



## Exploring Touch Communication Between Coaches and Athletes

by Michael J. Miller, Noah Franken and Kit Kiefer

### Abstract

*In athletics, coaches and athletes share a unique and important relationship. Recently Jowett and her colleagues (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003, 2004; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005) utilized relationship research (focusing on, for example, marital, familial and workplace relationships) from conjoining fields, and in particular social and cognitive psychology, to develop and test a four-component model (4 C's) that depicts the most influential relational and emotional components (closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation) of coach-athlete relationships. Proceeding from a review of the literature on human touch communication to examine research on the power of touch to exchange relational and emotional messages (Hertenstein et al., 2006), the present study explores coaches' and athletes' collective experiences of communicating via touch, utilizing in-depth interviews with eight college coaches and athletes. A phenomenological approach was used to gather, analyze and interpret the data, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) philosophical exploration of perception and human experience, which emphasizes the body as a means of communicating with the world. The findings indicate that touch between coaches and athletes increased at major events when emotions and tensions ran high. In addition, touch involved showing appreciation, instructing, comforting and giving attention, and affected perceptions of relationships. The findings also show that touch communication is influenced by societal factors, such as gender, relational stage, and what spectators, parents and other athletes may think. By illustrating how touch is enacted and experienced by a group of college coaches and athletes, the study represents an initial step toward understanding touch communication in the coach-athlete dyad.*

### Introduction

A word commonly used in the world of sports is "touch". Typically, "touch" refers to an athlete being able to delicately manipulate a situation or object with his or her body, often to a degree beyond the capabilities of the general population. For example, tennis players are routinely required to squeeze the handle of their racquet to an exacting degree of tightness in order to apply or remove speed from 57-gram tennis balls that hit their strings at speeds of up to 90 kilometres per hour. Golfers are said to need an enormous amount of feel (touch sensitivity) in order

to consistently putt balls (42mm in diameter) over uneven terrain into small, sunken cups (108mm diameter). Athletes, by virtue of the physical tasks that they perform, are often thought of as having a strong sense of their bodies and being very much in tune with their tactile (touch) senses.

However, little research has been done on how athletes experience communicative touch with their coaches. The idea that athletes and coaches (often retired athletes) focus considerable attention on getting in tune with their bodies makes them interesting candidates respectively for exploring touch

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](http://www.rhodes.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

communication. More specifically, since coaches and athletes share a distinct relationship and presumably consistent forms of touch, studying their experiences can offer insight into what various kinds of touch mean and feel like in a sporting context.

The study reported in this paper aimed to explore athletes' and coaches' experiences of communicative touch. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate to align the findings of this study as closely as possible to the idea of athletes and coaches communicating with their bodies. More specifically, the study draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) philosophical exploration of perception and human experience, which emphasizes the body as a means of communicating with the world and illuminates the intertwined nature of touching and being touched. This study is guided both theoretically and methodologically by the notion that the mind is inseparable from the body and that the experience of touch communication can be represented by a consideration of how individuals perceive touch via their bodies.

The study aimed to reflect the "universal" touch experiences of a particular group of college coaches and athletes. Through personal narratives, the selected sample of college athletes and coaches related stories of their own experiences of touch, as well as of the absence of touch, specific to their athletic participation. The narratives represent individual perceptions of touch, and are analysed and interpreted within the broad framework of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which considers strongly the reciprocity, power and ambiguity of touch communication.

The data obtained from this study offer an in-depth, context-specific snapshot of how touch is experienced in sports, illustrating, through collation of individual themes, what emerged as the collective experience of the subjects. Furthermore, by focusing more essentially on how touch between individuals is experienced physically, emotionally and relationally, the findings help to illuminate the mediating effects of factors such as gender, power, age, and how much the individuals involved in a touch like one another.

### Literature Review

The literature review leading up to the exploration of how coaches and athletes experience touch between one another examines three major threads. The first thread focuses on a four-component model, proposed by Jowett and Meeks (2000), that emphasizes the importance of athlete and coach *closeness*, *commitment*, *complementarity* and *co-orientation*.

More generally, the model helps to explain and examine the interpersonal, dyadic relationship between coaches and athletes. The second thread highlights literature which examines the emotional and relational messages communicated via touch, and illustrates where specific findings align with the four-component athlete-coach relationship model. Thus, the initial two-thirds of this literature review examines parts of the intertwined knot of empirical research regarding athletes' and coaches' relationships, along with the potential impact that physical touch may have on those relationships. The final thread of the review considers the alignment of touch literature and athlete-coach relationship literature in light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical conception of perception and the human body. In keeping with his suggestion that a human phenomenon should be approached without completely unravelling its ambiguity, the final section aims to ensure that the knot this study is exploring (touch phenomenon) remains ontologically bound by the relationships and theories that constitute it.

### *Coach-Athlete Relationships*

In order to locate touch communication in the context of coaches and athletes, it is critical to understand how coaches and athletes interact interpersonally. This section will thus outline how theorists from the field of sport psychology frame and examine the unique components of coach-athlete relationships.

In the 1980s, researchers studying the relationship between coaches and athletes focused primarily on how coaches utilize leadership skills to motivate and affect athletes' behaviours and performances (Chelladurai, 1984; Smith, Zane, Smoll, & Coppel, 1983). During this period, it was common for sport psychology theorists to utilize such measurement instruments as the Leadership Scale of Sport and Coaching Behaviour Assessment System (Jowett, 2006).

In the 1990s, however, there was a shift, spurred by research by Jowett & Meek (2000), to examine the interpersonal, relational and emotional characteristics that coaches and athletes share. Essentially, researchers focused not so much on just the coaches, but on how coaches and athletes relate as a unit. The shift entailed an emphasis on the bi-directional and reciprocal nature of relationships, whereby sport psychology theorists began to draw from relational theories in adjoining fields (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett, Paull, Pensgaard, Hoegma, & Riise, 2005; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002; Wylleman, 2000). Research began to illustrate the impact of the dyadic athlete-coach relationship on athlete success, leading some theorists to place coach-

athlete relationships at the heart of sports training (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006; Lyle, 1999).

Interpersonal theories from conjoining fields were initially used to develop a model of the coach-athlete relationship. In particular, research from social and cognitive psychology illustrating the interrelatedness of cognitions, emotions and behaviours in relationships (Hinde 1997; Kelley et al., 1983) was used to create a basic framework for describing and exploring athlete-coach relationships (Jowett & Meek, 2000). That initial framework of interrelated components led to Jowett & Cockerill (2002) further refining their model by theorizing and testing three interrelated cognitive, emotional and behavioural components that have been shown to have a significant impact on coach-athlete relationships. They call these components the “3 C’s”, referring to the relationship constructs of closeness (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), commitment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), and complementarity (Kiesler, 1997).

*Closeness* refers to the emotional tone of the athlete-coach relationship and is found in their expressions of interpersonal liking and trust/respect for one another (Jowett, 2006). *Commitment* is characterized as the coach’s and athlete’s long-term orientation toward their relationship, promoted and sustained by such accommodating behaviours as appreciating the other’s sacrifices, communicating and understanding (Jowett, 2006). Lastly, *complementarity* is described as coaches’ and athletes’ actions that are co-operative. It entails feeling comfortable, competent and concerned when in the presence of the other person (Jowett, 2006).

The aforesaid characterizations of the 3 C’s - given credence in a sporting context via qualitative research by Jowett and colleagues (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003, 2004; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005) - help begin setting up a framework for considering the impacts of touch communication between coaches and athletes. More specifically, as Jowett (2006) points out, they bring to the surface “relationship characteristics that reflect the contexts in which coaches’ and athletes’ experiences, roles and social behaviours take place” (p. 691). Hence, for this study, the 3 C’s provided a starting point for considering what types of emotional and relational messages are important when considering the enactment and perception of touch communication between coaches and athletes. That is, they indicate that touch communication which initiates feelings such as respect, trust, commitment and comfort is likely to affect the coach-athlete relationship positively, while touch that initiates feelings of being unattached and disoriented, or that

incites a lack of understanding and discomfort, is likely to affect the relationship negatively (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002).

Although the 3 C’s provide a starting point for understanding coach-athlete relationships, they are limited in their capacity to describe explicit similarities of the shared knowledge of coaches and athletes. Research by Duck (1994) indicates that relationship members in general are motivated to achieve and sustain similarity because it immediately connects two individuals. Because of this inherent striving for similarity, and in part because of an increase in social psychology research focusing on the congruence and incongruence of human cognitions in relationships (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1991; Kenny, 1994), Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) proposed that a fourth “C” - *co-orientation* - be added to the model. *Co-orientation* is described as athletes’ and coaches’ shared knowledge and understanding (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006). In their conceptualization of *co-orientation*, Jowett and Clark-Carter draw upon research by Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1966) that illustrates two sets of perspectives or perceptions that individuals use to co-orientate their relationships.

The first is the *direct perspective*, which Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) utilize to describe an athlete’s or coach’s own perception of how *close*, *committed* or *complementary* s/he feels in relation to the other. The second perspective is the *meta-perspective*, used by Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) to describe athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions of the other’s feelings of *closeness*, *commitment* and *complementarity*. *Co-orientation* lends insight into what social forces, cognitions and norms contribute to athlete and coach perceptions of touch communication between one another by allowing for an examination of both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication.

Findings from a study by Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) indicate that gender differences, power/role differences and relational stage differences all contribute to variable perceptions of *co-orientations*. Although the authors call for more research to determine the specific effects of gender, power and relational stage, their study supports findings from relational research involving other dyads (for example, marital couples) and lends credence to the usefulness of *co-orientation* as a factor in describing athlete-coach relationships.

In summary, coach-athlete relationships can be characterized by the members’ levels of *closeness*, *commitment* and *complementarity*, along with their perceptions of similarity regarding those three factors. In addition, gender, power and relational stage can be

said to affect athletes' and coaches' perceptions of how similar they feel they are in terms of *closeness*, *commitment* and *complementarity*. Taken as a whole, the aforementioned body of research paints a descriptive picture of the coach-athlete relationship and, in doing so, suggests that the emotional and relational messages exchanged within the relationship may have a significant impact on the mutual goals and strivings of athletes and coaches.

#### *Touch Communication: Physically Exchanging Emotional and Relational Messages*

This section examines literature that illustrates the power of touch to communicate emotional and relational messages. More specifically, touch-communication research will be presented that focuses on intimacy, commitment, power relating, and the perceptual similarities and differences of touch participants, highlighting the theoretical correspondence between these four elements and the four C's - *closeness*, *commitment*, *complementarity* and *co-orientation*.

Touch communication has been studied for the last five decades, dating back to the early work of Frank (1952). In those five decades, touch has been shown to play an important role in human relationships at all stages of growth and development. Lee and Guerrero (2001) characterize touch as a potent form of communication within people's social and personal relationships, quoting Thayer (1986) to punctuate their point: "nothing comes closer than touch", which "both influences and reflects the nature of social relationships between individuals" (pp. 12-13). In a very simple, physical sense, the act of touching another human being requires one to eliminate all space between whatever parts come into contact. Said another way, touching requires humans to get physically close to one another, and can often entail getting emotionally close as well.

#### *1. Intimacy and touch – (C1) closeness*

A series of studies on touch communication in various dyads have employed observers to interpret the degree of intimacy that different touches convey and infer how intimate the relationships are based on the kind of touch being observed (Burgoon, 1991; Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Floyd & Voludakis, 1999; Pisano, Wall, & Foster, 1986). These studies involved showing participants photographs or videos of touch between individuals and using surveys to quantify their perceptions of the interactions. Other related intimacy studies involve confederates actually touching participants in an experimental or real-world setting. For example, Burgoon, Walther, and Baesler (1992) had participants interact in an experimental, problem-solving situation in which a confederate

either enacted three brief touches or did not. Results from both types of studies have shown that touch, as opposed to no touch, shows more affection and trust, and expresses various predictable degrees of intimacy (face touching and hand touching, for example, are seen as more intimate than other forms of touch) (Burgoon, 1991; Hertenstein, Verkamp, Kerestes, & Holmes, 2006; Lee & Guerrero, 2001). Touch has also been shown to convey positive relational messages and increase liking in various contexts (Fisher, Rytting, & Heslin, 1976; Lee & Guerrero, 2001). In summary, research has shown that varying types of touch foster and express intimacy, liking and trust in multiple dyads and via multiple methods of inquiry.

Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) characterize coach-athlete *closeness* as interpersonal liking and trust/respect for one another. This characterization is very similar to the characterization of intimacy within the literature on touch communication, and suggests that touch may be an important facilitator of *closeness* between coaches and athletes and thus important to their relationship in general.

#### *2. Commitment and touch – (C2) commitment*

Several other touch communication studies focus less on relational intimacy and delve rather into examining other positive affective and relational messages that touch conveys, such as affection, attraction and commitment (Burgoon & Walther, 1990; Guerrero & Anderson, 1991; Johnson & Edwards, 1991). Of particular interest is the research of Johnson and Edwards (1991) that examines how individuals ascribe varying levels of commitment to different kinds of touch. Specifically, their study showed that, when evaluating a spectrum of touch ranging from intercourse to holding hands, participants' perceptions of commitment correlated to the "intimacy" of the touch (with sexual intercourse thus reflecting the most commitment). The results of this study may be somewhat limited in their capacity for generalization due to the framing of commitment and types of touch as romantic in nature. However, the fact that respondents associated varying types of touch with distinctly different levels of commitment makes a case for exploring types of touch specific to less romantic relationships, along with respondents' perceptions of how those touches relate to commitment.

Jowett and Clark-Carter (2006) developed an athlete-coach-specific construct of *commitment* centring on coaches' and athletes' long-term orientation, and characterized by general accommodating behaviours such as appreciating, communicating and understanding. Touch shared between coaches and athletes

intuitively carries with it a potential to reflect their appreciation and understanding for one another (for example, coaches congratulate athletes for strong performances with high-fives). When evaluated in light of the research illustrating the correlation between touch and commitment, it may be that touch between coaches and athletes interacts with their perceived relational commitment.

### 3. Power relating and touch – (C3) complementarity

The relationship between coaches and athletes is often perceived as characterized by an imbalance in power. By way of example, coaches can regularly be seen moving athletes or directing them, using touch in order to help improve their technique or teach them specific skills. Major and Heslin (1982) argue that this type of touch, in particular when directing people, is commonly perceived as dominant. Thus, simply through the act of instructing via touch, coaches may tend to be perceived as dominating.

To add to this perception, several studies and reviews of literature pertaining to status and touch have collectively illustrated that higher-status individuals are generally more likely to initiate touch, and in turn touch initiators are considered to be more dominant (Andersen, 1999; Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996; Henley & Harmon, 1985; Hertenstein et al., 2006). For coaches, being in a conceivably more powerful role than athletes (for instance, they can choose to give athletes playing time or not) may perpetuate the perception of athletes that touch from their coaches is dominating, and may in turn make them less likely to initiate touch themselves.

Jowett and Clark-Carter's (2006) conception of *complementarity* reflects how comfortable coaches and athletes feel in the presence of one another. The research on touch communication and status indicates that *complementarity* may be affected by coach-enacted touch. That is, by virtue of coaches' role and perceived position of power, coach-enacted touch may perpetuate athletes' perceptions of the coach being overly dominant. In addition, *complementarity* may also be affected by athletes' decreased likelihood to touch their coach due to their subordinate role and hence constrained feelings of entitlement. In each case, *complementarity* or comfort with one another potentially suffers for coaches and athletes because status perpetuates an imbalance in perception and in the actual act of touching one another.

### 4. Touch and contextual differences – (C4) co-orientation

Co-orientation, the fourth "C" proposed by Jowett (2006), complements the initial 3 C's by explicitly considering similarities and dissimilarities in athletes'

and coaches' perceptions of *closeness*, *commitment* and *complementarity* based upon gender, power/role, relational stage, and interpersonal differences. A series of studies from psychology and communication come together to highlight the perceptual differences of touch communication between relational dyads based on gender, age, relationship stage, settings, and the intentionality of individuals (Hertenstein et al., 2006). At this point, the research from both touch communication literature and athlete relational literature regarding contextual differences warrants further investigation. Theorists from the conjoining fields of study point out a need for the collection of more context-specific data (Hertenstein et al., 2006; Jowett, 2006).

A good portion of the touch research mentioned above focuses on dyads that are more specifically work-related, romantic, marital, or familial; as a result, generalization to a sport-related dyad requires careful consideration. In their own research, Jowett and her colleagues (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003, 2004; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005) point out similarities and differences between coach-athlete dyads and other related dyads. For example, they illustrate that, while both coach-athlete and husband-wife dyads are characterized by mutual trust, their levels of intimacy generally differ. Thus, in developing their sport-specific constructs of athlete-coach *closeness*, *commitment*, *complementarity* and *co-orientation*, they utilized interviews with professional and non-professional athletes and coaches in order to move the more general theoretical conceptions of the aforesaid constructs into a sports-specific dyad (Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006). Theoretically, this literature makes a similar move by specifying a particular form of communication between coaches and athletes (touch) and examining the alignment of general touch literature with athlete-coach relational literature in an initial effort to consider the impact and importance of touch in coach-athlete relationships. The review at this point stops short of posing any research questions.

### *Phenomenological Experiences of Touch*

The literature on touch communication and athlete-coach relationships comes together theoretically along several avenues, and from that body of literature one could conceivably assert hypotheses or research questions regarding the impact and/or frequency of relational and emotional messages that coaches and athletes exchange via touch. However, rather than proceed by asking questions that directly arise from that body of research, this study aims to consider it as a whole or complete (intertwined) network of relationships and interactions. More specifically, the

work of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) regarding human perception will be used to help frame a research question that, rather than address specific theoretical correlations, will look to explore, with a more phenomenological tone, athletes' and coaches' respective and collective bodily experiences of communicating through touch.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) challenged the notion of a division between the human mind and body, characterizing the human body as not simply a body, or object subject to the mind, but as a body-subject. His philosophical conception suggests that the body should be conceived of as our means to communicate with the world rather than as an object that our minds order to behave in various ways.

Recently, Mooney and Norris (2007) examined the findings of research by neuroscientists Libet, Wright, Feinstein, and Pearl (1979) utilizing Merleau-Ponty's notion of an "intentional arc", or the capacity of the human body to inherently know the world as "seeable" or graspable prior to conscious reflection. Another term Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) uses to elaborate this idea is "habituality", which he defines as "knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (p. 143). From this statement, one can argue that, in the absence of enacting touch, a very primal and unique form of knowledge is lost, since it is only in bodily movement that this kind of knowledge manifests itself.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) uses the act of touching one's right hand with one's left hand to describe how the human body reflects upon itself:

I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching ... . In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries ... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection. (p. 93)

The above passage gives rise to the notion that, as we touch other people, we become instantly aware of our own tangibility, or the "other's" perception of us as an object, and of our own exploration of them. In terms of athletes and coaches, being instantly aware of their tangibility and influence may prompt strong reflections regarding what touch that they enact and receive with one another means. This, combined with the notion that a form of knowledge rests in the act of

touching, suggests that even simple, quick physical contact may carry with it meaning and influence.

As mentioned in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) considers human perception and the study of perception to entail a necessary ambiguity. He states that man is a knot of relations and that dissecting this knot means destroying the interdependence that gives humanity its essential qualities (Reynolds, 2005). Thus, not pulling apart the knot of ambiguity can be the impetus for gaining, through study, an understanding of the very thing that establishes humanness.

### Research Question

The research question for this study is broad and considers the human body to be a unique tool for collecting and disseminating the relational and emotional knowledge gained from receiving and enacting touch with others; a tool for communicating, thus.

RQ1: What are athletes' and coaches' experiences of touching one another?

### Method

#### *Participant Pre-screening*

Given the aim and design of the study, the goal of participant selection was to generate a purposive sample that included athletes and coaches who respectively have or have had active relationships and substantial contact with representatives of the other group in their own sport. The criteria for selection accordingly stipulated that the participants were to have a minimum of three years of sports participation and currently be enrolled in a university NCAA athletic programme as either a coach or athlete. In addition, participants needed to be self-reflective and willing to share. To address these sampling needs, participants were pre-screened using background questionnaires (distributed and returned via e-mail) with open-ended survey questions attached to determine: (1) demographic and cultural information, (2) the basic nature of their experience of coach-athlete relationships, and (3) their willingness to engage in self-reflection regarding their athletic experiences. Prescreening e-mails were sent to five male and five female athletes purposively identified by the researchers on the basis of personal acquaintance or recommendation and relevant information at their disposal, along with five male and five female coaches, similarly identified, at two medium-sized Midwestern universities.

### *Participants*

Of the initial pool of 20 coaches and athletes, 12 responded to the pre-screening e-mails, and, of those 12, eight were selected to participate in the interviews. The size of the selected sample was consistent with Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation that research of a phenomenological nature should focus on between five to twenty-five participants who have all experienced the same phenomenon. The final sample of participants consisted of a male swimming coach, a male tennis coach, a female cheerleading coach, and a female soccer coach, as well as a female swimming athlete, a female track athlete, a male tennis athlete, and a male basketball athlete.

### *Data Collection*

Interviews were used to explore athletes' and coaches' perceptions of touch in the context of athletic experiences. The interviews each lasted from thirty minutes to two hours and focused on two overarching, broad components of interest: the *experience of being touched* and the *experience of touching*. Follow-up interviews were conducted with three of the participants in order to probe more deeply into their experiences. The use of two broad components helped to ground the interviews in order to elicit data that would lead to pertinent and clear textural (what the participants experienced) and structural (context or situational) descriptions (Creswell, 2007). The goal during the interview process was to guide the athletes and coaches to reflect upon everything that they experienced during various types of touches and in various contexts. For instance, when asking athletes about a hugging experience, the interviewer asked the participants to "think about a time that [they] hugged [their] coach and talk about all the things [they] experienced and felt from the moment [they] began the hug up until [they] pulled away from one another". The key was to ask questions that helped athletes and coaches reflect on the subtleties and very essence of their touch experiences.

The interviews were recorded on a laptop using a programme called Audacity© that enabled the data to be easily and visibly earmarked in certain segments in order to make the process of transcription more clear. Each participant filled out a consent form and agreed to have the interview recorded. Participants were able to be interviewed at times and locations that were convenient for them. The interviews were conducted by a trained graduate student who ensured that the participants each understood (1) that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, (2) that their responses would be completely confidential, (3) that there were no right or wrong answers, and (4) that they should

answer each question as honestly as they could.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the interviews were transcribed, the analysis process consisted of grouping and developing the data into textural and structural descriptions in accordance with the method of analysis prevalently employed in psychological phenomenology research (Creswell, 2007; Holroyd, 2001). The transcribed narratives were examined for shared experiences of touch, which were drawn out as themes. The themes were then analyzed on macro and micro levels. For example, one athlete, describing her shoulder being touched by a coach, relayed the following four themes: (1) a sensation of comfort, (2) an impulse to face the "toucher", (3) inner warmth, and (4) a slight wave of energy down her back. Analysis of the themes entailed examining each one individually; for example, considering the importance of comfort in relation to the essence of shoulder touching, and then considering concepts, like connection and attention, derived from the interplay of all four categories. Using this micro-to-macro analysis between subjects initiated the process of writing textural descriptions of each participant's experiences, and subsequently placing those experiences into specific contexts or settings in order to construct what are referred to as structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2002). The final step involved writing descriptions that present the collective essence of the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). The ultimate goal of the data analysis was to derive descriptions that provide insight into what it is like to experience touch as a coach or athlete within specific athletic situations.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section will begin by presenting the basic kinds of touch that coaches and athletes talked about. Next, stories relating athletes' and coaches' experiences of sharing emotional and relational messages via touch will be highlighted and discussed. Finally, the social factors that influenced many of the coaches' and athletes' experiences of touch communication will be discussed.

The forms of touch that coaches and athletes in this study shared with one another were high-fives, hugs (one- and two-armed), hands on shoulders, hands on backs, handshakes, instrumental touch (touch to teach a skill), massages or stretching, pats on the back, group hugs, hands on the neck, fist-knocking, hip touching along the back, tackling, fake-punching, shoving, and butt-patting.

### *Touch During Emotional Events*

All the coaches and athletes interviewed characterized

many of their most memorable touch experiences in sport as happening during very intense or emotionally charged events. One coach related a story about a major swimming event which he thought spurred an increase in touching behaviours for both the coaching staff and athletes. As he put it, "The meet was at the end of the season; everyone was emotionally charged and there was a really intense feeling being at our home pool." For him, both the atmosphere of being at home and having had the entire year to get to know athletes created a more comfortable environment for exchanging touch. More specifically, he stated that "I don't think personal space was as important for us at this meet, since we had gotten to know one another." During this event, there were many hugs and high-fives. A cheerleading coach related similar feelings from a big event, commenting that "The energy level of the competition had us all primed to hug if anything at all went well." Moreover, coaches expressed how the unseen emotional momentum of an event incited touch communication.

Athletes also readily expressed how the emotions and feelings tied to a big event prompted them to initiate touch with their coaches. A male tennis athlete commented on a hug that he gave his coach after finishing an important match: "Without even thinking, I ran up and hugged my coach. I was emotionally exhausted and the hug was a kind of closure for me." Other athletes painted a picture of touch in big competitions as being very emotionally charged; it connected them to their coaches in ways that felt real. For some of them, the time immediately after a big race or competition was the only time they came into physical contact with their coach. For example, a female swimmer said, "It was a breakthrough race for me and the first time my coach ever touched me. It was only a high-five, but it seemed like everything I was thinking and feeling went into that high-five. I was very excited and put my whole body into it." Even though her touch was brief and, from a theoretical perspective, not very intimate (Burgoon, 1991), the moment and context in which it took place prompted the exchange of strong emotions for her.

Not all touch during intense matches or competitions was characterized by positive emotions; failures also carried with them intense emotions and, in turn, touch. For example, every coach said that s/he used touch to comfort athletes after disappointing performances. One coach described comforting touch as being quicker than other forms of touch. In particular, he stated that, after a swimmer had a poor race, he typically could only give a quick pat on the back, since athletes were often on the move and in a hurry to get away. A soccer coach expressed that she used touch after tough games to let athletes know that she

was there for them and that she still loved them. For the athletes, touch after bad performances elicited mixed emotional responses. A female track athlete commented on her feelings regarding touch after a poor performance: "I don't know; it's like right when you get done throwing and you know you did bad, you're already thinking, he's going to try to cheer me up and it kinda makes you mad. Usually, though, I like a hug or pat on the shoulder 'cause it makes me feel like he cares, ya know. I don't tell him that, though I probably should!" Her depiction summarizes athletes' feelings on touch after they perform poorly, and illustrates that athletes sometimes welcome comforting touch and sometimes are annoyed by it.

In addition to what takes place during events, several coaches talked about touching athletes before events. In particular, a tennis coach talked about how his female athletes often asked either to be taped up (that is, have a sprained foot wrapped) or to have a knot rubbed out of their shoulder before a big match. His contention was that many of the athletes who invited this form of touch seemed to be more needy than other athletes. Along those same lines, both a male swimming coach and a female cheerleading coach also talked about stretching and rubbing down athletes before events. The cheerleading coach said, "I think that I'm probably stretching them more for nerves and attention than actually for their muscles. Some girls just need to know that you care."

For the coaches and athletes interviewed, the more emotion and/or tension there was during an event, the more frequent and memorable their touch experiences were. Touch was used to show appreciation, to comfort, and to exchange emotions. Addressing the absence of touch during big events, a tennis athlete had this to say: "If you don't touch at all after a big match, something is missing; it seems less epic; less important. I watch coaches that won't hug their players and I think man they just don't really care." One coach very eloquently summarized the power of touch to express emotions: "Touch is a physical manifestation of our feelings. When we don't have time or the right words fail us, we use touch to get our emotions across. Touch expedites the process of exchanging emotions, and in brief exchanges we form a powerful bond." In that statement, the connection between touch and emotions is drawn to the forefront, and it ends by expressing the relational bond that touch embodies.

#### *Coaches and Athletes Relating with Touch*

There was substantial agreement among this group of athletes and coaches that, as they got to know one another and trust one another, they were more apt to come into physical contact. A female swimmer

expressed this point by explaining how her coach became like a mother to her, so that, when she touched her, she felt comforted and mothered. This relationship, as she put it, “allowed me to be super-comfortable: I could rest my head on her shoulder during a hug”. In contrast, the same athlete commented on hugging a male coach that she did not have a strong relationship with and whom she did not like: “When he hugged me, I was like, ewww, why are you touching me.” The male swimming coach told a story about the most horrible high-five he ever got from a coach. The story entailed the coach, as a young athlete, visiting *his* coach at that time and expressing some very personal things going on in his life. His coach was not at all responsive, and this unresponsiveness pushed their relationship far apart. Several months later, the athlete had an excellent performance at a major event, and his coach ran up to the pool after the race to give him a high-five. He recalled looking up at his coach from the pool and adamantly not wanting to give a high-five. The athlete gave one, but commented that “It’s funny, I’m a coach now and it’s been fifteen years since that day, yet somehow that one high-five still gets me fired up!” His story relates the idea that relationships between coaches and athletes can have a major effect on their perceptions of touch.

Coaches and athletes also talked about the connection that they felt when they touched one another. A male basketball player spoke of a handshake with his male coach by stating, “It makes me happy just to shake his hand once in a while. We do that and we’re connected, ya know. It says to me that he ain’t afraid to touch me.” The cheerleading coach characterized one of her groups of athletes as “kind of a family”, where touch was common. One form of touch she described was play-fighting. When she packed up her things at the end of practice, the girls would run over to her on the floor and tackle her. The male tennis coach expressed a similar kind of bonding when he talked about how his male athletes would often give him a shove and laugh or throw a fake punch on his shoulder. For athletes and coaches, play fighting seemed to be a gender-exclusive way to bond.

In summary, coaches and athletes not only used touch to enhance their connection with one another, but they also required there to be significant trust or a start to their relationship in order to comfortably enact touch. Gender factored into the way that this group of athletes and coaches bonded through touch via play-fighting.

#### *The Power of Social Influences*

The power of social influences was talked about by every participant in the study, and for some coaches

and athletes it superseded many other points of interest. Coaches tended to focus on what other people might be thinking while they are enacting touch, and athletes focused more on what they felt was inappropriate.

Male coaches expressed concern and awareness during touch interactions regarding the scepticism that others may have regarding their motives in touching an athlete, and especially an athlete of the opposite gender. A swimming coach commented on how it feels sometimes to enact touch with female athletes: “Cultural norms are almost physically stifling sometimes; there are literally a million directions you shouldn’t go with touch.” Along those same lines, female athletes picked up on male coaches being “overly” aware of touching female athletes. One female athlete had this to say: “It’s funny, I’ll be trying to learn something new and it’ll be obvious that he needs to touch me to show me how to do it, but I almost have to say, hey you can touch me before he’ll do it.”

Another important finding pertaining to gender revolves around the power and self-esteem dynamic inherent in the coach-athlete dyad (Krauchek & Ranson, 1999). Female athletes consistently spoke of inappropriate touch as something that at least showed that their coach cared. As one female track athlete commented, “I do feel appreciated even if I know a touch was probably not one-hundred percent sports related.” Female athletes also spoke about not avoiding coach-enacted touch or the pressure to reciprocate touch in order to connect better with the coach. For example, a female swimmer had this to say about a hug from her male coach: “I held on as long as I needed to, so that it didn’t look bad. There just was no great way out of it.”

In terms of athletes touching their coaches, many athletes explained a lack of enacting touch as a result of the coach being an authority figure. Male coaches, in particular, commented on the uncomfortable feeling associated with being frequently touched by an athlete of the opposite sex. A male tennis coach had this to say: “I think it becomes painfully obvious to everyone but the girl that’s touching you that this is getting a little weird. Players start to seriously get jealous, and then you get all worried that they’ll think you’re playing favourites. You feel a little trapped.” The other male coach agreed, and commented on how frequent touch from female athletes felt distinctly uncomfortable at times.

Female coaches expressed a concern for their male assistants working with female athletes, stressing the need to touch professionally. Multiple phrases where

thrown out by coaches concerning what onlookers might think of their touching athletes, such as: "I'm always conscious of people watching", "I don't want people to think anything", "you have to know you're always being watched", "some things just look bad", and "you have to be careful with how you touch 'cause someone might see it the wrong way."

In this study, social norms regarding touch rested most heavily on the shoulders of coaches, who initiated touch more often than athletes did. Athletes, on the other hand, were cognizant of touch norms, but less expressive regarding how norms limited their touch. If anything, the opposite was true for female athletes, whereby social norms pushed them to initiate or reciprocate more touch.

In summary, athlete-coach touch generally tended to increase at major events when emotions and tensions ran high. Touch involved showing appreciation, instructing, comforting, and giving attention, and affected perceptions of relationships. Societal factors, such as gender, relational stage, what the audience and parents may think, and what other athletes think, appeared to mediate touch behaviours (for instance, play-fighting was enacted only by same-sex coaches and athletes).

#### Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study do not represent a complete picture of how touch is used or perceived in athletics; rather, they reflect common themes expressed by one group of college coaches and athletes. The study

encapsulated the sports of tennis, swimming, track and field, cheerleading and basketball. Although a study done by Fasting, Brackenridge, and Sundgot-Borgen (2004) showed that the prevalence of sexual harassment across 56 different sports was not affected by sport type and/or attire, it may be possible that various sports have unique touch cultures that mediate their behaviours. For example, it is not uncommon for cheerleading coaches working on stunts to have their hands on typically inappropriate parts of athletes' bodies. More research may thus be needed to examine sport-specific touch cultures. Quantitative research regarding how different kinds of touch are perceived between coaches and athletes may also prove useful in exploring touch in athletics, and help to cast a more generalizable net.

This study collected and analyzed athletes' and coaches' narratives of personal, often subtle, experiences of touch in an attempt to generate "universally" relatable descriptions of what it is like to touch and be touched in an athletic environment. Athlete-coach touch generally tended to increase at major events when emotions and tensions ran high. Touch involved the exchange of relational and emotional messages, and societal factors, such as gender, mediated the kind and frequency of touch communication between coaches and athletes. This study illustrates how touch is enacted in a microcosmic athletic culture. While not representative of the athletic culture as a whole, the findings generated by this microcosmic culture represent a first step towards describing how touch is perceived and enacted by athletes and coaches.

#### About the Authors



Michael J. Miller is a graduate instructor in the Communication Department at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. In addition, he is a research assistant in the School of Education, exploring ways to bridge learning and technology. Before proceeding to UW-Stevens Point, Michael was a teaching assistant and research assistant in the Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he investigated athlete-coach motivation and personalities.

Noah Franken is a graduate instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the Communication Department. His current work revolves around intrapersonal communication, and he has embarked on several lines of inquiry concerning inner dialogue and perceptions associated with suicidal adults.

Kit Kiefer is a graduate student in the Communication Department at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has written nine books on subjects related to popular culture and currently writes on travel for *The New York Times*.

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](http://www.rhodes.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

### References

- Andersen, P. A. (1999). *Nonverbal communication: Forms and functions*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Berscheid, E., Snyder, M., & Omoto, A. M. (1989). Issues in studying close relationships: Conceptualising and measuring closeness. In C. Hendric (Ed.), *Close relationships: Vol. 10. Review of personality and social psychology* (pp. 63–91). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Burgoon, J. K. (1991). Relational message interpretations of touch, conversational distance, and posture. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 15(4), 233–259.
- Burgoon, J. K., Buller, D. B., & Woodall, W. G. (1996). *Nonverbal communication: The unspoken dialogue* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hale, J. L. (1987). Validation and measurement of the fundamental themes of relational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 54(1), 19–41.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Walther, J. B. (1990). Nonverbal expectancies and evaluative consequences of violations. *Human Communication Research*, 17(2), 232–265.
- Burgoon, J. K., Walther, J. B., & Baesler, E. J. (1992). Interpretations, evaluations, and consequences of interpersonal touch. *Human Communication Research*, 19(2), 237–263.
- Chelladurai, P. (1984). Discrepancy between preferences and perceptions of leadership behaviour and satisfaction of athletes in varying sports. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 6(1), 27–41.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duck, S. (1994). *Meaningful relationships: Talking, sense, and relating*. London, UK: Sage.
- Fasting, K., Brackenridge, C., & Sundgot-Borgen, J. (2004). Prevalence of sexual harassment among Norwegian female elite athletes in relation to sport type. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 39(4), 373–386.
- Fisher, J. D., Rytting, M., & Heslin, R. (1976). Hands touching hands: Affective and evaluative effects of an interpersonal touch. *Sociometry*, 39(4), 416–421.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., & Kininmonth, L. (1991). Interaction in close relationships and social cognition. In G. J. O. Fletcher & F. D. Fincham (Eds.), *Cognition in close relationships* (pp. 235–255). London: Erlbaum.
- Floyd, K., & Voloudakis, M. (1999). Affectionate behaviour in adult platonic friendships: Interpreting and evaluating expectancy violations. *Human Communications Research*, 25(3), 341–369.
- Frank, L. K. (1957). Tactile communication. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 56, 209–255.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Andersen, P. A. (1991). The waxing and waning of relational intimacy: Touch as a function of relational stage, gender and touch avoidance. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8(2), 147–165.
- Henley, N. M., & Harmon, S. (1985). The nonverbal semantics of power and gender: A perceptual study. In S. L. Ellyson & J. F. Dovidio (Eds.), *Power, dominance, and nonverbal behaviour* (pp. 151–164). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Hertenstein, M., Verkamp, J., Kerestes, A., & Holmes, R. (2006). The communicative functions of touch in humans, nonhuman primates, and rats: A review and synthesis of empirical research. *Genetic, Social and General Psychology Monographs*, 132(1), 5–94.

---

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](http://www.rhodes.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

- Hinde, R. A. (1997). *Relationships: A dialectical perspective*. London, UK: Psychology Press.
- Holroyd, C. (2001). Phenomenological research method, design and procedure: A phenomenological investigation of the phenomenon of being-in-community as experienced by two individuals who have participated in a community building workshop. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 1(1), 1-12. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from <http://www.ipjp.org>
- Johnson, K. L., & Edwards, R. (1991). The effects of gender and type of romantic touch on perceptions of relational commitment. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 15(1), 43–55.
- Jowett, S. (2006). Interpersonal and structural features of Greek coach-athlete dyads performing in individual sports. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 18(1), 69–81.
- Jowett, S., & Clark-Carter, D. (2006). Perceptions of empathic accuracy and assumed similarity in the coach-athlete relationship. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(3), 617-637.
- Jowett, S., & Cockerill, I. M. (2002). Incompatibility in the coach–athlete relationship. In I. M. Cockerill (Ed.), *Solutions in sport psychology* (pp. 16–31). London, UK: Thomson Learning.
- Jowett, S., & Meek, G. A. (2000). The coach–athlete relationship in married couples: An exploratory content analysis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14(2), 157–175.
- Jowett, S., & Ntoumanis, N. (2003). The *Greek Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire* (GrCART-Q): Scale development and validation. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 34(2), 101–124.
- Jowett, S., & Ntoumanis, N. (2004). The *Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire* (CART-Q): Development and initial validation. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 14(4), 245–257.
- Jowett, S., Paull, G., Pensgaard, A. M., Hoegma, P., & Riise, H. (2005). Coach–athlete relationship. In J. Taylor & G. S. Wilson (Eds.), *Applying sport psychology: Four perspectives* (pp. 153-170). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Jowett, S., & Timson-Katchis, M. (2005). Social networks in the sport context: The influences of parents on the coach-athlete relationship. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19(3), 267–287.
- Kelley, H. H., Berscheid, E., Christensen, A., Harvey, H. H., Huston, T. L., Levinger, G., McClintock, E., Peplau, L. A., & Peterson, D. R. (Eds.). (1983). *Close relationships*. New York: Freeman.
- Kenny, D. A. (1994). *Interpersonal perception: A social relations analysis*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kiesler, D. J. (1997). *Contemporary interpersonal theory research and personality, psychopathology and psychotherapy*. New York: Wiley.
- Krauchek, V., & Ranson, G. (1999). Playing by the rules of the game: Women’s experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment in sport. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 36, Special Issue, 585-600.
- Laing, R. D., Phillipson, H., & Lee, A. R. (1966). *Interpersonal perception: A theory and a method of research*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lee, J., & Guerrero, L. (2001). Types of touch in cross-sex relationships between co-workers: Perceptions of relational and emotional messages, inappropriateness, and sexual harassment. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 29(3), 197-220.
- Libet, B., Wright, E. W., Feinstein, B., & Pearl, D. K. (1979). Subjective referral of the timing for a conscious sensory experience: A functional role for the somatosensory specific projection system in man. *Brain*, 102(1), 193-224.
- Lyle, J. (1999). Coaching philosophy and coaching behaviour. In N. Cross & J. Lyle (Eds.), *The coaching process*:

---

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](http://www.rhodes.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

*Principles and practice for sport* (pp. 25–46). Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heineman.

- Major, B., & Helsin, R. (1982). Perceptions of cross-sex and same-sex nonreciprocal touch: It is better to give than to receive. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 6(3), 148–162.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). New York: Humanities Press. (Original work published 1945)
- Mooney, B., & Norris, D. (2007). Merleau-Ponty on human motility and Libet's paradox. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7(1), 1-9. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from <http://www.ipjp.org>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Muir, D. (2002). Adult communications with infants through touch: The forgotten sense. *Human Development*, 45(2), 95-99.
- Pisano, M. D., Wall, S. M., & Foster, A. (1986). Perceptions of nonreciprocal touch in romantic relationships. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 10(1), 29-40.
- Poczwardowski, A., Barott, J. E., & Henschen, K. P. (2002). The athlete and coach: Their relationship and its meaning. Results of an interpretive study. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 33(1), 116–140.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). New York: Plenum.
- Reynolds, J. (2005). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). *The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved August 22, 2007, from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/merleau>
- Rusbult, C. E., & Buunk, B. P. (1993). Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 175–204.
- Smith, R. E., Zane, N. W. S., Smoll, F. L., & Coppel, D. B. (1983). Behavioural assessment in youth sports: Coaching behaviours and children's attitudes. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 15(3), 208–214.
- Thayer, S. (1986). History and strategies of research on social touch. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 10(1), 12–27.
- Van Manen, M. (2002). *Inquiry: Phenomenological inquiry*. Retrieved February 25, 2007, from <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/1.html>
- Wylleman, P. (2000). Interpersonal relationships in sport: Uncharted territory in sport psychology research. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 31, 555–572.