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Exploring the Context of Coached Masters Swim Programs: A Narrative Approach

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Knowing the psychosocial themes in a specific sport context allows us to understand athletes' experiences and informs approaches of coaches (Côté et al., 1995) and sport programmers (Danish et al., 2005). Few qualitative studies focus on psychosocial conditions of adult athletes in coached sport settings. The purpose of this study was to capture important psychosocial themes from the perspective of Masters swimmers involved in day-to-day coached swimming environments. Data were collected using semistructured open-ended interviews with 10 competitive swimmers (5 male, 5 female; M age = 53 years; age range: 45–65 years). Analyses revealed four over-arching themes that represented athletes' a) motives for swimming, b) perspectives on competition, c) experiences specific to being a Masters swimmer, and d) perspectives on being coached. Using a qualitative narrative approach (Denison, 2010), we developed three narrative profiles to depict how our Masters swimmers had different experiences relating to these themes. Our discussion focuses on how swimmers' understanding of the four over-arching themes depends on their profile.

Keywords: adult swimming, swimming, teaching techniques, swim training, swimming facilities, swimming instruction

Masters athletes (MAs) are typically over the age of 35, engage in competitive sport, see regular training as necessary for success, and are formally registered in clubs, events, or organized competitions (Young, 2011). Due in part to the aging of Baby Boomers combined with the recent emphasis on physical activity and sport as a tool for health promotion, MAs have become one of the fastest growing sport

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cohorts in Westernized countries (Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010; Young, Bennett, & Séguin, 2014). For instance, more than 30,000 athletes participated in the 2009 World Masters Games, and attendance is expected to surpass 35,000 in the 2017 Games (IMGA, 2013). Despite the increased numbers of Masters sport participants, only a small contingency of researchers have begun investigating the unique ways MAs perceive their participation and performance (Young, 2011).

Research has shown MAs believe their sport commitment is reinforced by the inherent enjoyment they experience (Casper, Gray, & Babkes Stellino, 2007; Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2013) and the opportunities afforded from sport involvement (Casper et al., 2007; Dionigi, Baker, & Horton, 2011; Young & Medic, 2011a). Precisely, athletes believe sport allows them to travel to new places (Hritz & Ramos, 2008), establish and maintain friendships with likeminded individuals (Dionigi et al., 2011; Hodge, Allen, & Smellie, 2008), and prevent aging by preserving their fitness and independence (Dionigi, 2006). Finally, many adults use sport to redefine themselves as athletes, to seek personal challenges, for goal fulfillment, and to experience competition (Dionigi et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2002; Vallerand & Young, 2014). Although the aforementioned research is an important first step in understanding the unique psychosocial conditions surrounding Masters sport (i.e., factors relating to the participants, the setting, and lived experiences in this setting), it does not explicitly relate to coached contexts. It is important to know the psychosocial conditions specific to the context of coached Masters sport so that we may better inform coaches who might work with MAs.

Research in youth/young adult sport suggests that coaches influence athletes' experiences of the team environment and their development of sport and life skills (e.g., Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005; Rathwell, Bloom, & Loughhead, 2014). In addition, the importance of considering the psychosocial conditions embedded within a specific sport environment is illustrated by prominent coaching models. For example, the Coaching Model (Coté, Salmela, Trudel, & Baria, 1995) implies that coaches must consider how athletes, coaches, and the environment interact, and that all three must be in harmony to create a successful sport experience. Chelladurai's (2007) Multidimensional Model of Leadership stipulates that athletes' performance and satisfaction are influenced by coaches' ability to demonstrate appropriate responses to the demands of the environment, their team, and their personal character. Although appraisal of the psychosocial conditions is integral to models of coaching knowledge, and much research exists in younger sporting populations, there is a dearth of research that similarly helps us to understand the nuanced experiences of MAs in coached contexts.

Inferences about important psychosocial conditions in the context of coached Masters sport can be made from works by Medic and colleagues. For instance, MAs reported hiring coaches as a strategy to improve their motivation (Medic, 2009) and having a coach was associated with greater inherent pleasure in learning, exploring, and acquiring new things through sport when compared with not having one (Medic, Young, Starkes, & Weir, 2012). These empirical anecdotes suggest a coached Masters sport context is both beneficial and different from a noncoached one. Young, Callary, and Niedre (2014) recently encouraged more research exploring the psychosocial conditions of coached environments. No research to our knowledge has provided an in-depth description of the particular psychosocial conditions found within the context of coached Masters sport.

This study aimed to provide rich in-depth information about the psychosocial conditions that are specifically pertinent within day-to-day organized and coached Masters swim programs. Swim programs are pertinent because swimming is a leader in recognizing coaches as integral resources and in encouraging discussion of best coaching practices as they relate to adults (e.g., Coaching Development Committee of Masters Swimming Canada, 2014; U.S. Masters Swimming, 2014). Further, much of the recent research on Masters sport, be it quantitative (e.g., Cardenas, Henderson, & Wilson, 2009; Hodge et al., 2008; Santi, Bruton, Pietrantoni, & Mellalieu, 2014; Young, de Jong, & Medic, 2014) or qualitative (Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2010; Dionigi et al., 2011; Grant, 2001) has been conducted in or around large-scale events (e.g., World Masters championships, Seniors Games), with very little in-depth research being conducted on athletes in the process of preparing for these events. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore prevalent psycho-social conditions at play in day-to-day coached Masters swim programs through the examination of Masters swimmers lived experiences within this setting.

Method

Participants

Ethical approval from a University Research Ethics Board was granted before participants were recruited. Ten Masters swimmers (five females and five males) from a city located in Ontario, Canada were interviewed. Before interviews, a short one-page survey collected demographic information and data to confirm that participants were sufficiently involved in an organized and coached context, were in the process of preparation for a swim event, and met criteria for being MAs (Young, 2011). Based on screening of 37 initial recruits, we purposively retained participants who were older than 35 (mean age = 53 years, ranging from 45–65 years), formally registered in a swim club, had recently been registered in swimming events, and trained regularly with a registered coach (mean weekly training = 4 hr, ranging from 3–7 hr). On average, our participants reported 13 years of prior involvement; however, we purposively interviewed swimmers ranging from 1–37 years.

Data Gathering

Data were collected using semistructured open-ended interviews. This interview style is similar to an ordinary conversation with the interviewee doing most of the talking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); the interviewer guides the topic of discussion while affording the interviewee freedom to answer openly without restrictions. This interview approach permits interviewees to decide what topics are most important (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviews were conducted individually by the first author and ranged in length from 44–61 min.

Interview guide. The first section of the guide focused on basic demographic information and participants' views and beliefs surrounding Masters sport (e.g., What are the reasons behind your involvement? What is important to you about Masters swimming or being a Masters swimmer?). The second section addressed participants' perceptions of, and experiences with, Masters swim coaches (e.g.,

Describe what the term “swim coach” means to you. Do you like having a swim coach? Why or why not? How important is your coach to you as an adult swimmer? What do you specifically want from a swim coach? What do you specifically need from a swim coach? Are there certain qualifications, competencies, or attributes you have seen from a good adult swim coach?).

Data analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim (total = 140 single-spaced pages) making only minor edits to correct for grammar and to remove potential identifying information. To establish the credibility of findings, participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on their data at two time points (Yardley, 2008). At the end of each interview, participants were given the chance to add, modify, clarify, or exclude any comments. Each individual was later sent the full verbatim transcript of their interview and provided an opportunity to add, modify, clarify, or exclude comments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants requested only minor changes related to spelling or grammar, but not content.

Thematic analysis. Inductive thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze all transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process began by reading the participants’ transcripts to obtain a view of the transcripts as a whole. This step allowed for an understanding of both the divergence and convergence of the transcripts. A line-by-line analysis followed, whereby coded text was inductively organized into first-order themes based on common meanings and interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, first-order themes were merged into higher-order themes based on their commonalities. At each step of the analysis, comparing researchers’ coding was used to establishing the credibility of the findings (Yardley, 2008). For example, by comparing each members’ coding and discussing alternative interpretations at each step of the analysis, the research team was able to triangulate their perspectives and ensure that the analysis was not confined to the perspective of the primary researcher (Yardley 2008). For a representation of the first-order and higher-order themes, please see Table 1.

Narratives. Although the inductive analysis identified prevalent themes for all athletes, it was apparent during our discussions that clusters of athletes were experiencing these themes somewhat differently, with particular differences manifest in many of the first order themes. The coinvestigators agreed that three different swimmer profiles had emerged from the data that together embodied both the convergence and divergence of the higher-order themes (i.e., each profile emphasized different patterns among the overarching themes), which we aimed to illustrate in our telling of narratives. Narratives can be used to relay collective experiences of a social phenomenon through the creation of stories (Creswell, 2013). Similar narrative approaches have been used in sport coaching literature (e.g., Callary, Werthner, & Trudel, 2012; Partington et al., 2005; Winchester, Culver, & Camiré, 2011).

In our construction of each narrative, poignant quotes in the data were used to scaffold the storyline and to illustrate how various higher-order themes were embodied within each swimmer profile, using each of our participant’s voices. Denison and Rinehart (2000) contended that a narrative is a legitimate research tool for representing the experiences of others in a powerful manner. The narratives are not exact records of any one individual’s specific experience and they do not represent a universal reality. Further, no profile is better than any other profile, and

Table 1 Coded Themes and Their Manifestation With Respect to the Three Emergent Masters Swimmer Profiles

| Higher-order themes | Motives for swimming | Perspectives on competition | Experiences specific to being a Masters swimmer | Perspectives on being coached |
|---------------------|--|--|---|---|
| First-order themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and fitness • Striving and challenge • Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motives to compete against others • Identifying as a competitor • Beliefs about self-competition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee membership • Owning participation • Continuity of involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about how coach performance should be evaluated • Beliefs about the paid coach-athlete contract • Beliefs about adult athletes' characteristics and train-ability |

no swimmer fit perfectly into any one of the three profiles. Denison and Rinehart also noted how the writing of effective narratives is complex but worthwhile because narratives develop an understanding of the social life and context of research participants in a manner that is artistically shaped and satisfying to read. As suggested by Denison and Rinehart, our crafting of narratives required several revisions to develop feasible plots while also providing a dialogue that readers could easily follow and reflect upon. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms are used and swim program names are fictitious.

Results

The overarching themes derived from the inductive analysis represented athletes' a) motives for swimming, b) perspectives on competition, c) experiences specific to being a Masters swimmer, and d) perspectives on being coached. These four themes and their subthemes were considered within the telling of each narrative, with an expressly different emphasis on each of these themes. The swimmer profiles included: a) Social Sally—the socially-oriented swimmer, b) Striving Stephanie—the striving-oriented swimmer, and c) Controlling Connor—the control-oriented swimmer. For the most part, narratives representing each profile drew from quotes ascribed to different participants. The majority of quotes scaffolding Sally's narrative were derived from a cluster of four swimmers; Stephanie's narrative was composed primarily of quotes from three different swimmers; and Connor's narrative emphasized quotes from the remaining three swimmers.

Social Sally

When Sally first moved to the city, she was looking to build a social network. Sally was cautious about staying healthy as she aged, so she decided to go to the local gym and sign up for a program where she could meet others "interested in keeping healthy and getting together for a meal and that sort of thing." When Sally asked the woman at the front desk about potential programs, the woman suggested joining the Masters swim club. Sally replied, "Ugh, I've seen Masters swimming before and it didn't appeal to me. They were very serious swimmers, and they were all a lot younger than me." To her delight, she was informed that their club "was a very social club and that people went out for coffee, breakfast, beer some nights, and they had a Christmas party." Sally remarked, "Ok, I'm new to Richmond. I love swimming, and it sounds like there are people who are not just into competition." Sally signed up that morning.

On her way to her first practice, Sally thought about the prospect of competition, who the other people might be at the club, and the type of coach she hoped to acquire. Sally contemplated, "I'm not crazy about the competition; I prefer just the practice," but she knew she had to give it a chance to start building a new circle of friends. Sally never had a coach before and did not know what to expect. She hoped for a coach who resembled her daughter's coach because "he's very relaxed; he's laid back, and he understands that there's a lot more to life than just swimming." Essentially, Sally wanted swimming to be a vehicle for teaching broader health and fitness lessons and hoped that the club placed little emphasis on swimming performance.

Three years later, while Sally was at the team Christmas party, she started talking to her new best friend and fellow swimmer, Janet. Sally and Janet were part of a long-standing group of self-titled swimmers “called the ‘pool watch babes’ that took on lifeguarding when the teenagers wouldn’t show up in the morning.” They also “volunteered on the board for many years,” because being a part of the collective group that organized and overlooked the operations of the club offered another “social aspect of Masters swimming” and a way to connect with and serve her peers. Sally and Janet laughed as they discussed how their initial reticence to approach competition had now been replaced by an admission, though reluctantly, that they could be very competitive at times. Sally told Janet, “I still need to be pushed, but if I’m pushed then I will probably pull a lot of other people into that [competitive swim] meet with me. I won’t go on my own, but if I go, I’ll end up being ring leader.” Janet agreed with Sally and said, while laughing, “I’m competitive with myself and I like to compete, although, I would never admit that right off the bat.” Although the two of them were still not concerned about beating others or winning races, they liked how competitions motivated them to improve their techniques during training and to try to beat their own past performance times at competitions.

As Janet got up to leave the party, Sally spotted her new coach. Sally liked this coach because she felt he took swimming seriously but also saw Masters swimming as an “opportunity to get out and socialize.” For example, she remembered that he had once said, “If you miss something like a timed-swim, you don’t get out of it. Just because you didn’t turn up on that day doesn’t mean you don’t do it the next time you come. I will put you in a lane by yourself. You will be doing it. There’s no getting out of it.” Although she liked being held accountable to her swim practice, she felt he understood “that people you meet through swimming become your really good friends. And as you become older you have more time to spend time with them.” Therefore, his practices were structured so athletes like Sally could “get a good workout but also get the social aspect of things as well.” Sally also believed her new coach had a strong understanding of Masters swimmers’ motives. For example, she believed that she and others “don’t really care if we go fast. We just want to get in, and want to swim, and want to be with friends. We’re not going to do something different, change our strokes, or do anything more.” Further, she felt he understood that for her “swimming is sort of personal time. Even though it’s not personal in the sense that you’re the only person in the pool, it’s something where nobody is saying ‘You got to do this, you got to do that.’ The coach does give direction but athletes have very much volunteered themselves into that situation. So it’s a little bit of justifiable me time.”

Finally, Sally liked that her coach was patient and expected a more prolonged progression with older athletes. She was convinced that “adult coaches need to be able to work with people who have had bad habits for years, because a lot of Masters swimmers have been swimming for years without proper coaching. So, adult coaches need to retrain more bad habits than [they do] with youth.” Yet, Sally also understood that her coach was afforded the opportunity to be patient because Masters coaches “are not going to be fired for the performance of the MAs. They’re going to be fired for incompetence or some other thing, not because their athlete’s performance is poor. The athletes’ performances can all be poor and yet the coach can be a good coach and the club can still pay that person.” Sally also felt that

Masters swimmers would not put up with ineffective coaching for long, especially coaches who did not try to get to know their swimmers and accommodate their preferences in the coached environment. “With Masters athletes, the coach has to behave in a way that people want to pay, right? Because they’re paying to play. So in a sense that’s self-policing because, if you crap on your athletes they’ll go to another swim club or they’ll change sports. Nobody wants to pay for bad coaching.”

Sally walked over to her new coach and expressed her appreciation by sharing how she loved that he saw “the human side of things,” and liked how “his wife brings their 2-year-old to play in the kids’ pool while he’s coaching on Sunday mornings” because it made him feel more approachable and relatable. In addition, she described how his efforts were “helping us to get better. We always want to improve. In swimming, as we get older, we are maybe not going to get faster but we can improve our stroke nonetheless.” In fact, Sally improved so much that she started keeping a diary of personal records she had set for herself, and she had actually won a few competitions that past year. She told the coach while laughing, “I’ve got some ribbons now. I’ve never had ribbons before, but I’ve actually got ribbons!” It was hard for her to hide her excitement about her ribbons. After a long chat with the coach, Sally went home feeling energized and could not wait to be reunited with the “pool watch babes” that weekend.

Striving Stephanie

After a few weeks at her new job in Canada, Stephanie was known for her unique chlorine smell. One day, a group of work colleagues asked why it always seemed like she had recently been inside a pool. Stephanie smiled and proudly proclaimed that she was a competitive Masters swimmer. She told them, “I was put in a competitive swim club when I was 5, and I’ve just always stuck with it. I just swim; it’s just part of my life. It always has been. I often joke that there’s more chlorine in my body than blood.” She explained swimming was part of who she was and that she was fresh out of the pool most of the times they saw her.

Stephanie’s colleagues were unfamiliar with Masters swimming, and asked how it was different from the open swim hours. Stephanie explained, “For me, swimming is important for many reasons. I’m doing it for fitness; I’m doing it for health; and I’m doing it because I’m competitive.” She elaborated, “Masters sport is not just to attain a certain level of fitness, it is about pushing yourself to be the best you can be. I need to be challenged, to do better, to go faster, and to improve my strokes . . . I guess my ultimate goal is to go faster. I am trying to improve, trying to get stronger, and trying to be able to keep up with that set of people in front of me.” Stephanie added, “Recreationally, I could swim for the rest of my life, but to actually swim competitively, to try to get better, to reduce my times, I absolutely need a coach.” She was convinced that a coached environment enriched her experience and offered a guided context that facilitated skill acquisition and performance improvements.

Stephanie did not want to scare anyone away, so she explained that Masters swimming is not just about competition, “We’ve got six lanes from slow to uber-fast. And, we’re encouraged to do competitions, but it’s not mandatory. I’m sure the first two to three lanes are just there to have fun and get healthy.” She then told her colleagues that people miss the benefits of being in a coached Masters program

when they “just go swimming when it’s a public swim, because they’re not learning anything. There’s no one there at the public swim to help them improve their stroke.” Stephanie felt that regardless of competitive orientation, all swimmers could improve because the context embodied an expectation that people will strive to learn and will improve.

Stephanie now had one of her colleague’s full attention. John had been swimming for 10 years on his own and was thinking about starting to compete. John told Stephanie “For the longest time, I was just swimming because it was fun. But now that I actually want to compete, I mean, I need to get somebody who can help me get my times down and that kind of stuff.” John was curious about what the coached context afforded to Stephanie, and how different facets of the experience motivated her. Stephanie explained “Being part of a Masters club is very important to me, because I am surrounded by like-minded people and I get lots of coaching. I couldn’t do it on my own.” She further deliberated “When I moved to Canada, I didn’t have any friends in the city, so the first thing I did was, even before I got a job, was join a Masters club, so my friends in Canada are mostly Masters swimmers too.” Finally, she explained how she strategically joined her Masters club to stay motivated, “It is easier to sustain your training if you are part of a group because there are other people at the same level of interest.”

Stephanie explained to John that she also relied on her coaches to support her personal striving, “The coaches are one of the things that keep me going. I really enjoy the interactions I have with the coach and some of the people that I swim with. Not that we’re great friends but it’s nice to see them every week. It is nice to do something together with other likeminded people.” She explained that she was lucky because “It’s hard to find a good coach in this city, and that clubs are often between Masters coaches.” She added, “If they find a good coach, they will try to keep them on, but I don’t think coaches get paid that much. They’re paid, but most are doing it out of a sense of dedication.” She then chuckled and felt silly while explaining she felt a motivation to please her coach. She said, “It’s a bit perverse that you can be in your fifties and still want to please a coach . . . It’s something you expect from a 12-year-old, but oddly enough, even in your mid-fifties, you still want to please your coach. Just having him poolside, knowing that he’s watching and timing you. You want to do well. If you had a good swim, then you kind of want to go over to him and hear that you had a good swim. So, you feel like a kid again.”

Although Stephanie described wanting to please her coach, she noted that she never felt pressure to perform at a certain level. She told John, “I enjoy competitions as a way of testing myself, so it is important to be with coaches who really encourage people to compete but are not focused on competition with others.” She added, “They really prepare us but there’s no pressure to compete and there’s no pressure to, as a team, perform at a certain level at competition.” However, she noted that she did not need pressure from the coach because she took ownership over her training, “The big difference about coaching me in comparison to coaching a kid is that I have experience. I know what I’ve done and what I want to achieve in terms of results. I am more disciplined than a kid would be when it comes to training. As an adult, I make the decision to be there. Thus, I will be more disciplined. All I need is good guidance and encouragement.” Framed within this notion of personal ownership, Stephanie saw her coach as an integral resource in legitimizing her investment in Masters swimming.

Finally, Stephanie explained that unlike with younger athletes, Masters coaches interact with the fastest and slowest swimmers equally. She elaborated, "If a coach is at a university or a really elite club, there's a pressure to perform, and that certainly influences the coaching style and the amount of time given to swimmers. But at a Masters level, I think the swimmers are more equal; they get more equal amounts of attention. The top swimmer gets the same amount of attention as the rest. So that's something that is different about Masters swimming." This was important to John because he wanted a coach to help him improve, but was not an elite swimmer. At this point, John asked Stephanie for the contact information for her Masters club.

Controlling Connor

One night while working a late shift at his law firm, Connor thought to himself "I've always had a job where I'm kind of alone thinking. Maybe mixing with people more often might be good for me." Connor thought about joining a Masters swim club so he could socialize while also improving his health and fitness. He pondered, "Being fit makes me feel good and makes me feel healthy. I have always had a sport in my life and I stick with it because it takes care of me in a way. Sport keeps me healthy and has some emotional and psychological benefits too." Connor was a swimmer in high school and already swam laps in his pool every morning to stay in shape, but wondered if he could achieve any added performance benefits from a Masters club. He thought, "Having swum for 25 years, it's probably difficult for me to make improvements. At this point, a lot of it is already fairly well ingrained."

Connor liked the idea of adding a competitive element to his workout. Connor knew that for most people "At the Masters level, the competition is a little bit more competing with yourself, setting personal goals, and getting there." However, Connor was more competitive than most. Connor thought, "I like being able to compare myself against other people; not necessarily that I'm better or worse. But I've been swimming for the last 20 odd years by myself. And, I do a couple of good laps and say 'Hey! I must be doing well!' But when I can set the bar against other people, I can push myself to a new level." Connor also liked that Masters swim programs made up of "other lawyers, physicians, and engineers . . . and a broad base of university professors." He thought, "There's actually quite a few people I would like to know or have a reason to get in touch with, who I wouldn't otherwise get to know if I didn't swim. So that's a bonus to Masters swimming." Connor's mind was made up.

Once he joined the club, Connor was difficult for coaches because he sometimes ignored what they asked of him. For Connor, "The coach needs to understand that it's ok [not doing what is asked], and it is up to the coach to figure out 'how else can I push this person?' They [the coaches] can't just give up. Instead, they need to understand that in order for adults to learn, they must present their information in a certain way and in different ways." Connor also felt coaches should accommodate his wants and needs because he was paying for the coaching he received. Almost antagonistically, he would "Sometimes, [I] ask them [coaches] bizarre things like . . . 'Can I always turn up halfway through the practice?'" He knew that if the coach didn't accommodate him, he could say "I'm not happy with this program and, actually, I don't want to come after Christmas. Can I have my money back please?"

Connor had the most problems with Coach Cindy because she pushed him and tried to keep him accountable for his lap times. Connor didn't like her because he believed "... that people who are really serious about coaching probably wouldn't want to coach Masters swimming because adult swimmers don't improve very quickly. If they were really focused on their swimmers' times, then they would probably want to coach junior swimmers because they are going to see a steady improvement." Therefore, Connor felt she should take it easy on him because "There isn't an external pressure on the coach to perform, the way there would be for an elite coach." One day, after Cindy shouted at him for not trying hard enough, Connor decided he was going to leave the program. He believed her coaching was better suited for "... high school and university, because back then if you committed to the team, then you better have been giving everything you got." Whereas now, his motto was, "Three quarters of the way through a practice, if I get a leg cramp, well then, screw you. I'm going home. I'll go have a beer or something. I don't need to be here."

After a few hours of searching, Connor found the Beavers swim club and went in to ask about their coaching. To his delight, the representative informed him that at their club, new swimmers filled out a form where they could indicate the type of coaching they liked. For instance, the representative explained, "If individualized coaching is what you're looking for, you have to ask for it. You have to say 'I would like you to look at my stroke; can you give me some feedback and make suggestions?' Some people don't like that so it is up to them to let the coach know." On his form, Connor wrote, "I don't necessarily like to be singled-out for having flaws in my swimming, but I do have flaws, so, I don't mind getting feedback because I want to improve. That's what I'm there for—to improve over a period of time."

It didn't take long before Connor began raving about his new program. He would say "It's a hard workout but I always feel like I had fun. There is a little bit of talk afterwards and that type of thing. So, because of the way that practices are run, I stay motivated. Because quite frankly, we don't have to be there, it's our choice." Connor also liked that he was able to improve his swim times under the guidance of his new coaches. He often told his coaches with excitement, "In all of my other sports, I'm only going to get slower. But with swimming, even at my age, I can still get faster because it's so technical. I have people in my program that are 65–70 who I sometimes struggle to keep up with at certain distances, and that's not discouraging, that's tremendously inspiring because I project, if I keep working hard, I can be like them at 65–70."

After 10 years with the Beavers, Connor became the longest-standing Masters swimmer at his club and a committee member on the executive board. Connor loved his leadership role and was very involved in the swim program, sometimes to his detriment. For example, a woman recently filed a complaint about Connor for overstepping his role and disciplining her during a practice. She wrote, "I find in the more community-based pools and programs the swimmers are trying to guide the coaches and that doesn't work as well, because you end up with the president or the club executive trying to drive the practice, instead of the professional."

When other members asked Connor to leave the managing of the practices to the coach, he replied, "It's not the coach's role because we [the club] hire them to coach; we don't hire them to manage poor behavior. I don't look at that as being the responsibility of the coach. It's my responsibility." He continued, "It's actually my

responsibility as being the executive to lay it all out. I mean our club mandate states that if you are a problem-swimmer, we can eject you from the club.” Connor then reminded the others of the protocol for hiring coaches, “As a club, we provide some direction to the coach about what they should be doing. We actually have something that documents what our expectations are for the coach and what they can expect from individual swimmers and us as a club. We lay out our different expectations such as being prepared for the workout, putting up engaging workouts, engaging with the swimmers, and things like that. Also, we organize how they get paid, and what they should do if they have problems with swimmers.” He finished by saying “We hire the coaches, so we’re kind of in charge and can run our own business. The coaches are there to support us while we do that.” After a long debate, the club remained divided about how leadership was shared among committee members and coaches, and everyone went home feeling a little frustrated.

Discussion

Our purpose was to provide rich in-depth information about the psychosocial conditions that are specifically pertinent within day-to-day organized and coached Masters swim programs. We did so by telling the narrative stories of several profiles of swimmers based on their experiences in daily practices in a coached swimming environment. In the following section, we discuss the three narrative profiles in terms of their convergence and divergence on themes derived in our analyses and in relation to past literature.

Motives for Swimming

Swimmers in all three profiles cited health and fitness, personal striving and challenge, and social motives as important determinants to their initiation and continued involvement in coached competitive swim programs. Health and fitness reasons are consistently acknowledged by Masters swimmers (Tantrum & Hodge, 1993; Young & Medic, 2011a) and by MAs in other sports (e.g., McIntyre, Coleman, Boag, & Cuskelly, 1992). MAs may also construe health-related motives relating to health gains as well as for ill-health avoidance reasons (Vallerand & Young, 2014). In the current study, swimmers in all profiles held health and fitness motives, suggesting they were aware of health benefits and anticipated better fitness through their involvement in a coached swim environment. Further, swimmers in each profile cited striving and challenge motives. These results align with research showing MAs are highly task or mastery oriented (Young, 2011), that MAs like to regularly test and assess themselves (Dionigi et al., 2011; Medic, 2009), and that opportunities for personal goal fulfillment are associated with Masters’ sport commitment (Vallerand & Young, 2014).

Social motives were experienced differently depending on the profile. Socially-oriented swimmers epitomized notions of social affiliation marked by a desire to establish mutual connections so that they felt like they belonged in this social milieu. They wanted to meet new people who shared a common interest, a sentiment previously reported by MAs (e.g., Dionigi et al., 2011; McIntyre et al., 1992). Striving-oriented swimmers were also interested in meeting others, but for more task-related purposes. They sought connections with people whose personal attri-

butes (e.g., being driven and serious about training) would encourage and legitimize their demanding training schedules. This search for suitable training mates may have benefits, as Masters swimmers' training in a team setting (Santi et al., 2014) and training partners can influence the sense of duty that Masters swimmers have toward continued sport involvement (Young & Medic, 2011b). Finally, quotes from control-oriented swimmers suggested that they might be motivated to use Masters sport to enhance one's social standing and to seek opportunities to validate their sense of status. Although it has been recognized that MAs are generally of higher education and socioeconomic status (MacDonald et al., 2009) than the general public, little research has documented MAs' awareness of such differences and whether this might engender a heightened sense of one's status.

Perspectives on Competition

The participants understood competition in two ways: self-competition and competition against others. These results are in line with prior reports. For example, 51% of international-level Masters swimmers indicated they swam for self-competition reasons such as personal progression and self-referenced achievement, and 40% indicated their commitment was also influenced by rankings or beating opponents (Young & Medic, 2011a). Although past research shows that MAs are more inclined to use self-referenced criteria for judging competitive success (Young, 2011), some studies remind us that socially comparative criteria associated with competition may still play an important role in the Masters setting (e.g., Ogles & Masters, 2000; Dionigi, 2008). Likewise, in our narratives, the swimmers in the control-oriented profile emphasized competition against others slightly more than self-competition.

Although swimmers in all three profiles identified as a competitor, the spontaneity with which they did, and the process of becoming 'a competitor' varied depending on profile. Swimmers comprising the striving and controlling profiles more readily labeled themselves as competitors possibly because they had long ago been socialized into a competitive setting, either because they stayed continuously active in sport their entire life, or had transferred competitive aspects from earlier sport settings to adult swimming. Conversely, swimmers in the socially-oriented profile were reluctant and only admitted to being a competitor privately. Stevenson (2002) described how the process of identifying as a serious Masters swimmer is long, depends heavily on a socialization process extending from intake (i.e., introduction to the activity by others) to a state of highly entangled immersion in the conventions, etiquette and norms of this setting. It may be that our socially-oriented swimmers were not yet fully entangled in competitive norms, nor comfortable with acknowledging self-competition as competition.

Experiences Specific to Being a Masters Swimmer

Swimmers described characteristics specific to Masters swimming that they felt were important as adults. Narratives illustrated very different beliefs about committee membership and shared leadership. Both swimmers in the socially- and control-oriented profiles noted the importance of having shared leadership between athletes and coaches. However, controlling swimmers were almost patriarchal in how they dictated what they thought the coach should do for the club. Further, they had overly high estimations of their roles as club members that extended into

roles that traditionally are assigned to a coach. Conversely, the swimmers in the social profile saw committee roles as another means to build bonds with others (including a coach), were more likely to believe that swimmers on the committee board should have equal leadership status to the coach, and openly criticized other committee members for being too controlling in their duties.

Little is known about athlete leaders at the Masters level; however, a small number of studies on athlete leaders in university sport exists from which we can make inferences (Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012; Loughhead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006). University athletes with formal leadership designation (i.e., team captain) help to accomplish group objectives, satisfy team members' needs, and represent the group's interest by acting as a liaison between coaches and athletes. Similar peer leadership may exist among Masters, although remarks from our interviews show mixed opinions regarding this possibility. For example, ambiguity surrounding formal leaders' (committee members) roles may result in less satisfied team members. For instance, when committee members act as both leaders (e.g., hire and direct coach) and followers (e.g., follow direction in practice) to coaches, dynamics may ensue that may not always be optimal. Alternatively, they might be considered helpful leaders if the coach assents to such extended roles for board members/swimmers, especially if they provide different types of knowledge and fill complementary roles to the coaches, akin to what assistant coaches might do (e.g., Rathwell et al., 2014). The closer standing that committee members/swimmers have with their peers may mean that they are a resource, which if tapped properly, could increase leadership possibilities and provide swimmers with additional benefits that supplement those derived from the coach.

Swimmers in all profiles mentioned that they "owned" their decision to participate. They were aware that they had voluntarily made sport a priority in a cluttered schedule of work and family responsibilities. This is consistent with literature showing that many MAs negotiate familial and professional duties to fit organized sport into their lives (e.g., Barrell, Chamberlain, Evans, Holt, & Mackean, 1989). The swimmers in the social profile saw their decision to participate as a luxury, a sort of self-reward for managing the demands of a busy life. Research shows how acknowledgment of personal investment such as time, money, and effort is frequently positively associated with commitment in various MAs (Weir, Medic, Baker & Starkes, 2008; Starkes, Medic, & Routledge, 2007), including swimmers (Young & Medic, 2011b; Young, Piamonte, Grove & Medic, 2011). Notions of past investment may have been accentuated by the continuity in swimming evident in the striving and controlling profiles. The acknowledgment of years of cumulative investments is not only a badge of honor, but may be a personal currency they do not wish to squander by ceasing involvement. Indeed, quotes suggested that swimmers may feel a duty to continue their sport because their identity/self-esteem depends on it (Wigglesworth et al., 2012; Young, de Jong, et al., 2014).

Perspectives on Being Coached

Swimmers in each profile articulated beliefs about the paid coach. The swimmers in the striving and controlling profile were acutely aware that they were paying their coaches to be present and expected coaches to treat them as "clients." They believed that coaches needed to cater to their wants and needs and expected that

coaches would engage them in decisions. Although coaching literature on younger sport cohorts shows that tailoring to athletes' preferences and needs is important (Andrew, 2009; Chelladurai, 2007), failure to do so may be especially consequential in MAs. For example, quotes from the controlling profile illustrated how client demands were expressed in an antagonistic way toward coaches, especially when athletes vowed to take their monies elsewhere should they be dissatisfied. Finally, swimmers in the social profile did not adopt a client mentality, rather they commented on what little Masters coaches were paid and discussed how the coach-athlete contract implied that Masters coaches give equal time and opportunity to athletes no matter their skill level.

Swimmers discussed their characteristics as older athletes, including beliefs associated with "train-ability." Swimmers in all three profiles acknowledged physical limitations and conveyed realistic expectations with respect to their capacity for improvements. The social- and control-oriented swimmers described how coaches need to play the role of "bad habit breaker," which may or may not yield observable improvements. Conversely, the striving swimmers expressed the most confidence in a capacity to improve technique/performance, which is consistent with studies showing that the physiology of aging athletes is adaptive and, depending on the individual, highly responsive to training into the 70s (e.g., Nessel, 2004). Interestingly, the control-oriented swimmers illustrated some conflicting attitudes that may constrain how swimmers can be trained. Specifically, some swimmers conveyed how they liked to be singled out by a coach for stroke correction, whereas others responded adversely to such public attention. One control-oriented swimmer even alternated between preference and distaste for individualized correction, depending on who the coach was and when the feedback was delivered. Denison (2010) noted that learning is an emotional process in which relational power exists between the learner, others, and the context. Therefore, learning varies depending on individuals and their context, and a homogeneous coaching model cannot cater to all. Instead, delivery preference for feedback appears to vary tremendously depending on the swimmer.

Striving-oriented swimmers were characterized by a drive to please their coach, suggesting that coach reinforcement is an active influence on efforts and behavior in the Masters club setting, as it is in youth sport (e.g., Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979). Elsewhere, social constraints (e.g., worrying about coach approval) has been associated with swimmers' obligatory sport commitment (Young & Medic, 2011b). On the other hand, the control-oriented swimmers reflected swimmers who sometimes neglected what the coach had prescribed in practice—they felt that they should have the right to say "no" to their coach. This athletic characteristic is noteworthy because of its possible entwinement with adults' ownership of their decision to participate and "client" mentality, and because it is probably foreign to youth/adolescent athletes.

All profiles illustrated swimmers' beliefs about how coaches' performance should be evaluated. Generally, swimmers wanted coaches who displayed a degree of seriousness (evidenced by a structured workout) and who demonstrated interest in their personal development. Swimmers in each profile agreed that swimmers' performances at competitions were not criteria for evaluating coach aptitude. This suggests Masters coaches' encouragement of competitive participation is not self-serving. It also underscores how this context is unlike younger elite sport settings

where external criteria are enforced on the coach to have their swimmers perform well at competition.

Conclusion

Using three narratives, the current study revealed psychosocial conditions that were specific to the context of coached Masters sport programs. Models of coaching practice underscore the importance of considering environmental conditions that pertain to the cohort in question (e.g., Chelladurai, 2007; Côté et al., 1995), meaning that themes prevailing in younger sport cohorts (e.g., youth, adolescent, collegiate/young adult) ought not be assumed in Masters environments. Having multiple narratives to tell the stories of MAs was beneficial because the particular themes and storylines related to a specific profile of swimmers may have otherwise been marginalized/obscured using different methods.

While all themes discussed were couched within the context of being in a coached environment, the first two highest-order themes (motives for swimming, perspectives on competition) might be considered ambient themes. Ambient variables (e.g., Côté et al., 1995) exist to varying degrees in the background—coaches should be aware of these realities in developing their mental models for coaching practice but these ambient themes do not specify coaching considerations per se. On the other hand, our latter two highest-order themes (i.e., experiences specific to being a MA, perspectives on being coached) might be considered indirect influences on coaching practice because they more closely pertain to athletes' experiences with their coaches, and their beliefs with respect to how they wish to be coached. Indeed, beliefs about older athletes' train-ability, the coach-athlete contract, and shared leadership between coach and athlete, for example, may have a more pronounced impact on Masters swim coaches' effectiveness in training, organizational, and competitive activities in the club.

Future research is required to understand the experiences of Masters swimmers and their coaches with respect to direct coach-athlete interactions in the training setting and how they are related to indirect influences. For example, studies could explore how coaches may empower Masters swimmers with formal leadership roles to optimize their athletic experiences or how coaches learn from their experiences with Masters swimmers to effectively coach this age cohort. Finally, future research might also explore Masters swimmers' stated benefits of having coaches and how their coaching preferences are revealed in their experiences with their coaches.

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