

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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**Abstract**

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Narcissism has emerged as a highly relevant personality trait in sporting contexts, as its competitive environment offers individuals numerous opportunities to pursue personal glory. However, little is known about narcissism in the context of the coach-athlete relationship, and the extent to which similarity in narcissism across coaches and athletes can influence relationship quality. This study sought to explore how similarity in narcissism affects a coach's perception of their coach-athlete relationship. Data from semi-structured interviews with 30 national and international coaches were analysed using thematic analysis within a critical realist approach. Coaches were purposefully sampled based on their Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire & Dark Triad Dirty Dozen narcissism scores from Stanford et al. (2024). Four groups were then established: similar in trait narcissism/high relationship quality (Sim-High), similar in trait narcissism/low relationship quality (Sim-Low), dissimilar in trait narcissism/high relationship quality (Dis-High) and dissimilar in trait narcissism/low relationship quality (Dis-Low), prior to any interviews. Using Wiltshire & Ronkainen's (2021) three level framework of analysis, seventy experiential, eighteen inferential, and five dispositional themes were generated. The dispositional themes were perceived relationship perfection, high (perceived) self-awareness, breeding behaviors, relationship power and relationship elasticity. This study offers an insight into the experiences of similarity in narcissism and the subsequent influence on the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.

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



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

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

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

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

27 **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,  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.7 \pm 6.5$  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

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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

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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 ( $M_{duration} = 56.0 \pm 9.5$  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

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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.



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### 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

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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**

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1 Coaches felt that trait narcissism was an advantage in competitive sport, and felt it enhanced  
2 their relationship. Three inferential themes were identified in this dispositional theme: liberated,  
3 necessary for success, and developing their characteristics.

### 4 *Liberated*

5 This first inferential theme was developed from three experiential themes from the Sim-High  
6 and Dis-High sampling groups. Similarity on trait narcissism would often allow coaches to feel they  
7 could be themselves, which meant they encouraged their athletes to do the same resulting in greater  
8 levels of relationship complementarity:

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

14 However, within the Dis-High sample, to achieve high relationship quality, coaches strongly felt that  
15 because of their dissimilarity, they had to be more flexible and allow the athletes to be themselves:

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

### 19 *Necessary For Success*

20 This second inferential theme consists of four experiential themes across all sampling groups.  
21 Coaches are likely to strongly think that narcissism gave their athletes a spiteful edge in the pursuit of  
22 winning allowing them to have greater levels of closeness within their relationship. Coach 2,  
23 discusses the positive effect that this had on their relationship:

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

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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:

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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

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1 that...rather than me highlight it to him, and have that awkward negative conversation,  
2 I'd just tell the kid who's going to go, okay thanks. Then [Athlete's Name] would push  
3 off the wall and change himself. Because I've not told him that he's wrong, I've not  
4 highlighted the problem. He's heard me criticise somebody else, so he. almost thinks, he  
5 almost believes that I haven't seen him do something wrong. [Coach 16, Sim-High]

6 Interestingly, within the Sim-Low sampling group, many coaches strongly felt that they could  
7 not manipulate their athletes. Coach 26 demonstrates this in the following quote: "I was trying to find  
8 that way to sell it to her. A lot of the time my powers of manipulation did not work on her."  
9 Relationship quality was also reduced in this sampling group for many of the coaches if they felt they  
10 were being manipulated by their athlete. For example, Coach 26 goes on to say, "If you know that  
11 you're being manipulated by an athlete, then you're going to be less likely to buy into the relationship  
12 and want to sort of work together on things." [Coach 26, Sim-Low]

### 13 *Dominance*

14 The next inferential theme consists of six experiential themes across all the sampling groups  
15 apart from Sim-High. It resulted in the likelihood that coaches would want to dominate their athlete.  
16 Within the Sim-Low sample, most of the coaches felt similarity led to a fight for dominance leading  
17 to a power struggle, resulting in low complimentary behaviours, that could not be overcome within  
18 the relationship. Coach 25, who along with their athlete had the lowest levels of narcissism within the  
19 sampling group, explained how it was their level of similarity in narcissism that caused this fight for  
20 dominance:

21 I think sometimes she could give a little less of that dominant side towards me. I'll give  
22 you an example. This morning when she turned up on poolside, she took her time to get  
23 in the pool a bit ... She walked past me once to get her suit on, and then she strolled back  
24 in. I'm like, come on [Athlete's Name] let's go. I think in a sense, you think to yourself,  
25 you're taking the p\*\*\* a bit here and I am the one in charge. [Coach 25, Sim-Low]

26 When there was dissimilarity in narcissism but high relationship quality some of the coaches  
27 felt they could easily dominate their athletes but were careful not to. Coach 2, who was higher than

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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

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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

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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***

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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:

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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

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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

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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

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

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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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# SIMILARITY IN NARCISSISM AND THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

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

# SIMILARITY IN NARCISSISM AND THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

## 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)