

A Qualitative Examination of the Developmental Networks of Elite Sport Coaches

Jordan S. Lefebvre, Gordon A. Bloom, and Lindsay R. Duncan

Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University

The developmental network perspective proposes that people acquire a wide and diversified network of concurrent developmental relationships, such as mentors, who assist their personal and professional development. The overarching purpose of this study is to qualitatively examine the developmental networks of experienced elite sport coaches to identify their developmental agents, the outcomes resulting from these developmental relationships, and the type of developmental assistance provided by the developmental agents. Participants were nine experienced elite head coaches ($M_{\text{age}} = 50.22$, $SD = 10.56$) with an average of 21.44 years of head coaching experience at the university, professional, and/or national levels. Data were acquired during a single interview with each participant via a two-step process: the construction of visual representations of participants' developmental networks, which were subsequently used to guide semistructured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that coaches had a vast network of developmental relationships (e.g., coaches, athletes, and family) that collectively contributed to their development on a personal (e.g., core values) and professional (e.g., coaching knowledge and employment opportunities) level. Furthermore, members of the developmental networks facilitated the acquisition of developmental outcomes by providing intentional and unintentional forms of assistance, such as feedback, guidance, advice, and role modeling. This study adds to the growing body of literature that suggests people learn and develop with the assistance of multiple developmental relationships. Thus, developing coaches should be encouraged to surround themselves with a variety of developmental agents, both inside and outside of sport, to enhance their growth and development.

Keywords: coach learning, development, mentoring, sport coaching

Over the past two decades, mentoring scholars across a variety of disciplines have been advocating for the developmental network perspective as an alternative conceptual approach to understanding the impact of mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The *developmental network perspective* is an all-encompassing mentoring model that

proposes that people acquire a wide and diversified network of concurrent *developmental agents* who take “an active interest in and action to advance the [mentee]’s career by providing developmental assistance” (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 268). Notably, the developmental network perspective integrates principles of social network theory (e.g., Granovetter, 1973), and suggests that mentoring relationships can vary in diversity (i.e., relationship type) and strength (i.e., relationship quality; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Yip & Kram, 2017).

There has been growing evidence from a variety of disciplines, including industrial and organizational psychology (e.g., Murphy & Kram, 2010), medicine (e.g., DeCastro et al., 2013),

This article was published Online First February 4, 2021.
Jordan S. Lefebvre  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6071-1002>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jordan S. Lefebvre, Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, 475 Pine Avenue West, Quebec H2W 1S4, Canada. Email: jordan.lefebvre@mail.mcgill.ca