trait that has emerged as highly pertinent in sport is narcissism[1], as

10 sporting environments can provide individuals with exponential glory (e.g., winning, recognition,

11 fame). Within subclinical settings narcissists are characterised as being "self-centred, self-

12 aggrandizing, entitled, dominant", with "a manipulative interpersonal orientation" (Morf et al., 2011

13 p. 400). Narcissists can be charismatic, charming, and supremely confident individuals with a strong

14 drive for success. However, their sense of personal superiority or overconfidence often serve as a self-

15 protective factor to mask deep-seated feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy (see Roberts et al.,

16 2018 for a review of narcissism in sport). Narcissists believe they are exceptional performers, yet their

17 heightened perception of ability does not always translate into actual results (Roberts et al., 2018). In

18 coaching roles such individuals more frequently demonstrate a controlling interpersonal style (e.g.,

19 trying to motivate through coercion or intimidation, exerting excessive control over athletes), which

20 can impact their relationship and performance outcomes (Matosic et al., 2020). For example, coaches

21 who are higher in narcissism tend to win fewer gold medals at the Olympics (Cook et al., 2021). A

22 successful coach-athlete relationship requires both members to contribute equally to its effectiveness

23 by adopting a coach-athlete centred approach (Jowett & Slade, 2021). However, narcissists in dyadic

24 relationships have been shown to be insensitive, selfish, hostile, or aggressive (Wurst et al., 2017). As

25 such, narcissism could be potentially limiting a coach's ability to create an effective relationship with

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[1] The term 'narcissists' or reference to 'narcissism' in this article refers to individuals who score relatively high on non-clinical, valid self-report measures.

their athletes by overemphasising their own ability, putting their own needs ahead of their athletes, or playing down the contributions of their athletes in their success.

To the best of our knowledge, only one study to date has explored the effects of similarity in narcissism in the context of coach-athlete relationships (Stanford et al., 2024). Taking a quantitative approach, (Stanford et al., 2024) found that greater dissimilarity in narcissism (i.e., greater differences in narcissism scores between coaches and athletes) resulted in higher relationship quality for coaches, and higher levels of narcissism in coaches negatively affected their behaviours (i.e., complementarity) toward their athletes. Interestingly, the athletes' level of narcissism had no effect on either their own relationship quality or that of their coach. These findings suggest a greater need to focus on how narcissism is primarily influencing relationship quality for coaches. Additionally, little is known about how coaches feel about the role of narcissism in their relationship or how this results in them behaving towards the athletes they are working with. Furthermore, the quantitative approach employed by (Stanford et al., 2024) offers limited insight into the thoughts and feelings underlying coaches' negative complementary behaviours, as well as how similarities in narcissism shape their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with athletes.

To address the current limitations in the field, alternative methodologies should be adopted. By combining qualitative methods with existing quantitative findings, a more comprehensive understanding of coaches' experiences within their coach-athlete relationships can be achieved. In sport psychology, there has been growing advocacy for more rigorous qualitative practices, particularly those that consider ontological and epistemological perspectives (Poucher et al., 2020). Critical realism represents a significant advancement in social science methodology, as it develops a qualitative theory of causality and allows for the identification of underlying patterns in social phenomena through the triangulation of multiple data sources (e.g., narcissism similarity scores and semi-structured interviews). Critical realism highlights how both quantitative and qualitative data co-exist within the "real" world, each contributing valuable insights to our understanding of social phenomena (Gorski, 2013).

The Present Study

1   Addressing the limitations of the literature on personality in the coach-athlete relationship, the

2   present study had two aims. First, we examined the extent to which coaches' own levels of narcissism

3   influenced their perception of their relationship quality. Second, we explored how similarity in trait

4   narcissism influences coaches' perceptions of their relationship, using the 3+1Cs model (i.e.,

5   closeness, commitment, and complementarity). Specifically, we assessed both aims using the critical

6   realist approach to thematic analysis proposed by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). This process

7   assessed the corresponding validity indicators of empirical adequacy, ontological plausibility, and

8   explanatory power.

9   **Method**

10   **Transparency and Openness**

11   This study was not preregistered and adheres to the American Psychological Association's

12   Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (JARS-Q; Levitt et al., 2018). To protect

13   participant confidentiality, audio recordings of the interviews and their transcripts are not publicly

14   accessible. The interview guide has been provided within supplementary data.

15   **Participants**

16   Thirty coaches (18 male, 12 females, $M_{age} = 37.7 \pm 6.5$ years) were recruited having initially

17   participated in (Stanford et al., 2024). Coach participants were re-contacted via email and asked to

18   participate in this study based on the similarity between their own and their athletes' levels of

19   narcissism (see below for more details on this process) and the quality of their coach-athlete

20   relationship as previously reported. These coaches worked in three individual sports (Swimming = 18;

21   Triathlon = 7; Cycling = 5) at an international ($n = 9$) or national level ($n = 21$). Coaches had been

22   working with their identified athlete for 2 to 8 years ($M = 3.9 \pm 1.9$ years) and worked with them for 9

23   to 40 hours of contact per week ($M = 6.3 \pm 5$ hours). Table 1 provides further information on the

24   narcissism levels of each coach and athlete, their similarity, sampling percentiles, and specific

25   demographic factors (e.g., sport, gender, etc).

26   **Research Design and Methodology**

27   Our research was underpinned by the paradigm of critical realism. The search for causal

28   mechanisms within a critical realist approach helps researchers explain social contexts and events to

1   address a social phenomenon (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). This is achieved through ontological

2   realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality. Ontological realism accepts there is a

3   singular reality, that exists independently of the research team and participants (Wiltshire, 2018),

4   despite social contexts being highly complex and multi-layered. Epistemological relativism recognises

5   knowledge is an artificial product, produced in a specific context (Wong et al., 2013), allowing for the

6   acceptance of the idea that there are different views on reality. This knowledge is transitive, finite, and

7   fallible to that specific phenomenon, which is critiqued and scrutinised via judgmental rationality.

8   Therefore, critical realism allows for a plausible and accurate account of how similarity in narcissism

9   impacts the coach-athlete relationship.

10   **Data Collection**

11   　　　Following institutional ethical approval, coaches were identified by purposefully sampling the

12   lowest and highest percentiles from trait narcissism scores, which were in relation to similarity with

13   their athletes, on the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (DTDD: Jonason & Webster, 2010), and relationship

14   quality based on responses to the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q: Jowett &

15   Ntoumanis, 2004) from an earlier study, as detailed in (Stanford et al., 2024). Specifically, individuals

16   were identified who were on the lower or upper percentiles (Table 1) of similarity with their athlete on

17   trait narcissism and relationship quality. Once identified they were affiliated to one of the four

18   sampling groups: similar in trait narcissism/high relationship quality (Sim-High), similar in trait

19   narcissism/low relationship quality (Sim-Low), dissimilar in trait narcissism/high relationship quality

20   (Dis-High) and dissimilar in trait narcissism/low relationship quality (Dis-Low). Similarity between

21   dyads was calculated by the absolute difference of trait scores to create an index of similarity,

22   ensuring dyadic interdependence (Jackson et al., 2011). Values closer to 0 represented greater

23   similarity between dyads. The lead researcher contacted the participants who scored the highest

24   and/or lowest on the DTDD and CART-Q then worked down the percentiles until data saturation was

25   achieved.

26   　　　Once identified, coaches participated in a single, semi-structured interview. An interview guide

27   consisting of three sections was developed for each sampling group (full interview guides in S1). All

28   four interview guides were identical regarding the framing of questions, with amendments only made

1   to refer to the participants assigned sampling groups (e.g., how is your relationship quality influenced

2   so positively/negatively because you and [athletes name] have a similar/dissimilar level of …). We

3   piloted each interview guide with an international-level coach who was independent of the study and

4   refined it prior to data collection. To counter the often-negative connotations associated with

5   narcissism, at the start of each interview the lead researcher read out a statement to all participants.

6   This highlighted the neutral position of the research team toward the effects of narcissism, in line with

7   interactionist perspectives on the impact of personality (e.g., Roberts et al., 2018), and the

8   interest/focus was on the coach's experience of working with an athlete who was similar or dissimilar

9   to them in this trait. Further, the term narcissism was replaced with its definition of "self-centred, self-

10   aggrandizing, entitled, dominant, and a manipulative interpersonal orientation" (Morf et al., 2011

11   p.400) to remove any predetermined ideas the participants might have associated with this trait. The

12   interviews ranged in duration from 41 minutes to 77 minutes (Mduration = 56.0 ± 9.5 min).

13   **Data Analysis**

14   To ensure methodological coherence (Poucher et al., 2020), the lead researcher transcribed all

15   interviews verbatim. In conjunction with notes taken during the interviews, the data was analysed

16   using a critical realist approach to thematic analysis (full data analysis is available in S2). Wiltshire

17   and Ronkainen (2021) proposed that a realist approach in conjunction with thematic analysis should

18   be structured around the three domains of experiential, inferential, and dispositional themes outlined

19   in Bhaskar's (1975) conception of a stratified ontology. Experiential themes refer to subjective

20   viewpoints, such as intentions, hopes, concerns, beliefs, and feelings that are observed experiences by

21   the participants as captured in the data. The generation of the experiential themes within each

22   sampling group started with the lead researcher reading the transcripts and listening again to the

23   recordings of all the interviews to re-familiarise himself with the data. To ensure we achieved

24   complete re-immersion, we conducted a second reading of each sampling group alongside annotations

25   on the transcripts (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Any data-driven identified quotes were listed to generate

26   "nascent" experiential themes in Microsoft Excel. Nascent experiential themes were listed vertically,

27   each theme as a new row, and were written in plain-English with descriptions of the observed

28   experience expressed by the participant. We repeated this process for the second transcript with the

1 addition of a "deductive" checking process of whether the same observed experience was also true for

2 the second participant. Any new data-driven themes were added as a new row. The deductive

3 checking of each transcript against the others was repeated, resulting in a master list of experiential

4 themes for each sampling group. Each sampling group's master list was shared with the wider

5 research team, where detailed conversations followed to ensure each participant's quote, descriptive

6 labels, and the strength of each theme across the sampling group was discussed ensuring the coaches'

7 viewpoints were accurately represented. After each conversation, the lead researcher returned to the

8 raw data to check and/or amend descriptive labels to improve representations of a particular

9 participant's quote.

10   The next stage was to move beyond experiential themes (i.e., evidence-based statements about

11 participants in the data) towards the generation of inferential themes. Inferential themes refer to the

12 notion that some aspects of the social world are not empirically observed but can be inferred through

13 our experiences and empirical investigations. Inferential themes meant the analysis moved beyond a

14 "data-driven" and "deductive" thinking processes and combined "inductive" and "abductive" thinking

15 as an extension of the experiential themes. The lead researcher independently generated inferential

16 themes and added them to a separate tab on the Microsoft Excel document. This was again shared

17 with the research team for judgmental rationality to be applied. Developing these inferences relied on

18 the research team's combined knowledge of the conceptual landscape of the participants, applied

19 experience within coaching environments, and current associated literature to generate key and new

20 concepts that are ontologically plausible. In instances of dispute, the lead researcher would refer to the

21 transcripts to check the original statements made by the participants.

22   The final stage was to theorize and examine the potential power that exists in coaches'

23 relationship quality on similarity in narcissism and how this has manifested in their current

24 relationship through dispositional themes. Generating dispositional themes relied on building on the

25 current generated experiential and inferential themes to determine the "latent" or "dormant"

26 mechanisms within coaches that cause real influence in their relationship (Jagosh, 2020). Again, the

27 lead researcher worked independently on nascent dispositional themes in Microsoft Excel before

28 bringing his ideas to the wider research team so that further judgmental rationality could be

1 collectively applied. Before any dispositional theme was accepted, it needed to be aligned to the

2 experiential and inferential themes. In alignment with the established experiential and inferential

3 themes, all proposed dispositional themes were scrutinised in accordance with the following statement

4 "because this [dispositional theme] exist, there is a likelihood that this [inferential themes] happens in

5 the coach-athlete relationship, which is demonstrated in our data through the coaches reporting

6 [experiential themes]" amended from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). It was then either accepted or

7 rejected. This alignment checking process allowed dispositional themes to be generated in a logical

8 and coherent way that summarised the analysis, resulting in methodological cohesion between critical

9 realist philosophy and thematic analysis that ensured an emphasis on both accurately capturing the

10 empirical world (through experiential themes) as well as creative thinking and engaging with theory

11 and concept (through inferential and dispositional themes).

12 **Methodological Rigor**

13 Critical realism, like all philosophical positions, cannot produce any guarantee of absolute

14 conclusions (Maxwell, 2012). However, rigor was assessed against Maxwell's (1992) corresponding

15 validity indicators of empirical adequacy, ontological plausibility, and explanatory power to ensure

16 the highest level of credible conclusions have been attained (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Rigor

17 was applied through empirical adequacy when the experiential themes were generated. This meant the

18 reported themes needed to accurately represent the intentions, hopes, concerns, feelings, and beliefs

19 that the participants observed in their relationships. Therefore, all transcripts were re-read, and

20 interview recordings were repeatedly listened to ensure the lead researcher absorbed all the raw data.

21 The development of "nascent" experiential themes, with a deductive checking across all participants

22 within the sampling group and crosschecking the lead researcher's accuracy of participants quotes and

23 descriptive labels with the remaining research team, enabled critical realist ontological assumptions to

24 be met. The aim was not to try and achieve consensus but to ensure empirical adequacy was being

25 achieved by checking if the lead researcher had accurately interpreted the coaches' experiences about

26 their relationship. All inferential themes had to achieve ontological plausibility to be accepted in the

27 analysis and ensure enhanced rigor was ascertained.

1   Ontological plausibility refers to the notion that the generated inference themes had to be

2   considered as plausible reflections of what occurs to a coach's relationship quality because of their

3   level of similarity with their athlete. This was made possible through the credibility of the research

4   team and application of judgmental rationality when reviewing and refining each proposed

5   interpretive theme. Therefore, any unobserved but occurring experiences by the coaches that effected

6   their relationship quality were identified, discussed, and evaluated. To be accepted, any

7   epistemological statements made by the research team had to reflect the ontological position of

8   critical realism. An examination of the explanatory power in the dispositional themes (i.e.,

9   unobservable causal power and potential mechanisms in the real world) ensured the highest possible

10   rigor was attained. Again, this was achieved through the application of judgmental rationality during

11   frequent meetings in which the team discussed and evaluated the nascent themes initially proposed by

12   the lead researcher. When these themes were checked, the research team members held the lead

13   researcher to account in terms of what the analysis had so far revealed before any mechanisms were

14   confirmed. This "critical friend" approach (Smith & McGannon, 2018) ensured that any claims

15   produced in this study were safeguarded (Maxwell, 2017).

16   **Results**

17   Our analysis produced five dispositional themes: perceived relationship perfection, high

18   (perceived) self-awareness, breeding behaviours, relationship power, relationship elasticity. These

19   themes influenced the levels of closeness, commitment and complementarity within the relationships.

20   The five dispositional themes were underpinned by 18 inferential themes and 70 experiential themes

21   (Table 2). Direct quotations from the transcripts have been included to illustrate the way coaches'

22   perceptions of their relationship quality are formed.

23   **Perceived Relationship Perfection**

24   This dispositional theme refers to coaches feeling their relationship was faultless and they

25   would not tolerate any flaws in their athlete's character. This theme was prevalent across all sampling

26   groups, despite the level of similarity and coaches' own self-reported level of relationship quality.

27   Two inferential themes were identified in this dispositional theme: superior relationship and

28   influenced performance.

1 *Superior Relationship*

2   This inferential theme included nine experiential themes across all sampling groups.

3 Specifically, we determined that coaches are likely to think they are committed to their athletes as

4 they create an outstanding relationship with them. In the Sim-Low sample despite self-reporting low

5 relationship quality, some of the coaches felt that similarity on narcissism allowed them to be better

6 than other coaches because they cared more about their athlete enhancing the level of closeness.

7 Coach 24, who along with their athlete had one of the highest absolute scores for narcissism in their

8 sampling group, felt similarity led to a better relationship:

9   I understand her you know; I know where we are with each other if that makes sense. I

10   observe other coaches who work with her in the squad, I know that they feel they can't

11   get the best out of her. But with me, our relationship allows us to be incredible. [Coach

12   24, Sim-Low]

13 *Influenced Performance*

14   This inferential theme included four experiential themes across all sampling groups apart from

15 Dis-Low. Coaches are likely to think that their dyadic performance is affected because of their level of

16 similarity. Within the Sim-High sampling group, most of the coaches felt being similar in trait

17 narcissism allowed for their mentality to be aligned with that of their athlete in turn producing high

18 relationship quality:

19   Sometimes you coach swimmers who you want to coach a certain way, but you can't.

20   Because their mentality isn't aligned with yours, their mindset isn't right. And you end

21   up compromising really...With [Athlete's Name] because she was like me, I could coach

22   her the way I wanted to coach her. The way I believed a World Junior breaststroke

23   champion should be coached. [Coach 17, Sim-High]

24 **High (perceived) Self-Awareness**

25   Coaches perceived their level of awareness to be different depending on their level of

26 similarity. This level of perceived awareness influenced the quality of their relationship. Three

27 inferential themes were identified in this dispositional theme: fitting my coaching style,

28 understanding, and poor connection.

1 *Fitting My Coaching Style*

2   This inferential theme was developed from two experiential themes from the Sim-High and

3 Dis-Low sampling groups. Coaches felt that similarity allowed them to coach in their own way, which

4 resulted in higher complementary behaviours in their relationship. Most participants in the Sim-High

5 sample strongly believed that similarity drove performance and positive relationships. Coach 23, who

6 independently scored exactly the same on narcissism as their athlete, explained:

7   If we weren't the same personality trait, like [Different athlete's name] was the opposite,

8   she was a melt, and I couldn't relate to her...Whereas with [Athlete's Name], I'd push

9   him into situations, I'd push him into a challenge; I'd push him over the cliff and make

10   him fly. With [Athlete's Name] I was like, you're going to be just fine, f**k it, let's go.

11   [Coach 23, Sim-High]

12   In contrast, many coaches within the Dis-Low category felt dissimilarity led to poor

13 relationship quality because athletes were only picked on their performance level. Coach 8, who was

14 higher than his athlete in narcissism with one of the biggest absolute differences, explains:

15   We're working within a swim team; we don't have four athletes that we can handpick

16   through personality profiling, as well as performance profiling. So, we get what we're

17   given in effect... so the relationship is always secondary if we want to win. [Coach 8,

18   Dis-Low]

19 *Understanding*

20   The second inferential theme included five experiential themes across all sampling groups.

21 Coaches are likely to feel that understanding their athlete's level of narcissism in comparison to their

22 own allowed them to achieve greater relationship quality through higher levels of closeness. Within the

23 Sim-High sample, most of the coaches believed that similarity gave them a better understanding of their

24 athlete:

25   If we've got similar traits, then our thought processes will be the same and we will react

26   similar in situations… So, if I'm down she's going to be, but equally, if she's riding high,

27   I'll probably be able to tap into that and know what's going to affect her, and how that

1   will then affect her performance and her mood. Because I suppose if I know what's

2   affecting my mood, then I'll know it's affecting hers. [Coach 19, Sim-High].

3   It is of interest to this study that coaches within the Dis-High group could identify that their

4   athlete had a different level of narcissism to their own and this acknowledgement supported higher

5   relationship quality:

6   We are all different types of people, I understand that. She can be self-centred and

7   dominant but that is not a bad thing. I feel like I talk to her much more like a human …,

8   and obviously treat her with respect, I know she is different to me, and I think that's why

9   I've been successful with her. [Coach 3, Dis-High]

10   *Poor Connection*

11   The final inferential theme included three experiential themes from only the Dis-Low sampling

12   group. Due to a lack of similarity on narcissism coaches in this group often struggled to relate to their

13   athletes resulting in lower levels of relationship closeness. They found it hard to personally connect

14   with their athletes and could not read them. Coach 10, who was lower than his athlete in narcissism,

15   stated: "I think being similar is better because you have a better understanding of why they are so

16   emotional at times and react the way they do to things." For most of the coaches this lack of similarity

17   resulted in them struggling to bond with their athletes, thus reducing their relationship quality. Coach

18   15 who was higher than their athlete on narcissism, explains:

19   He's spent some time in the last [COVID-19 related] lockdown, looking around at what

20   some of the best athletes are doing in the world that are male in the gym and he can

21   f**king rinse them. So, he looks at it and goes, well I can lift that, and I can do twice as

22   many reps, and it's not a problem. I'm already as good if not better than most of them in

23   the gym, but we're having to rein that in. That's part and parcel of him understanding,

24   and me understanding how to connect with him better to get that message across in a way

25   that keeps relating to him, but it is often hard. [Coach 15, Dis-Low]

26   **Breeding Behaviours**

Coaches felt that trait narcissism was an advantage in competitive sport, and felt it enhanced

their relationship. Three inferential themes were identified in this dispositional theme: liberated,

necessary for success, and developing their characteristics.

Liberated

This first inferential theme was developed from three experiential themes from the Sim-High

and Dis-High sampling groups. Similarity on trait narcissism would often allow coaches to feel they

could be themselves, which meant they encouraged their athletes to do the same resulting in greater

levels of relationship complementarity:

> I think being similar allows me just to be myself rather than feel like I've got to put on a
>
> different personality. It allows her to be herself as well… I think it enhances our
>
> relationship because we can just be normal, we don't have to put on an act. It is no effort
>
> to have conversations about how great we are going to be this season. [Coach 22, Sim-
>
> High]

However, within the Dis-High sample, to achieve high relationship quality, coaches strongly felt that

because of their dissimilarity, they had to be more flexible and allow the athletes to be themselves:

> I give her space to express herself… I want to give her an environment that has mutual
>
> respect, so she can be herself and use colourful language... It is allowing them that
>
> freedom and sort of slightly wider constraints to allow for flexibility. [Coach 7, Dis-High]

Necessary For Success

This second inferential theme consists of four experiential themes across all sampling groups.

Coaches are likely to strongly think that narcissism gave their athletes a spiteful edge in the pursuit of

winning allowing them to have greater levels of closeness within their relationship. Coach 2,

discusses the positive effect that this had on their relationship:

> He'd be able to hit his targets, and then if someone, perhaps a younger athlete doing
>
> freestyle was at a similar level to him doing fly, he'd automatically go and race them and
>
> make sure that he beat them…He'd manipulate where he would be in the lane to make
>
> sure that he had a competitor in training. It's a good feeling. It made me proud because I
>
> want him to win and be the best. [Coach 2, Dis-High]

1   Coaches in the Dis-High sampling group were very accepting of narcissistic tendencies as they

2   strongly believed top athletes were narcissistic and they wanted to work with the best. Coach 1 who

3   was lower than his athlete in this trait explained, "I want to work with top athletes. Most athletes at

4   the highest level must be self-centred and focused on themselves, otherwise they would always train

5   to be average, not push themselves, So, I am okay with them being self-centred."

6   *Developing Their Characteristics*

7   The final inferential theme was developed from three experiential themes from all sampling

8   groups apart from Sim-Low. Some coaches within the Sim-High group strongly believed that

9   similarity created a relationship which taught their athlete how to conduct themselves in the sporting

10   environment. This allowed for higher levels of complimentary behaviours within their relationship:

11   So, my job, I took it upon myself to try and teach him the difference between confidence

12   and arrogance, and respecting the people around you, your environment, being humble.

13   Because deep down, that is how he is, that is the person he is, but that's not who he was

14   portraying. [Coach 16, Sim-High]

15   Achieving high relationship quality when coaches were dissimilar in narcissism was

16   accomplished through nurturing complementary behaviours within their relationship over time. Coach

17   2 in the Dis-High sample was considerably higher than their athlete in this trait but describes how

18   nurturing the relationship resulted in a positive outcome:

19   She was driven from start to finish, and she was always engaged with what I had to say

20   because the drive was there. Developing our relationship was through nurturing it over

21   time… I'd say she started as a very average regional level swimmer; the nurturing opened

22   her eyes to what she could achieve, because she wasn't aware of her capabilities. Once

23   her eyes opened then she went from an average regional swimmer to a national medallist.

24   [Coach 2, Dis-High]

25   **Relationship Power**

26   This dispositional theme refers to the notion that coaches felt that they possessed the power

27   within their relationship. The six inferential themes identified in this dispositional theme were:

1 control, manipulating the relationship, dominance, controlling the level of closeness, listening, and

2 communication.

3 *Control*

4   The first inferential theme consists of three experiential themes across the sampling groups

5 apart from Sim-Low: coaches often need to feel like they are in control of their coach-athlete

6 relationship. For example, in the Dis-High group most participants felt strongly that the coach should

7 always be in control of the athlete's behaviour. Coach 1, who was considerably lower than his athlete

8 in narcissism and had the second overall highest absolute difference, demonstrated how he used

9 verbal control over his athlete:

10   Yeah, because I think it there's trust there initially, then swimmers will allow you to

11   control them. And I think again, it goes back to where they're swimming well as well. I

12   think it swimmers are swimming well, and they're seeing results, they allow you to

13   control them, the environment, and the relationship. [Coach 1, Dis-High]

14 *Manipulating The Relationship*

15   The second inferential theme consists of five experiential themes across the sampling groups of

16 Sim-High and Sim-Low. In the Sim-High sample, coaches are likely to feel that it is an advantage to

17 manipulate their athletes. Specifically, some coaches believed that manipulation was part and parcel

18 of being a good coach and being similar allowed them to manipulate their relationship more

19 effectively, resulting in a positive perception through greater levels of complementary behavior within

20 their relationship. Coach 17 was very open about this saying, "I think I would say I'm trying to

21 manipulate my athlete all the time". This manipulation comes in many forms. For example, Coach 16,

22 who along with their athlete had one of the highest levels of narcissism within this sampling group,

23 illustrates how they used indirect communication to ensure high relationship quality is maintained:

24   If I was going to give [Athlete's Name] some feedback and some criticism that he maybe

25   didn't want to talk about or didn't want to accept, or maybe wouldn't have accepted

26   positively, and there was somebody else in the lane that also could do with the same

27   criticism, I would coach the other person while [Athlete's Name] was stood next to them.

28   And I knew full well that [Different Athlete's Name] would know that he doesn't do

that…rather than me highlight it to him, and have that awkward negative conversation,

I'd just tell the kid who's going to go, okay thanks. Then [Athlete's Name] would push

off the wall and change himself. Because I've not told him that he's wrong, I've not

highlighted the problem. He's heard me criticise somebody else, so he. almost thinks, he

almost believes that I haven't seen him do something wrong. [Coach 16, Sim-High]

Interestingly, within the Sim-Low sampling group, many coaches strongly felt that they could

not manipulate their athletes. Coach 26 demonstrates this in the following quote: "I was trying to find

that way to sell it to her. A lot of the time my powers of manipulation did not work on her."

Relationship quality was also reduced in this sampling group for many of the coaches if they felt they

were being manipulated by their athlete. For example, Coach 26 goes on to say, "If you know that

you're being manipulated by an athlete, then you're going to be less likely to buy into the relationship

and want to sort of work together on things." [Coach 26, Sim-Low]

Dominance

The next inferential theme consists of six experiential themes across all the sampling groups

apart from Sim-High. It resulted in the likelihood that coaches would want to dominate their athlete.

Within the Sim-Low sample, most of the coaches felt similarity led to a fight for dominance leading

to a power struggle, resulting in low complimentary behaviours, that could not be overcome within

the relationship. Coach 25, who along with their athlete had the lowest levels of narcissism within the

sampling group, explained how it was their level of similarity in narcissism that caused this fight for

dominance:

I think sometimes she could give a little less of that dominant side towards me. I'll give

you an example. This morning when she turned up on poolside, she took her time to get

in the pool a bit … She walked past me once to get her suit on, and then she strolled back

in. I'm like, come on [Athlete's Name] let's go. I think in a sense, you think to yourself,

you're taking the p*** a bit here and I am the one in charge. [Coach 25, Sim-Low]

When there was dissimilarity in narcissism but high relationship quality some of the coaches

felt they could easily dominate their athletes but were careful not to. Coach 2, who was higher than

1   their athlete in narcissism, demonstrates how they would see a lack of engagement as a sign he was

2   being too dominant:

3   I am quite dominant with him, just so they learn... I don't like to mollycoddle or help too

4   much. But I had to learn quickly when I'm being dominant, they stop engaging, and I

5   have to be a bit less dominant because you can push the relationship too far. [Coach 2,

6   Dis-High]

7   Most coaches in the Dis-Low sampling group also felt that being overly dominant, due to being

8   higher than their athlete in trait narcissism, resulted in athletes just following what the coach wanted.

9   This was reflected in the following quote from Coach 8: "The biggest challenge is making sure he

10   doesn't tell me what I want to hear…The less times that happens, the more chance we've got at

11   getting that shared vision and goal."

12   ***Controlling The Levels of Closeness***

13   The next inferential theme consists of five experiential themes across all sampling groups apart

14   from Sim-High. Coaches are likely to feel that similarity on narcissism allows for a closer relationship

15   (i.e., more likely to achieve high levels of relationship closeness). Because of this, when coaches

16   scored lower in narcissism, they felt they had to get out of their athlete's way to achieve high

17   relationship quality. Coach 3, who was lower than his athlete, demonstrates how he maintained high

18   relationship quality despite their level of dissimilarity:

19   I think because I didn't have to sort of pull her along, I didn't have to motivate her, I

20   didn't have to give her that drive because she's got it already…I suppose she

21   demonstrated it quite a bit in the pool, you know, as a racer, head-to-head swimmer off

22   the last wall, my money would be on [Athlete's Name]. So, in the water I didn't feel like

23   I needed to cajole her to go faster, I didn't need to get her to race people to get the most

24   out of her, she just did that already. Made my job a bit easier really, I just got out of her

25   way and let her do her thing. [Coach 3, Dis-High]

26   When coaches were higher than their athlete in this trait, many strongly felt they had to pull

27   their athlete up to equalise the level of intensity within the relationship. Coach 2 in the Dis-High

28   sample demonstrates how this was evident in their relationship: "He's obviously quite laid back, so he

1   needs somebody to keep saying, right you need to do this, … he needed the kick up the arse, to sort

2   himself out." Because of this some of the coaches felt that due to their level of dissimilarity they had

3   to give their athlete space at times. Coach 9 (Dis-Low), who was lower than his athlete in narcissism,

4   explains how being overbearing effected their relationship:

5   If she went 2:03 on 200 freestyle and comes back in a strop. If I said but your dive was

6   really good, she'd tell me to f**k off. I've learned that for some people or some

7   situations. Saying nothing is more impactful and more important than just saying

8   something to make someone feel better. [Coach 9, Dis-Low]

9   *Listening*

10   The next inferential theme consists of two experiential themes across the sampling groups of

11 Dis-High and Dis-Low. This theme meant that dissimilarity affected how much the coaches were

12 willing to listen to their athlete and was indicative of both high and low relationship quality. When

13 relationship quality was high, some coaches who were lower than their athlete in narcissism felt that

14 their athlete listened to them resulting in higher levels of commitment. Coach 6 in the Dis-High

15 sample explains: "I would just say that he listened to my viewpoint probably even more. When I said

16 that he needed to do things he respected it more". However, when coaches were higher than their

17 athlete in narcissism, relationship quality was decreased because most of them found it hard to listen

18 to their athlete's needs. An example of this can be seen in Coach 11's explanation of how their

19 relationship is affected when their athlete does not feel listened to:

20   I think there just becomes a lack of trust. You can flip it and put yourself in the

21   swimmer's shoes. It's like, the b*****d doesn't listen to me. He's just making me do

22   what he wants to do; he's not listening to me. I'm the high performer; he needs to listen

23   to me. And even if you don't want to listen to them, you need to make them think that

24   you're listening to them. [Coach 11, Dis-Low]

25 *Communication*

26   The final inferential theme consists of three experiential themes across the sampling groups of

27 Sim-High and Sim-Low: coaches often believed that similarity in narcissism allowed them to

28 communicate how they wanted. Within the Sim-High sampling group most of the coaches felt that

1 similarity in narcissism allowed them to communicate directly and openly, resulting in higher levels

2 of closeness, commitment and complementarity within the relationship. Coach 16, who along with his

3 athlete had some of the highest levels of narcissism in the sampling group, explains: "It was like we

4 fast tracked in a lot of ways I suppose. There was no bulls**t, there was absolutely zero bulls**t, it

5 was straight to the point all the time. I can say anything I need to him." However, this level of

6 openness led to some coaches feeling their athletes could be very harsh about their coaching ability,

7 and often led to a reduction in coach-athlete relationship quality. Coach 17 explains: "[Athlete's

8 Name] can be very vocal and brutally honest about my coaching. You know it's coming, so you're on

9 your toes and you've already got the answer ready. Otherwise, it's very bad for our relationship."

10 **Relationship Elasticity**

11 The final dispositional theme refers to the notion that, dependent on their level of similarity,

12 coaches are willing to endure differing amounts of tension within the relationship. The four inferential

13 themes identified in this dispositional theme were: demanding relationship, natural conflict,

14 investment of time, and clear expectations & boundaries.

15 *Demanding Relationship*

16 The first inferential theme consists of six experiential themes across the four sampling groups

17 apart from Dis-High: coaches are likely to demand complimentary behaviours from their coach-

18 athlete relationship. Most coaches in the Sim-High sample believed similarity in narcissism allowed

19 for equal intensity in the relationship. Coach 20 thought that their relationship would breakdown if

20 this were not present: "If I'm not matching her levels of intensity, if I'm not matching her levels of

21 competitiveness, she'd be p***ed off, she'd have gone". However, most coaches in the Sim-Low

22 sample also felt similarity could lead to an over-demanding relationship and reduced relationship

23 quality. Coach 25, despite having the lowest levels of narcissism within the sample explains:

24 She wants to feel like she's getting something, she's not just turning up for the sake of

25 turning up…I want to be a great coach, so I am always wanting to make sure I am getting

26 the best out of [Athlete's Name]. Every single time I turn up to the session it's like I

27 must give everything to [Athlete's Name] to make her better. [Coach 25, Sim-Low]

28 *Natural Conflict*

1   The second inferential theme consisted of two experiential themes within the Dis-Low

2   sampling group only: coaches think conflict is a natural part of their relationship. Most of the coaches

3   in this sampling group felt dissimilarity led to small continual disagreements. Coach 8, who was

4   higher than his athlete in narcissism and had one of the biggest absolute differences in the sample,

5   demonstrated how this manifested in their current relationship:

6   Not a full disengagement, because he wants to please me…he'd drops from four kicks

7   off the wall to three when I told him to do four. He will just do the turn rather than try

8   and tuck up tighter after I asked it to be tight…So it's just that 1% if you like but these

9   small things, we often fell out about. [Coach 8, Dis-Low]

10   In addition, most of the coaches in this sampling group felt conflict was inevitable due to being

11   dissimilar. Coach 10, who was lower in narcissism than their athlete, said: "It was either boom or

12   bust... If it, if it blew up, it blew up big time… she was a f**king nightmare. Nothing would avoid

13   that happening."

14   ***Investment Of Time***

15   The third inferential theme consists of two experiential themes within the Dis-High and Dis-

16   Low sampling group: coaches could be investing differing amounts of time due to being dissimilar in

17   narcissism which influenced the level of complementarity they experienced within the relationship.

18   Most coaches in the Dis-High group felt that respect came from an investment of time with their

19   athlete, and this enhanced their relationship quality. Coach 1 demonstrates how when they increased

20   their level of time with their athlete their relationship improved:

21   I think it just made me aware that he did appreciate the levels I was going through to help

22   him on his journey and the time I'd spend with him separately. In my limited time, to

23   have like a meeting here and there to arrange things, the time I put into him in the Covid

24   lockdowns and stuff where I had regular meetings with him where I would help him.

25   That all improved our relationship. [Coach 1, Dis-High]

26   The second experiential theme was resenting the time spent on their athlete. For example, if the

27   coach resented investment, relationship quality reduced. Coach 11, within the Dis-Low sample states:

1   I took the time to explain that to her, and she would understand it, but she would just sort

2   of have a meltdown, I would get frustrated with her especially, I was like, you should

3   really understand this now I am not going over it again. [Coach 11, Dis-Low]

4   *Clear Expectations & Boundaries*

5   The final inferential theme consists of two experiential themes within Sim-High and Dis-High

6   sampling groups. When coaches outline their expectations, greater relationship quality is achieved.

7   Many coaches within the Sim-High group felt it was important for the relationship to have clear

8   boundaries because they were so similar. Coach 19 explained how that similarity allowed them to

9   easily achieve this: "I wouldn't just roll over and give her what she wanted. It was a case of, there had

10   to be lines drawn in respect to what my expectations were within training." Within the Dis-High

11   sample, some of the coach's felt dissimilarity allowed them to be honest about what they wanted out

12   of the relationship. Coach 2, who was higher than his athlete in narcissism and had the highest

13   individual score within the sample explains:

14   We might not always agree due to our dissimilarity in personality but there's a respect…

15   I know my role and they know theirs and not be worried about sort of hurting one

16   another's feelings, it's just, this is the goal, that's how we get there, let's go [Coach 2, Dis-

17   High]

18   **Discussion**

19   To our knowledge this study is the first to explore how coaches' levels of narcissism influence

20   their perception of relationship quality, as well as how similarity in trait narcissism affects coaches'

21   views on the quality of their relationship. Our methodological approach allowed for the triangulation

22   of quantitative (i.e., coaches' individual narcissism and relationship quality scores) and qualitative

23   data sources (i.e., semi-structured interviews). Our research uncovers the influence of similarity in

24   trait narcissism and how this affects coaches' perceptions relationship quality.

25   Coaches here typically perceived their relationships to be perfect and would not tolerate any

26   flaws in their athlete's personality, despite their level of similarity or self-reported level of

27   relationship quality. Individuals' high in narcissism perceive themselves to be superior to the people

28   they are around (Roberts et al., 2018). Our study has revealed that this previously reported belief of

1   superiority extends to coaches' perceptions of their coach-athlete relationship. Such beliefs could be

2   due to the coach's lack of mutual understanding (i.e., co-orientation) potentially heightening their

3   feelings of vulnerability and the sense of being undervalued within their relationship because

4   narcissists profess to be confident individuals who hold overly optimistic views of their abilities and

5   performance achievements (Robins & Beer, 2001). Thus, similarity in narcissism may result in the

6   coach becoming more committed and developing more complimentary behaviors in their relationship.

7   This occurs not only because similarity on personality traits provides greater stability and

8   connectedness (Jackson et al., 2011), but because it provides coaches with the opportunity to believe

9   they can influence their athletes' performances through better relationships. According to Jowett &

10 Shanmugam (2017), the fundamental goal of coaching is to achieve and maintain an effective coach-

11 athlete relationship. Therefore, similarity on narcissism provides coaches with an instant self-

12 enhancement opportunity through the belief that their relationship is perfect, and they can instantly

13 demonstrate how good a coach they are (Hepper et al., 2014).

14   Similarity on narcissism resulted in a heightened perceived awareness of the athlete they were

15 working with, which they believed allowed them to create an effective relationship, where they could

16 unapologetically be themselves and foster a higher understanding of how to use their narcissistic

17 tendencies, through complimentary behaviours, to be successful. In the coach-athlete relationship

18 literature, the awareness someone has about their relationship has been identified as empathic

19 accuracy (defined as the capacity to perceive, from moment-to-moment, the psychological condition

20 of another, such as thoughts, feelings, moods, and the motivations and reasoning behind these

21 behaviours; Ickes et al., 1990). Underpinning narcissists' behaviours is the motivation to adopt any

22 sufficient response to favour their agentic (Campbell et al., 2007) or self-enhancement goals (Morf et

23 al., 2011). Similarity on personality traits can also decrease disagreements, improve perceptions of a

24 partner's emotions, and increase relationship longevity within a dyad (i.e., Rammstedt et al., 2013).

25 Therefore, similarity on narcissism could potentially be allowing coaches to understand the

26 behaviours of their athletes with greater accuracy. Yet coaches might not be utilising this heightened

27 understanding of their athletes' behaviours to achieved greater relationship quality, instead choosing

28 to fulfil their own grandiose needs (Stanford et al., 2024). Future research should investigate whether

1   similarity in narcissism does in fact enhance empathic accuracy. Such a question would be

2   particularly suited to observational or meta-perception approaches in the coaches' and athletes' own

3   environment, in order to combat narcissists over inflation of their abilities (Roberts et al., 2018).

4   Coaches felt that similarity in trait narcissism allowed them to feel they could be themselves,

5   which meant they encouraged their athletes to engage with narcissistic behaviours as they believed

6   this would result in better performances. But this association between narcissism and performance is

7   not necessarily as clear cut. Gabriel et al. (1994) found no relationship between narcissism and

8   performance achievements even though narcissists believed they had performed well. In addition,

9   Wallace and Baumeister (2002), provided convincing evidence that the narcissism-performance

10 relationship is moderated by perceived opportunity for personal glory. Specifically, narcissists

11 performed well when the opportunity for glory was high and poorly when low. Individuals in a

12 leadership position who are high in narcissism also reduce their effort when opportunities for glory is

13 minimal (Ong et al., 2016). Therefore, it is understandable why coaches view this trait as

14 advantageous for building positive relationships in competitive sport, as it enhances their belief that

15 their athletes will reach the highest level, whilst simultaneously providing themselves with an

16 opportunity for personal glory. However, this study did not examine whether athletes perceived their

17 coaches' narcissistic tendencies as beneficial to the quality of their coach-athlete relationship. Thus,

18 future research in this area would do well to consider how similarity in narcissism influences both

19 coaches' and athletes' perceptions of relationship quality.

20   Coaches felt that they possessed the power within their coach-athlete relationship and through

21 trait narcissism they used a range of techniques, such as control, manipulation, and dominance. These

22 techniques are frequently reported in relationship contexts with regards to individuals high in

23 narcissism (Wurst et al., 2017). Whilst we would not condone these techniques to conflict harm on

24 athletes, coaches viewed these methods as a key strategy that allowed them to create a positive

25 relationship and a fundamental part of their coaching. Manipulation is often seen as a negative

26 behaviour, our study demonstrated that coaches viewed it as a way to influence and address

27 undesirable behaviours in their athletes without damaging their coach-athlete relationship.

28 Additionally, it may have increased the coach's sense of self-worth, as they felt more effective in

1   managing their athletes' behaviour while simultaneously reinforcing their own grandiose self-image.

2   For instance, a narcissistic individual is often highly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and

3   unworthiness. To protect against these vulnerabilities, they may seek external validation (i.e., I must

4   be a great coach because of how well I can manipulate and control my athletes to do what I want).

5   The power dynamic within the coach-athlete relationship has also been widely reported within

6   coaching literature (Sonesh et al., 2015). Our findings have demonstrated that dissimilarity in

7   narcissism influences the power dynamic of the coach-athlete relationship. Therefore, similarity in

8   narcissism can enhance a coach-athlete relationship through a greater balance of power if both

9   members are making joint contributions to achieve dyadic effectiveness (i.e., coach-athlete centred

10   approach, Jowett & Slade, 2021). In this study, we used the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason &

11   Webster, 2010) to assess coaches' levels of narcissism. This measure primarily focuses on the

12   grandiose aspect of narcissism (Maples et al., 2014), which may explain why coaches perceived

13   themselves as having power over their athletes. Therefore, further research is needed, incorporating

14   athletes' perspectives on different types of narcissism (e.g., grandiose versus vulnerable), to better

15   understand how these traits influence the balance of power in the coach-athlete relationship.

16   Finally, depending on their level of similarity, coaches were willing to endure differing

17   amounts of tension within their relationship. This study is the first to demonstrate from a coach's

18   perspective that similarity on trait scores can also result in greater relationship quality through an

19   acceptance of narcissistic behaviours. Despite narcissists reporting less commitment within romantic

20   relationships (Campbell et al., 2002), similarity in narcissism for coaches allowed them to feel that

21   they brought an equal intensity to the relationship and enabled them to avoid small but continual

22   disagreements. Conflict in the coach-athlete relationship, like in all relationships, is inevitable.

23   However, it is the ability to resolve and overcome this conflict that results in relationship

24   maintenance, which is often difficult for individuals who are high in narcissism due to their proclivity

25   to terminate relationships earlier and exhibit aggressive behaviours to their partners. (Keller et al.,

26   2014). Davis et al. (2019) identified that communication support strategies (i.e., supporting

27   individuals when things are not going well), motivation (i.e., being willing to work hard together), and

28   conflict management (i.e., the ability to be understanding during disagreements) can help to redirect

1 the negative effects of conflict towards a positive outcome within the coach-athlete relationship.

2 Similarity in trait narcissism could be facilitating this process of greater communication by allowing

3 coaches to feel they are able to set and implement clear expectations and boundaries, which are vital

4 in minimizing interpersonal conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

5 **Methodological Approach**

6 We employed the critical realism approach to thematic analysis outlined by Wiltshire and

7 Ronkainen (2021). This methodological framework has provided valuable insights and key lessons,

8 particularly in its application of the theme types; empirical, inferential, and dispositional, and their

9 associated validity indicators. In addition, this method allowed for our methodology to combine

10 qualitative and quantitative approaches, allowing for a greater understanding of the role of similarity

11 and narcissism in the coach-athlete relationship making it ideal for the interdisciplinary approach

12 employed in this study. The current study demonstrates how effective this approach can be, as the

13 experiential, inferential, and dispositional themes help establish causality within qualitative research.

14 These themes also have the potential to inform future participatory research and interventions,

15 providing reliable and novel insights that can advance the development of existing theoretical

16 frameworks, such as narcissism.

17 **Strengths and Limitations**

18 This study is the first to examine the effects of similarity in narcissism on coaches' relationship

19 quality using a unique methodology. By purposely sampling coaches across differing levels of

20 similarity, an in-depth understanding of the role narcissism plays in enhancing relationship quality has

21 been established. The sample offers high ecological validity due to its size and composition, which

22 not only ensures the data reflects the participants' perceptions of the "real" world but provides an

23 overall picture of how similarity can affect the relationship quality of coaches. However, this study is

24 limited by its focus solely on coaches who reported relatively low levels of narcissism within

25 (Stanford et al., 2024), which may not fully capture the complexity of the coach-athlete relationship

26 and the reciprocal influence between both parties. Capturing the experiences and thoughts of the

27 athletes the coaches were working with would have provided further triangulation of the themes

28 generated. In addition, whilst the use of absolute differences has been widely used in sport psychology

1   (Jackson et al., 2011), the extent to which the coaches were dissimilar to their athletes varied across

2   the sampling groups (e.g., in the Dis-High sample, Coach 6 recorded an ABS of 16, while Coach 5,

3   within the same sampling group, had an ABS of 8), influencing how the themes have been generated.

4   Finally, while it has been recommended that research focus on a single sport to generate context-

5   specific results (Hodgson et al., 2017), excluding team sports or other key team members, such as

6   assistant coaches or team captains, where the quality of the coach-athlete relationship has been shown

7   to be lower (Rhind et al., 2012), limits our understanding of how multiple personalities, varying levels

8   of narcissism, and interpersonal dynamics outside a dyad influence the quality of the coach-athlete

9   relationship.

10   **Practical Implications**

11   Our findings suggest that coaches should be aware of how narcissism would present in the

12   sporting environment and the impact this could have on their working relationships. Roberts et al.

13   (2015) also recommend working with (rather than against) an individual's narcissistic tendencies,

14   whilst nurturing the relationship over time, and ensure opportunities for glory are continuously

15   created (i.e., promoting to the athletes being the most prepared, or the hardest workers etc). As

16   coaches have reported a greater likelihood of conflict when they are dissimilar in narcissism to their

17   athletes, they should focus on conflict resolution, not conflict avoidance, to achieve and maintain a

18   high relationship quality. This study has also highlighted several practical strategies, such as coaches

19   not being overly dominant or demanding within their coach-athlete relationships, designating specific

20   time to listen to their athlete's needs, controlling how emotionally involved they are with their

21   athletes, and creating clear expectations & boundaries of the relationship to ensure high relationship

22   quality is achieved and/or maintained.

23   **Conclusion**

24   This study sought to examine the extent to which coaches' own levels of narcissism influenced

25   the perception of their relationship quality and determine how trait similarity influences their coach-

26   athlete relationship. Using a targeted sampling methodology a unique insight into coaches' view of

27   how narcissism influences their relationships was achieved. Five dispositional themes where

28   generated (perceived relationship perfection, high (perceived) self-awareness, breeding behaviours,

1   relationship power, relationship elasticity) through the production of 18 inferential themes and 70

2   experiential themes. Whilst we would not condone the use of behaviours that would result in harm to

3   coaches or athletes, the findings of this empirical investigation have provided an original and

4   significant contribution to the coach-athlete relationship literature by extending the understanding of

5   how narcissism impacts the experiences and behaviours that surrounds the relationship for coaches.

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1 **Table 1**

2 *Sampling Groups, Participants Demographics, Raw Data Scores and Data Percentiles*

3

	Sport	Gender	Coaching Level	Coach Narcissism Score	Athlete Narcissism Score	Absolute Difference (ABS)	Coach Relationship Quality Score	ABS Percentile	Relationship Quality Percentile
Dissimilar Narcissism Score and High Relationship Quality (Dis-High)									
Coach 1	Swimming	Male	International	4	18	14	75	99th	74th
Coach 2	Swimming	Male	National	16	5	11	76	98th	83rd
Coach 3	Swimming	Male	National	8	17	9	77	93rd	90th
Coach 4	Triathlon	Female	National	8	19	11	75	98th	74th
Coach 5	Cycling	Female	International	11	19	8	77	87th	90th
Coach 6	Triathlon	Female	National	4	20	16	75	100th	74th
Coach 7	Swimming	Male	National	14	4	10	76	97th	83rd
Dissimilar Narcissism Score and Low Relationship Quality (Dis-Low)									
Coach 8	Swimming	Male	National	16	6	10	52	97th	1st
Coach 9	Swimming	Male	International	9	17	8	56	87th	4th
Coach 10	Swimming	Male	International	8	16	8	64	87th	16th
Coach 11	Swimming	Female	National	16	8	8	52	87th	1st
Coach 12	Triathlon	Female	National	13	5	8	59	87th	9th
Coach 13	Triathlon	Female	National	10	4	6	54	78th	3rd
Coach 14	Cycling	Female	National	12	4	8	55	87th	4th
Coach 15	Swimming	Male	International	17	7	10	63	97th	15th
Similar Narcissism Score and High Relationship Quality (Sim-High)									
Coach 16	Swimming	Male	National	14	13	1	77	7th	90th
Coach 17	Swimming	Male	National	14	13	1	77	7th	90th
Coach 18	Triathlon	Female	National	10	11	1	77	7th	90th
Coach 19	Swimming	Female	International	9	10	1	75	7th	74th
Coach 20	Swimming	Male	International	9	10	1	75	7th	74th
Coach 21	Triathlon	Female	National	9	10	1	76	7th	83rd
Coach 22	Cycling	Male	National	10	10	0	75	1st	74th
Coach 23	Swimming	Male	National	8	8	0	75	1st	74th
Similar Narcissism Score and Low Relationship Quality (Sim-Low)									
Coach 24	Swimming	Female	National	13	12	1	44	7th	1st
Coach 25	Swimming	Male	National	6	5	1	56	7th	4th
Coach 26	Triathlon	Female	National	9	10	1	57	7th	5th
Coach 27	Triathlon	Male	National	12	11	1	58	7th	8th
Coach 28	Swimming	Male	International	10	9	1	60	7th	11th
Coach 29	Cycling	Male	National	11	12	1	64	7th	16th
Coach 30	Cycling	Male	International	8	9	1	61	7th	13th

1 **Table 2**

2 *Dispositional, Inferential and Empirical Themes*

Dispositional Themes	Inferential Themes	Empirical Themes
Perceived Relationship Perfection	Superior Relationship	Supreme relationship (Sim-High)
		Relationship rigidity (Sim-High)
		Care more than other coaches (Sim-Low)
		I am amazing in relationships (Sim-Low)
		Athletes reinforce my greatness (Dis-High)
		I am a great leader (Dis-High)
		Adding value to the athlete (Dis-High)
		Boost the athlete ego (Dis-High)
		Athlete is a leader of others (Dis-Low)
	Influenced Performance	Improve dyadic performance (Sim-High)
		Poor performance resulted in relationship deterioration (Sim-Low)
		Unfulfilled performance potential (Sim-Low)
		Athlete success meant better relationship (Dis-High)
High (Perceived) Self-Awareness	Fitting My Coaching Style	Pushing performance standards (Sim-High)
		Performance over personality (Dis-Low)
	Understanding	Vulnerability (Sim-Low)
		People are different (Dis-High)
		I understand them (Dis-Low)
		I can read them (Dis-Low)
		Felt they had a very strong relationship (Dis-Low)
		Not understanding different personality (Dis-Low)
		I can read them well (Dis-Low)
	Poor Connection	Can't read their emotions (Dis-Low)
		Difficulty connecting (Dis-Low)
		Test emotional tolerance (Dis-Low)
Breeding Behaviours	Liberated	Being themselves (Sim-High)
		Relationship comfortability (Sim-High)
		Flexibility to allow them to be themselves (Dis-High)
	Necessary For Success	Positive impression (Sim-High)
		Part of being successful (Sim-Low)
		Accepting of higher performing athletes' behavior (Dis-High)
		Enjoyed that athlete's spite (Dis-High)
	Developing Their Characteristics	Manor of operating (Sim-High)
		Nurture the relationship (Dis-High)
		Easier to tone this personality down (Dis-Low)
Relationship Power	Control	Situational control (Sim-High)
		Interpersonal control over the athlete (Dis-High)
		Needed to be around the athlete (Dis-Low)
	Manipulating The Relationship	Indirect communication (Sim-High)
		Manipulation is my job (Sim-High)
		Trust through concealment (Sim-High)
		Could not manipulate their athletes (Sim-Low)
		Don't manipulate me (Sim-Low)
	Dominance	Power struggle leading to a dead lock (Sim-Low)
		Emotional investment (Sim-Low)
		Careful with my dominance (Dis-High)
		Enjoys athletes' dominance (Dis-High)
		They just do as they are told (Dis-Low)
		I am dominance (Dis-Low)
	Control The Levels of Closeness	Low empathy (Sim-Low)
		Overly close relationship (Sim-Low)
		Get out their way (Dis-High)
		Space with the relationship (Dis-Low)
	Listening	Athlete listened to the coach (Dis-High)
		Difficulty in listening to the athlete (Dis-Low)
	Communication	Honest communication (Sim-High)
		Poor two-way communication (Sim-Low)
		Harsh critique (Sim-Low)
Relationship Elasticity	Demanding Relationship	I push them towards greatness (Sim-High)
		Equal intensity (Sim-High)
		Sport is hard and should be the relationships (Sim-Low)
		Demanding of each other (Sim-Low)
		Higher standards (Dis-High)
		Increased effort to communicate (Dis-Low)
	Natural Conflict	Conflict is an inevitability (Dis-Low)
		Small consistent disagreements (Dis-Low)
	Investment Of Time	Invested a lot of time (Dis-High)
		Resented the amount of time invested (Dis-Low)
	Clear Expectations & Boundaries	Clear boundaries (Sim-High)
		Clear goal and roles in the relationship (Dis-High)