Ethical club climate and coaching style: Unveiling their role in coach-perpetrated psychological abuse of gymnasts

Abstract

Athlete wellbeing and safety is of central importance to the field of sport management. Despite the growing attention of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners on interpersonal violence in sport, the issue remains prevalent. The most occurring form of interpersonal violence – coach-perpetrated psychological abuse of athletes – remains understudied. This gap was addressed in this study by exploring the dynamic interplay between individual coaching behaviors and organizational club characteristics in sub-elite level gymnastics in Flanders (Belgium). The findings indicate a relationship between coaching style, club climate and psychological abuse perpetrated by coaches. Gymnasts that perceived their coaches as more controlling, and/or the club climate as unethical also experienced more psychological abuse by their coaches. Furthermore, the club climate was found to moderate the relation between controlling coaching and psychological abuse, indicating the importance of taking an organizational and management lens to the issue of interpersonal violence in sport.

Key words: Interpersonal violence, gymnastics, ethical climate, psychological abuse, controlling coaching, ethics management

Introduction

Sport constitutes a context in which harassment and abuse, referred to as interpersonal violence in scientific literature, is highly prevalent (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Parent & Fortier; 2017; Vertommen et al., 2022). Prominent cases of interpersonal violence against athletes worldwide have shocked sports policy makers, the media, and the general public. There are four forms of interpersonal violence in sport: i.e., psychological, physical, sexual violence, and neglect (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Recent studies have revealed worrying prevalence rates for all forms. For example, Hartill et al. (2023) studied interpersonal violence against children in sport (n =10302) in six European countries. They reported psychological violence rates of 65 %, physical violence rates of 44 %, and sexual violence rates of 20 %. Interpersonal violence occurs across all sports, and at all levels, with increasing risk at the elite level, for child athletes, athletes with a disability, and those who identify as LGBTQ+1.

In the sport literature, sexual violence has received considerable attention since the late 1980s (Mountjoy et al., 2016). More recently, literature emerged on the issue of psychological violence – defined as a pattern of deliberate, prolonged, repeated non-contact behaviors within a power differentiated relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). This is considered the most prevalent form of interpersonal violence (Vertommen et al., 2016), which paves the way for other types of violence (Prewitt-White, 2019). When compared to more visible forms that can, for instance, leave physical marks on the body, psychological violence is subject to greater discussion and interpretation. Indeed, qualitative studies with coaches (Jacobs et al., 2017), athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), and other stakeholders (Kerr & Stirling, 2012) made clear that psychological violence is justified and normalized in some cases (e.g., “humiliating athletes is meant to keep them sharp”). This study addresses some of the knowledge gaps that remain around psychological violence, hampering adequate safeguarding in practice.

Although many stakeholders can be the perpetrators, a substantial proportion of interpersonal violence is perpetrated by coaches (Vertommen et al., 2016). If the coach is the perpetrator, the literature refers to "abuse" given this relationship implies a power imbalance (Krug et al., 2002). In their study on interpersonal violence in organized elite sport, Ohlert et al. (2021) found that 24% of the athletes (n=1,665) in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany had experienced interpersonal violence by their coach, with the highest numbers for psychological abuse. In qualitative studies, (former) elite athletes describe a situation where the coach gradually exerts more control over them. Coaches employ coercive, threatening, and authoritarian means to impose their ideas on athletes while ignoring or dismissing the latter's perspectives and feelings (Hodge and Lonsdale, 2011). This study adds to existing research by studying how such control and pressure by coaches relates to psychological abuse in a large sample of youth athletes.

Looking beyond the bad apple, the role played by other people, organizations, and institutions in concealing abuse has moved sharply into focus the last couple of years, especially in the field of sport management. As one lawyer who represented some of Nassar's victims claimed, "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one" (Kerr & Stirling, 2019, p.10). Taking an organizational lens to study coach-perpetrated psychological abuse, we suggest that club climate can facilitate or hamper abusive coach behavior. Climate has been defined as "the shared meaning organizational members attach to the events, policies, practices, and procedures they experience and the behaviors they see being rewarded, supported, and expected" (Ehrhart et al., 2014, p. 69). Although the literature on climate in general business organizations is mature (Newman et al., 2017), knowledge on the role of an (un)ethical climate in sport organizations is still largely lacking (Burton et al., 2017; Constandt et al., 2018). Specifically, some gaps remain to be addressed concerning the relationship between club climate, coaching style, and interpersonal violence. We assume that psychological abuse by

coaches is more likely to occur in organizations that have an unethical climate. Innovative scientific insights on the role of club climate can/will hold a broader set of club stakeholders accountable. By depicting both informal and formal organizational factors contributing to an ethical context, this study calls upon club leaders and managers to take on their responsibility in developing and maintaining safe(r) environments.

The research question we address is the following: How are coaching style and ethical club climate related to psychological abuse by coaches in sport clubs? Once there is a better understanding of (the interaction between) individual (i.e., coaching style) and organizational (i.e., ethical club climate) determinants of psychological abuse, we can start building and promoting safe(r) sporting environments, in which athletes are protected from harm.

Literature review

Interpersonal violence towards athletes

Interpersonal violence is a pressing issue in sport and athletes worldwide are increasingly raising attention for this problem. In the WHO's definition, violence is conceptualized as the intentional, threatened, or actual use of either physical force or power that is likely to result in "injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 1084). This conceptualization contains several types of violence and the sport literature identifies and discusses four types in particular. Physical abuse refers to the experience of a non-accidental trauma or physical injury which harms the athlete (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Sexual abuse is defined as any conduct of a sexual nature, where consent is not or cannot be given (Taillieu et al., 2016). Definitions refer to psychological abuse and emotional abuse interchangeably. In line with Mountjoy et al. (2016), we refer to psychological abuse recognizing that the psyche consists of more than emotions. It also contains cognitions, values, and beliefs about oneself and the world. Psychological abuse includes neglect, which involves

intentionally ignoring an individual's needs, nurturing, and/or well-being, and thereby failing to protect it from exposure to danger (Mountjoy et al., 2016, p. 1021).

The possible detrimental impact of interpersonal violence is well-evidenced. Experiencing interpersonal violence has been linked to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorder, as well as to reduced physical health and quality of life (Parent & Fortier, 2018). Despite these detrimental consequences, research shows high prevalence rates of interpersonal violence in sport (Pankowiak et al., 2023; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021). The exact prevalence of interpersonal violence is difficult to determine due to under-reporting and different operationalizations of the definition (Marsollier et al., 2021; Vertommen & Parent, 2020). However, experts agree on the disturbing proportions this phenomenon has reached (Bermon et al., 2021; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016).

In terms of understanding the emergence, risk factors, enabling factors, antecedents and consequences of interpersonal violence in sport, scholarship has mainly focused on sexual harassment and abuse, especially against female athletes (Forsdike & O'Sullivan, 2022). Less scientific attention has been given to the other – more prevailing – types (Prewitt-White, 2019). This study aims to generate novel insights on the determinants of psychological abuse in sport.

Coach-perpetrated psychological abuse

Many people in the athletes' entourage (i.e., staff, peer-athletes, parents) can be the perpetrators of psychological abuse, with coaches being an at-risk target group (Vertommen et al., 2022). There is often a power imbalance between the coach and the athlete. Imbalance can also exist among peers, but is more outspoken in the coach-athlete relationship, and is exacerbated in high performance sport (Fortier et al., 2020). In such environments, young athletes, often socialized into coach-perpetrated violence, spend substantial time with their coach and develop a close coach-athlete relationship. The coach decides on selections, installing loyalty and subordination, and might take control over the athletes' lives (diet, weight, sleep,

social relationships, etc.) (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Smits et al., 2017; Stirling et al., 2011). They even take over the controlling role of parents sometimes, leaving the young athlete in an even more vulnerable position (Fortier et al., 2020).

Research with (former) elite athletes depicts a process where the coach gradually exerts more control over them, forcing them to act in specific, prescribed ways and push them beyond their limits (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2014). This description of coaches' style, stemming from qualitative evidence, aligns very well with what is described in the literature as a controlling style of coaching (Bartholomew, 2010). A controlling coaching style expresses itself in various ways, by applying 1) intimidation techniques (e.g., humiliating the athlete), 2) a controlling use of rewards (e.g., promise rewards when athletes will push through), 3) excessive personal control (e.g., interfering with the athlete's personal life choices), 4) negative conditional regard (e.g., ignoring an athlete who failed in the coaches eye) (Bartholomew et al., 2011). Sport management scholars, amongst others, have shown that controlling coaching styles undermine autonomy and intrinsic motivation, leading to decreased athlete performance, health, and well-being (e.g., Allen & Shaw 2009; Allen, & Bartle, 2014; Quested & Duda, 2010). The question here is whether a controlling coaching style – which is highly prevalent in high performance sport (Haerens et al., 2018) – relates to worse, namely psychological abuse.

Coaching style has never been empirically linked to psychological abuse in quantitative studies. Moreover, studies on coaching style are mostly retrospective and typically involve small samples of adult (ex-)elite-level athletes (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Therefore, findings are not convincing enough to rule out skepticism of coaches and managers alike regarding the risks and downsides of this demotivating coach-leadership style. A first objective of this study is to integrate and scale up research on coaching style and psychological abuse by studying whether controlling coaching relates to psychological abuse in a large sample of youth athletes.

Beyond the bad apple: The role of the organization

Acts of violence are not just individual acts committed by perpetrators against victims. Instead, each case that comes to light unravels systemic and organizational issues that enable interpersonal violence to occur in sport spaces. From an institutional perspective, sport is often considered an environment where violent or abnormal behavior is considered necessary to achieve victory or increase competitiveness (Gammelsæter, 2021). The winning-at-all-cost culture is cited as a factor contributing to the phenomenon of violence against athletes (David, 2005). The remuneration of coaches, clubs, and federations is still largely depending on winning medals. This environment in which excessive training, early specialization, and isolation is allowed or stimulated, may increase the risk for coaches to perpetrate and athletes to experience abuse (Fortier et al., 2020). Some countries, cognizant of such at-risk environments, have created policies that ensure protection from interpersonal violence (Jacobs et al., 2017). More broadly, collaborations between different organizations and countries have created movements (e.g., Safe Sport movement) towards a better future (Wilson et al., 2022).

At the organizational level, both informal and formal factors can facilitate or hamper coach-perpetrated psychological abuse (Kaptein, 2020). Regarding informal factors, Roberts et al. (2020) note that organizational tolerance and conformity to dominant values (i.e., high performance, expertise, and masculinity) which fail to prioritize athlete well-being are most often associated with psychological abuse. Unethical organizational norms, as well as instrumental beliefs within sport clubs can socialize coaches into controlling coaching roles or abusive practices, and athletes into coping with performance values (e.g., endure pain, humiliation, make sacrifices) (e.g., Morbée et al., 2020). Management and directors, like many coaches, are convinced that only a controlling coaching style can produce top-level sporting results (i.e., "no pain, no gain"). The fact that some athletes achieve top results despite the

pressure and/or harmful coaching styles, strengthens the coach and management in their belief that this is the only path to success.

With regards to formal ethics management factors, scholars addressed the issues of inadequate monitoring of staff, as well as an absence of background checks during recruitment, underutilization of ethical codes, and a lack of ethics training and structures to discuss or report cases of violence in sport organizations (Parent & Fortier, 2018). Managers and/or board members are important social agents to take actions to stop or mitigate interpersonal violence upon witnessing it (i.e., positive bystander behavior) (Rothman et al., 2019). However, they often turn a blind eye, normalizing psychological abuse. In many cases, they hardly question coaching styles and are insufficiently aware of alternative approaches that can lead to both sport success and athlete well-being.

Ethical climate in (sport) organizations

Addressing the call of Kavanagh et al., (2020) and Forsdike and Fullagar (2021) for sport management scholars to take an organizational lens to study interpersonal violence, this study builds on the well-theorized concept of ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1987). Ethical climate is defined as "the shared perception of what is correct behavior and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization" (Victor & Cullen, 1987: 51). This definition is widely used to link collective moral reasoning to behavior (Ehrhart & Schneider, 2016).

Building on the seminal work of Victor and Cullen (1987), Arnaud (2006, 2010) states that ethical climate in an organization results from a collective moral reasoning process consisting of four dimensions or stages. First, moral sensitivity represents the presence of moral awareness and empathic concern (Arnaud, 2010). Applied to interpersonal violence in sport, moral sensitivity is present when members are aware that something wrong is happening and that people are hurt. Second, moral judgement concerns using internalized ethical frameworks to judge situations. Here, for example, members of a sport club would think about and actually

label instances of interpersonal violence as such. Third, moral motivation is about the prioritization of moral values over other values when planning to act. Put differently, moral values, such as honesty and inclusion, are prioritized over other values such as sports success or power (Arnaud 2010). Fourth and finally, moral character relates to the final cognitive stage of moral reasoning just before the implementation of ethical values when acting (Arnaud 2010). In this stage, self-responsibility is important (Arnaud 2006, 2010). In our example, moral character is present when club members overcome feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety for potential retaliation, by deciding to actually report instances of interpersonal violence. Unethical behavior occurs when at least one of these stages fails (Romand et al., 2009).

Scholarship on ethical climate in the general management context has demonstrated that an organization's ethical climate is associated with enhancing the ethical values of its employees (Deshpande & Joseph, 2009), their organizational commitment (Tsai & Huang, 2008), turnover intentions (Mulki et al., 2008), job satisfaction (Elçi & Alpkan, 2009), and even performance (Friend et al., 2020). An organizational ethical climate indirectly supports ethical behavior, through processes of moral emotions and moral efficacy (Arnaud & Schminke, 2012).

Contrarily, it is clear that an unethical climate can socialize individuals into unethical behavior, such as (psychological) abuse. Aquino and Lamertz (2004), for instance, found that the probability of workplace abuse increases when organizations have climates supporting "the belief that punishments and the exercise of coercive power are functional for motivating people" (p. 1030). Bulutlar and Oz's (2009) study showed that the risk for bullying increases in climates where egoism and self-interest direct behavior.

Compared to the general management context, research on ethical climate in sport management is still limited (Burton et al., 2017), especially in relation to interpersonal violence. Much research on psychological abuse in sport has centered around coach-created motivational climate (see Duda & Appleton, 2016, Smith et al., 2007, Smoll et al., 2007). Yet, a broader

view on climate is needed. A second objective of this study is, therefore, to assess the role of the ethical climate in preventing or amplifying coach-perpetrated psychological abuse.

In addition to the informal ethical context of the club (i.e., ethical climate), this study also looks at the formal ethical context of the club (Kaptein, 2020). Sport authorities have made the implementation of ethical codes and the appointment of integrity/safeguarding officers mandatory in Flemish sport federations. In turn, several federations have prescribed similar regulations to their affiliated clubs. However, questions remain to be answered regarding the presence, operationalization, and awareness of such management controls and whether they can contribute to a safer club environment, free from abuse.

A third and major aim of this study, is to explore the possible moderating role of ethical climate on the relationship between coaching style and psychological abuse. Coaches are considered important leaders and role models in the club (Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Burton et al., 2017; Constandt et al., 2018), however, they conform to the existing ethical norms and standards within the club or internalize the values that are promoted within the club. Over time, these values can shape behaviors like decision-making and coaching style. When club managers or directors do not explicitly disapprove controlling coaching styles, they implicitly contribute to an unethical climate, which can pave the way for psychological abuse. Once we have a better understanding of the individual and organizational determinants of psychological abuse, and the dynamic interplay between them, the challenge becomes to help individuals and organizations to promote safe sporting environments, in which athletes are protected from harm.

Method

Study context

Gymnastics in Flanders was selected as a context for our study for several reasons. First, high performance gymnastics (i.e., sub-elite and elite level) is recognized for having some risk factors for psychological abuse (Greither & Ohlert, 2023). It is marked by high training load,

both in intensity and training hours, competition pressure, and early specialization implying power imbalanced relationships between adult coaches and young children (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). The latter are often isolated from their parents and restrained from a normal social life.

Second, research and practice have evidenced the susceptibility of the sport to abuse in Flanders and the rest of the world (Roberts & Quigley, 2023, Smits et al., 2017). The most notable case of abuse in gymnastics is the Larry Nasser case in the US in which a team doctor abused 256 athletes for decades, without governing bodies properly detecting or stopping it (Edelman & Pacella, 2019; Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022). Other scientific studies in the Netherlands (Smits et al., 2017), Canada (Kerr et al., 2020), and Australia (Osborne et al., 2023; Roberts & Quigley, 2023; Seanor et al., 2023), as well as reports in Australia (Change the Routine, 2021) and England (Whyte Review, 2022), confirm the oftentimes toxic environment in gymnastics (Osborne et al., 2023). Alliances of (youth) gymnasts worldwide, are advocating towards a cultural change, with more emphasis on athlete welfare, less controlling and abusive coaching behavior, and safer environments (e.g., 'gymnasts for change' movement).

Third, gymnastics in Flanders shows some specific features when it comes to governance. Gymnastics is organized through a structure consisting of autonomous clubs ran by volunteers. Anyone can start a club and offer programs for those who wish to perform at the (inter)national level. Clubs have limited resources, their leadership is embedded in amateur ideologies, and they are not obliged to have an integrity officer or ethical code. In turn, the gymnastics federation is also an independent body, ruling according to its own protected regulatory regimes. At the time of data-collection, safeguarding measures were limited. For example, there was no independent safeguarding officer, athlete commission, or separate legal entity for handling cases. These structures leave members (e.g., athletes and coaches) in more vulnerable positions for abuse compared to, for instance, employees in private companies (Kerr & Barker-Ruchti, 2014; Smith & Stewart, 2013).

Study sample and data collection

Gymnasts at the highest competition level (i.e., level A and B) from all disciplines included in the Flemish Gymnastics Federation (i.e., artistic gymnastics, acrobatic gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, power tumbling, trampoline, and rope skipping) were recruited via convenience sampling. Active and recently retired gymnasts between 14 and 30 years old were targeted. This age range was chosen as some terminology was deemed inappropriate for minors under 14 and the Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire (Vertommen et al., 2021), used in this study, is valid from the age of 14 years on. A cut-off of 30 years old was set as maximum age. The sport has evolved over the last couple of years and it is therefore possible that the experiences of older/former gymnasts are different compared to younger ones. Setting the cut off at 30 years old assumed that most gymnasts would fall under the same ethical code. Finally, most gymnasts of 30 years old have retired quite some years ago, and therefore, the accuracy of the answers to retrospective questions is probably at its limit.

Recruitment was realized through the authors' networks and the Federation's and other sport bodies' communication channels, who shared the link to the online questionnaire. To enhance reach, coaches, clubs and role models (e.g., retired sub-elite gymnasts) were contacted to use their communication platforms. We also visited 3 competition events in several provinces of Flanders to invite gymnasts to participate in the study. In total, 1095 participants provided online informed consent to take part in this study. Of these 1095 gymnasts, nine were excluded as they were under the age of 14, and one outlier (43 years old) was left out because of age. Last, 501 gymnasts were excluded because they did not fill out the full questionnaire which precluded an examination of the hypotheses. This resulted in a final sample of 594 athletes (92.1% female, Mage = 21.78 ± 4.05). The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the department Psychology and Educational Sciences at Ghent University. Contact information of the researchers, the federation's safeguarding officer and independent

victim counselling hotlines were added at the beginning and end of the questionnaire to deal with safeguarding concerns and triggers while participating in the survey.

Measures

An online survey was developed containing mainly closed questions. Before starting the questionnaire, informed consent was given by each participant. Parents or legal representatives of participants younger than 18 years old, gave their informed consent prior to the child's participation in the survey. This study was part of a bigger project for which gymnasts filled out a larger survey. In total, the online survey comprised nine parts. Relevant to the current study, athletes first filled out some socio-demographic questions such as the athletes' age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Next, sport-specific questions (e.g., competition level, years of experience, gymnastics discipline) were asked. Then, the following variables were assessed: (a) interpersonal violence in sports, (b) controlling coaching style, (c) ethical climate, and (d) outcomes of controlling coaching and interpersonal violence such as self-esteem and competitive anxiety. The latter part also contained questions on the presence and awareness of an integrity officer and an ethical code in the club. The current study focuses on controlling coaching and ethical climate as antecedents of psychological abuse specifically. The outcomes of controlling coaching and interpersonal violence are reported in a separate manuscript (Laureys et al., submitted). Internal consistency of these three questionnaires were tested with Cronbach's Alpha and can be found in Table 1.

An open question was included at the end of the survey in order to leave room for respondents to comment on their experiences. Specifically, we questioned how respondents experienced filling out the survey and asked whether they wanted to share some thoughts about their experiences/feelings.

Psychological abuse

We drew from the *Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire (VTAQ)* of Parent et al. (2019) to assess interpersonal violence. The *VTAQ* is a self-report instrument that questions all types of interpersonal violence (i.e., psychological-neglect, instrumental, physical, and sexual) perpetrated by peer athletes, coaches and parents in the sports context. For this specific study, psychological abuse was measured using the 16 items of the coach-perpetrator subscale of the *VTAQ* (Parent et al., 2019). Specifically, the validated Dutch version of the *VTAQ* was used (Vertommen et al., 2021). First, the gymnasts read the following instructions: "The following questions are about things you may have experienced in your sport, gymnastics. It could be about events during training, competitions, or other club activities (such as meetings, training camps, or team outings), from the moment you started your discipline until now", which was then followed by the stem: "In the context of your sport, has a coach…". After the stem, the gymnasts responded to 16 items (e.g., "Offended, humiliated, or ridiculed you") on a 4-point Likert scale ranging (1) *Never*, (2) *Seldom: one or two times*, (3) *Sometimes: three to ten times*, to (4) *Often: more than 10 times*. Mean scores were calculated based on the mean frequency score (1 = never, 2 = one or two times, 3 = three to ten times, 4 = more than ten times), for all items in the subscale. As a result, scale scores ranged from 1 to 4.

Controlling coaching style

The perceived controlling style was measured through the *Controlling Coach Behaviors Scale (CCBS)* (Bartholomew et al., 2010). This questionnaire consists of 15 items, related to four subscales; intimidation (i.e., humiliating and belittling sport participants), controlling use of rewards (i.e., pushing sport participants to engage, persevere, and perform well via material rewards), excessive personal control (i.e., interfering with sport participants' activities not directly linked to sports) and negative conditional regard (i.e., withholding attention and appreciation if sport participants fail to meet expectations). After the stem (i.e., "Indicate what is applicable to the head coach under whom you trained during the peak of your gymnastics

career."), the 15 items (e.g., "My coach supports me less when I don't train and perform well') were rated by the gymnasts on a 7-point Likert scale with (1) *Totally not agree*, (4) *Neutral,* and (7) *Totally agree*. For the sake of the study, an overall controlling coaching style score was made (mean score of all items).

Club climate (informal ethics context)

The club climate was measured using the 19-item *Ethical Climate Index (ECI)* Short Form developed by Arnaud (2010). The scale was designed and validated to assess ethical climate. The questionnaire was adapted to the sports context. Although club ethical climate is a collective measure that ideally contains multi-informant data gathered at different levels, we focused on athlete-perceived ethical climate on an individual level of analysis. This approach is in line with Burton et al. (2017) and Constandt et al. (2018), who argued that individual perceptions of a sport organization's ethical climate are also relevant to consider as they might directly guide individual behaviors. The ECI contains 19 items in four subscales: Collective moral sensitivity (e.g., "In general, people (fellow gymnasts, coaches, board, volunteers) in my gymnastics club feel compassion when they see someone being treated unfairly or unjustly."), Collective moral judgement containing items regarding 'focus on others' (e.g., "People (fellow gymnasts, coaches, management, volunteers) in my gymnastics club have a strong sense of responsibility to society and humanity.") as well as items regarding 'focus on self' (e.g., "In my gymnastics club, obtaining personal benefit is the primary concern of individuals (fellow gymnasts, coaches, management, volunteers).", Collective moral motivation (e.g., "In my gymnastics club, power is more important than fairness."), and Collective moral character (e.g., "People (fellow gymnasts, coaches, management, volunteers,) in my gymnastics club believe that it is better to take responsibility for what they do wrong."). The items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale , ranging from (1) *Totally not agree*, (3) *Neutral,* to (5) *Totally agree*. The mean score of all items was calculated. The scores on the items belonging to the subscales

Collective moral judgement focus on self and Collective moral motivation were inverted, as a higher scored related to a lower ethical climate.

Safeguarding procedures (formal ethics context)

Two questions were included on whether the gymnasts knew about the existence of a code of conduct and a safeguarding officer in their club. The questions were as follows: "Is there an ethical code present in your club?" and "Is there a safeguarding officer in your club?". Both questions had three answer possibilities: "Yes", "No", and "I don't know". As the concept of a safeguarding officer is quite recent in Flanders (and gymnastics clubs are not yet obliged to have an integrity officer), only the responses of currently active gymnasts were considered.

Data analysis

To check for possible multicollinearity between controlling coaching and psychological abuse, variation inflation factor (VIF) scores were calculated. As the questionnaires of both controlling coaching (Bartholomew et al., 2010) and coach-perpetrated psychological abuse (Vertommen et al., 2021) are validated, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to study overlap in content. To examine the direct associations between a controlling coaching style and club climate on the one hand, and psychological abuse on the other hand (aim 1 and 2), we estimated two separate regression models. Next, we examined whether the club climate played a moderating role in the associations between controlling coaching and psychological abuse (aim 3), by estimating a moderation pathway model. If this association was significant, a post hoc test looking at the level of ethical climate (-1SD, mean, +1SD, in other words poor, average, good) was conducted.

To determine whether the study variables differed as a function of athletes' gender (male vs female) and their status (still active in gymnastics vs retired), a one-way MANOVA was performed, with the study variables (perceived controlling coaching, club climate, and psychological abuse) as dependent variables and with the athletes' gender or status as fixed

391 factors. Correlations were used to assess the relationship between athletes' age and the weekly
392 training hours and the three study variables. Based on these analyses, each of the pathway
393 models was controlled for possible relevant covariates such as gymnasts' age, gender, number
394 of training hours, and status. To evaluate the model fit of the moderation pathway model,
395 Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Squared Error Approximation (RMSEA), the
396 Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) were
397 used. A good fit is indicated by cut-off values close to .95 for CFI and TLI, close to .06 for
398 RMSEA, and close to .08 for SRMR (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The results were interpreted as
399 significant when $p < .05$. All models were estimated by means of path analyses in Lavaan (R).
400 Numerous comments, remarks, and experiences were shared by participants (n=233) at
401 the end of the survey. Many of these comments were related to coaching style, psychological
402 abuse, and ethical climate, and the relationship between these variables, hence, complementary
403 to the quantitative analysis. Therefore, the authors decided to do a descriptive analysis and
404 inductive coding of the open question in NVIVO. 137 comments were directly related to the
405 research topic, which we coded into bad, good, and mixed experiences. Codes were developed
406 accordingly, adding the following sub codes; "controlling coaching style", "psychological
407 abuse by coaches" (i.e., bad experiences), "supportive coaching style", "positive change" (i.e.,
408 positive experiences), and "confronting/eye opening to fill out the survey", "looking back at it
409 now…", "double feelings/experiences", "part of the game" (i.e., mixed experiences). The
410 purpose of these ancillary analyses was to gain deeper insight into the quantitative findings and
411 to illustrate them with concrete examples.

412 **Results**

413 **Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses**

414 The majority (92.1%) of the sample was female. 32.2% of the sample was still actively
415 competing in competitions, of which 42.9% in the highest level (A) and 53.4% in the second

highest level (B). Of the gymnasts that did not do any competitions, 68.5% participated on A-level, compared to 31.5% on B-level. 84.9% of the gymnasts experienced some form of coach-perpetrated psychological abuse (see Laureys et al., submitted).

The mean standard deviations, Cronbach's Alfa (α), and the correlations between the study variables can be found in Table 1. The VIF-scores of 1.330 show that there is no multicollinearity between controlling coaching and psychological abuse. A five-factor CFA-model, loading VTAQ-items of psychological abuse onto one factor and the items of the CCBS onto four factors (see Supplementary Figure 1). The model fit was acceptable (fit indices: CFI =.810, TLI = .791, RMSEA = .095, SRMR = .103), indicating the five-factor model with separate factors for the VTAQ and CCBS items could be used for further analyses. Only item 15 of the VTAQ (i.e., "Your coach asks you to limit your social contacts"), showed a better fit for the factor Excessive Personal Control in the CCBS instead of for psychological abuse. Because of this overlap, and to stay as close as possible to the original and validated questionnaires item 15 was excluded from further analyses.

No significant differences in perceived coach control, ethical climate, and psychological abuse were found between male and female gymnasts (see Supplementary Table 1). Looking at whether there is a difference between status (active vs retired), significant differences were found for controlling coaching, club climate and psychological abuse. Retired gymnasts perceived more controlling coaching, reported more psychological IV, and scored their club lower on ethical climate (see Supplementary Table 1). Gymnasts' age and number of training hours were significantly correlated to all study variables (see Table 1). Based on these results, we decided to control all our analyses for the gymnasts' age, training hours, and whether the athletes were still active.

Looking at the formal ethics factors, we assessed whether or not gymnasts were aware of safeguarding procedures in their club. 28.3% (n = 168) of the participants answered "Yes",

7.4% (n = 44) answered “No”, and 63.1% (n = 375) answered “I don’t know” to the presence of an ethical code in their club. One gymnast did not answer the question. Similar results were found for safeguarding officers, where 28.8% (n = 55) of the active gymnasts responded “Yes”, 20.4% (n = 39) responded "No”, 50.3% (n = 96) responded “I don’t know”. Again, one active gymnast did not answer the question.

Insert Table 1 about here

Direct relations between controlling coaching, club climate, and perceived psychological abuse

The first aim of this study was to examine the direct relation between a controlling coaching style and coach-perpetrated psychological abuse (see Table 2). Results showed that when the coach was perceived as more controlling, the gymnasts reported to have experienced more psychological abuse ($p < .001$). The second aim was to assess the impact of the informal ethical context. More specifically, the direct relation between club climate and coach-perpetrated psychological abuse was studied. Here, findings showed that a poor club climate (i.e., lower score) related to more self-reported psychological abuse ($p < .001$; see Table 2). Looking at the subscales of ethical climate, collective moral sensitivity, collective moral motivation, and collective moral character related negatively to psychological abuse ($p < .001$; see Table 2). Only the subscale collective moral judgement did not relate to psychological abuse ($p = .072$; see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

The moderating effect of the club climate

The third aim of the study was to examine the possible moderating effect of club climate on the relation between controlling coaching and psychological abuse. The interaction between controlling coaching and ethical climate was negatively related with psychological abuse ($p = .001$, see Table 3). A post hoc test showed that when the gymnasts perceived their coach to be

highly controlling that having a high club ethical climate (+1SD, $p < .001$), lowered the chances of having experienced psychological abuse compared to when they were in a club where the ethical climate was average (mean, $p < .001$) or poor (-1SD, $p < .001$) (see Figure 1). In other words, an ethical club climate plays a buffering role as the relationship between controlling coaching and psychological abuse became less strong in a club with a high ethical climate, whereas in a low or moderate ethical club climate the relationship between controlling coaching style and psychological abuse was stronger. This seems like a gradual effect, indicating that the more controlling the coach is, the more important the buffering role of an ethical climate can be.

Insert Table 3 and Figure 1 about here

The lived experiences of gymnasts in Flanders

Of all the answers to the open question, 24% were about positive experiences. Respondents referred to environments free of interpersonal violence or to a positive change in that direction. One athlete mentioned; "At times, I was shocked by the questions that were asked, because I never experienced such coaching behavior. I look back on my gymnastics career with great pleasure and pride. It has developed me into the person I am".

76% of the comments, however, related to negative or mixed experiences. The following example illustrates how a controlling coaching style related to psychological abuse; "It went from raising their voice to yelling, to hitting or pushing us off equipment. I never dared to report it, and I think members of my club would not have taken it seriously." The poor ethical climate, evidenced in this example by fear for reporting, will amplify unethical coach behavior. The lack of moral sensitivity, moral character, moral motivation, and moral judgement based on self rather than on others, makes this club a toxic environment in which controlling coaching is likely to debouch into psychological abuse.

Another athlete reported a negative experience with a controlling coaching style and an unethical club climate;

> “For four years I trained under conditions that were not okay. I was ignored, laughed at, gossiped about by the trainers, even when I could see/hear it. Coming home after such trainings made me feel like I didn’t matter, like I had failed, or that I was just not good enough. The club realized this and did nothing, which was a step too far for me”.

In total, 41% of all comments contained some form of normalization of controlling coaching and/or coach-perpetrated psychological abuse. Some gymnasts testified about the tolerance and acceptance of these behaviors, and how stepping out of the sport was needed to realize how toxic the climate was. Many of them commented on how “confronting” or “eye opening” it was to fill out the survey, or noted that “by looking back” they realized what they had gone through. The following quotations illustrate these findings; "Long after I quit, it became clear that bad things had happened to me that I didn't previously acknowledge."; "At the time, I thought their behavior was normal. I was very young (between 7 and 12 years old) so I had little awareness of 'right and wrong'. Perhaps it contributed to my current fear of failure”. Many gymnasts reflect upon their (ongoing) career with mixed feelings. In that regard, they note that despite the negative experiences with a controlling coach or psychological abuse, they look back on their sport with a positive feeling. One athlete responded; "Gymnastics is still my greatest passion, but it is overshadowed by all the mental pressure my coach puts on me”. Others consider such behaviors as a prerequisite to attain sports results, and therefore as “part of the game”. One athlete mentioned; “It may seem negative, but when gymnastics is your passion and you want to be successful, you just accept that hard approach...”, and another gymnast left this comment;

> “I understand that some things may be classified as interpersonal violence to outsiders, but to me they were not. Yes, there was yelling, shouting, and threatening, but it was

never intentional. It was precisely because of those things that I felt respected and involved. It's hard to explain to outsiders because there are certain things that, when told out of context, seem completely wrong. But it never felt wrong."

Finally, findings show that many athletes rationalize unethical coach behavior as a mechanism to cope with the harm. Whether it was in the light of performance; "It seems like I put my trainers in a bad light. Yet, there were definitely some good moments and they made sure that I became Flemish, Provincial and Belgian champion." or referring to other disciplines or peers as experiencing worse; "Fortunately, I was strong enough to put things into perspective, but I believe that some co-gymnasts took it more seriously". All these findings indicate how controlling coaching is institutionalized in gymnastics. Hence, various comments were raised on the need to change climates, organizations, and systems. One respondent said; "Gymnastics is a sport that involves fear and pressure. The culture needs to change in order to prevent mental issues, eating disorders and anxiety. An integrity officer is a start, but also the bare minimum".

Discussion

The results of this study indicated a relation between coaching style, club climate and psychological abuse perpetrated by coaches. Gymnasts that perceived their coaches as more controlling, also reported to have experienced more psychological abuse. In terms of the club climate, the findings showed that a poor ethical climate related to more coach-perpetrated psychological abuse. Furthermore, the club climate was found to moderate the relation between controlling coaching and psychological abuse.

The research findings show that psychological abuse is widespread in high level gymnastics in Flanders (see Laureys et al. (submitted) for detailed prevalence numbers). Compared to similar research of Hartill et al. (2023), Vertommen et al. (2016), and Ohlert et al. (2021) the numbers in our study are significantly higher. These differences can be explained by the fact that this study focused on gymnastics only and excluded the lower, recreational levels.

The selective sample, probably inviting to athletes having experienced interpersonal violence, and the fact that the federation was involved in recruiting participants to the study, implies a selection bias. Moreover, the inclusion of retired athletes in this study can also explain higher numbers. These individuals probably have more time, external mirrors, and distance to reflect upon their lived experiences. A part of the explanation can be attributed to the specificities and culture of sub-elite gymnastics which is subject to extreme training load, physical contact, esthetic and weight pressure, obedience to dominant coaching styles, and isolation from friends and family. Moreover, like swimming, for example, gymnastics is a sport with a very young peak sport age, and therefore might be more subject to psychological abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). One respondent reflected on the conditions of gymnastics in one of the open questions; "The saying 'listen to your body' does not exist in gymnastics. Neither does having an opinion of your own. The only thing that matters is performance".

Two determinants have been found to directly affect psychological abuse by coaches; the coaching style and the club climate. Athletes in our study who reported high levels of controlling coaching also reported more experiences with psychological abuse. When coaches force athletes to act, think, or feel in specific, prescribed ways and push them beyond their limits, they have higher chances of crossing boundaries and psychologically abusing their athletes. Laureys et al., (submitted) confirm the high prevalence of controlling coaching styles in high performance sport, now specifically within the context of gymnastics. Despite the evidence of the detrimental effects of controlling coaching on an individual's psychological and social well-being (e.g., need frustration, burnout, low self-esteem) in our and other studies, there is a sustained belief among coaches and managers that better results will be obtained when this style of coaching is applied (Vansteenkiste & Soenens, 2015).

Depicting a controlling coaching style as a risk factor for psychological abuse, the findings of this study contribute to the debate of why and how to avoid controlling coaching

styles (Delrue et al; 2017; Haerens et al., 2018). By minimizing the use of pressure and demands as well as by promoting a more holistic development of individuals (especially child athletes), coaches can contribute to safer climates (Delrue et al., 2017; Lambrecht, 2016). As coaches are leaders for athletes, managers are, or should be, leaders for coaches. This means they also have their role to play in coaching the coach to safeguard health and well-being at the sport club (De Clerck et al., 2022).

An overlooked aspect in understanding interpersonal violence in sport is that it does not happen in a vacuum. Contrarily, like other sport integrity issues, it most often occurs within an organizational context (Souvenir et al., 2023). We found that psychological abuse is more likely to be perpetuated in sport clubs that have poor ethical climates and limited collective moral reasoning. Where athletes report club climates with high collective moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character, less psychological abuse by coaches is reported. This means that creating awareness and empathic concern (i.e., sensitivity) around interpersonal violence can help to prevent psychological abuse. Moral motivation is about compromising ethical values for power, winning, or success of the club. Through reforming structures and policies, federation and club managers could decrease pressure on performance, winning, and other externalities to improve moral motivation and decrease psychological abuse. No correlation was found between moral judgment and psychological abuse. The low mean score on moral judgement indicates that the organizational environments in gymnastics tend to insufficiently judge and problematize integrity breaches as such, while other motivations (such as athletic performance) are prioritized over moral motivations when being faced with psychological abuse. These findings resonate with the work of Constandt and Willem (2019) who found very similar perceptions on collective moral judgment in soccer (association football) clubs. A lower collective moral character was related to higher psychological abuse. In the collective moral character stage, the ethical values have to be transformed into action, which requires individuals

590 to take up responsibility (Arnaud, 2006). Case studies (e.g., Larry Nasser case) have shown that
591 speaking up, standing up, reporting, and offering help comes with fear of repercussions and
592 other barriers. Obviously, such climates do not protect against coach-perpetrated psychological
593 abuse. Contrarily, positive ethical climates have been linked to the willingness to blow the
594 whistle (Parboteeah et al., 2010; Rothwell & Baldwin, 2007).

595 This study also looked at whether club climate can moderate the relationship between
596 controlling coaching and psychological abuse. Results showed that in a more ethical club
597 environment, controlling coaches are less likely to psychologically abuse gymnasts. A coach is
598 just one stakeholder in the club, who is also – for better or for worse – shaped by its
599 environment. The club climate represents the 'rules of the game' as collectively constructed by
600 managers, parents, board members, and other internal stakeholders, which influence the
601 coaches' behavior (Kaptein, 2020). The moderating effect of club climate, however, only seems
602 to buffer the strength of the relationship (not eliminate it) between controlling coaching and
603 psychological abuse. This indicates that ethical club climate, although a very important
604 determinant, is insufficient to prevent coach-perpetrated psychological abuse.

605 In addition to an organization's informal ethical context (i.e., ethical climate), the
606 literature also refers to an organization's formal ethical context (Kaptein, 2020; Maesschalck &
607 Vanden Auweele, 2010) to steer behavior. The formal context, also known as hard controls,
608 consists of the tangible parts of an organization, such as its plans, policies, and procedures.
609 Apart from ethics training, a policy on whistle blowing, and an ethics monitoring system,
610 having a written ethical code and a safeguarding officer are considered important components
611 to prevent integrity issues to occur (Constandt et al., 2018; Kaptein, 2020; Treviño & Weaver,
612 2003). In this study, we explored the presence and awareness of a code of ethics and a
613 safeguarding officer in the club. We found that barely a third of the respondents knew there was
614 a code of ethics or an integrity officer present in their club. Of those who knew the existence of

an integrity officer in their club, 14% did not know who that person actually was. Constandt et al. (2019) reported similar results in soccer clubs in Flanders. The integrity officer is supposed to be an accessible, low-threshold and trustworthy source to report concerns about interpersonal violence. The fact that these positions are not filled, known, or used subscribes the conclusion of vulnerabilities for interpersonal violence at the organizational level.

A last important finding of the study was that retired athletes perceived more controlling coaching, psychological abuse and poorer ethical club climates compared to active athletes. This could point in the direction of normalization. The qualitative data supported this finding with many gymnasts saying that distance from toxic environments was needed to realize that controlling coaching and psychological abuse is not normal, nor part of the game. Normalization theory, rooted in the sociological work of the French philosopher Foucault (1979), has been frequently applied to all kinds of research topics to better understand how organizations use power and dominant discourses to normalize unethical behaviors (e.g., Salin, 2003). In sport, normalization of controlling coaching behavior is evident when internal club stakeholders rely on the norm that "pressuring athletes" or "neglecting them when they do not perform well" is acceptable and legitimate to foster respect and discipline, to push athletes beyond their limits, and to compete and perform (Bartholomew et al. 2011; Roberts et al., 2020). If controlling coaching behaviors are tolerated, coaches and other internal stakeholders may not believe that they are wrong which increases the risk of psychological abuse (Nite & Nauright, 2020; Van Der Hoeven et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, gymnastics is a closed environment that does not tolerate much external views or new people coming in (Greither & Ohlert, 2023; Smits et al., 2017). Behavior is forced from coaches upon athletes and then a lot of the athletes are getting into coaching and repeat their own experience (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). Therefore, gymnastics is quite autocratic and resilient to change. This, together with the military and masculine roots of the sport, form the

backbone of the normalization and tolerance of controlling coaching in gymnastics (Kerr et al., 2020; Smits et al., 2017). In order to change a sport that tolerates hegemonic masculine narratives, controlling coach–athlete relationships, and psychological abuse, to one that is safe and free from interpersonal violence, a more holistic and (pro)active approach is needed from scholars and practitioners alike. This study took first steps in this direction, by offering insights into the intertwined elements of coaching style and club climate.

Contributions of the study

First, this study adds to the body of knowledge on psychological abuse in sport. This form of interpersonal violence has received the least amount of clinical and research attention, presumably due to the cultural acceptance of psychological violence in sport, the frequent lack of malicious intent by the coach, the lack of (physical) evidence, and the perceived lack of urgency with respect to intervention (Brassard & Donovan, 2006). Our study has shown, however, that it is a highly prevalent form, and its consequences can be severe (see also Stirling & Kerr, 2013; Laureys et al., (submitted)). Studying interpersonal violence in relation to coaching style also added novel insights on the underlying causes and mechanisms of psychological abuse by coaches.

Second, psychological abuse is a complex problem that requires a multi-disciplinary approach integrating insights from different disciplines and targeting different levels (macro-, meso-, micro-). This study adds a sport management perspective to a body of literature that predominantly took an individual micro-level perspective in the past (Roberts et al., 2020). We conclude that an ethical climate can – directly and indirectly – impact the occurrence of coach-perpetrated psychological abuse. A controlling coaching style can result in abuse and an unethical club climate can strengthen that relationship causing a negative vicious circle. There is some literature on the effect of coach leadership style on ethical climate (e.g., Burton et al., 2017, Constandt et al, 2018), however less is known about how a coach leadership style is

influenced by the ethical climate within a club. The latter is an interesting study topic, especially with regards to psychological abuse, which is often accepted/normalized by the athlete's entourage.

Third, epidemiological research has provided insights in prevalence and characteristics of all types of interpersonal violence in different sports, sport levels, and global regions. Additionally, some studies in sport (see Roberts et al. (2020) for a review), addressed psychological abuse by coaches in exploratory, retrospective, qualitative studies with adult elite sport populations. This study addressed both active and retired, children and adult populations performing at the elite and sub-elite level in the sport of gymnastics. The unique sample and methodologies used, provides innovative and sound explanatory insights. For example, the moderating role of club climate has never been studied in relation to coaching style and interpersonal violence before, and the insights on normalization (through data from both active and retired athletes) provide food for thought and future research.

There are also some practical implications of this study. The sport of gymnastics, overshadowed by ethical issues in the past five years, is offered a background to shape their policies and practices in an ethically responsible way. These insights point to the importance of educating coaches about motivating styles and non-abusive approaches to developing and challenging athletes. In that respect there is a need to implement evidence based interventions that are effective in training coaches in adopting a more motivating and less controlling style (Reynders et al., 2019). Ultimately, until athlete-centered and positive coaching practices are fully embedded, the well-being of participants in gymnastics, and other sports alike, will remain at-risk.

Our findings also urge to look beyond the coach, and hold other stakeholders responsible for coach-perpetrated psychological abuse in sport clubs. Some specific practical guidelines have been suggested regarding the role and implementation of informal and formal ethics

measures in the sport club. A more ethical climate will develop as a result of increased moral reasoning and safeguarding programs/procedures will provide the hard controls needed to improve the overall ethical context. Finally, an important responsibility lies with the leaders (e.g., directors and managers) of sport organizations. They have the power to fire coaches, to install programs and policies, and set example in terms of ethical conduct. Leaders who cultivate a motivating climate within sports clubs significantly impact motivation and optimal behaviors (De Clerck et al., 2022). Leaders will become more vigilant to detect at-risk coaching behaviors, and effectively prevent or act upon them. Indeed, the village can be part of the problem, but is therefore luckily also part of the solution (Roberts et al., 2020; Souvenir et al., 2023).

Limitations and future research opportunities

To measure psychological abuse of athletes by their coaches, we used the validated VTAQ scale (Parent et al., 2019; Vertommen, 2021). This is a low threshold calculation of the manifestation of interpersonal violence, and does not take into account severity. Yet, some athletes will not feel victims of psychological abuse, nor will they consider their coach(es) perpetrators of psychological abuse. Future research should account for severity of incidents and take into account experiences of the athlete.

It should be noted, that by no means this is a mixed method study, nor was the survey designed for this. Rather, the mere purpose of adding qualitative insights was to illustrate some of the quantitative findings. Interesting data on normalization of controlling coaching was gathered. Various research initiatives and practices have been developed to combat interpersonal violence. However, these tools remain ineffective if leaders in sport are not sensitive to the problem, tolerate it, or cover it up (Van Der Hoeven et al., 2022). Therefore, an important route for future research is to challenge the existing norms in sport and try to de-normalize controlling coaching.

This study is to a large extent retrospective and cross-sectional, uni-informant, and sport-specific. Although valid new insights have been generated on coaching style and the protective role of club climate on psychological abuse, more sound study designs are needed to entirely eliminate skepticism regarding the risks and downsides of controlling coaching. Larger scale, longitudinal, multi-informant, and multi-level studies across sports and levels could provide insights that can be generalized to larger and diverse populations of athletes. Such designs would allow for a more robust interpretation of club ethical climate (and the role of different stakeholders therein), however, would also imply giving up on anonymity. Approaching this sensitive topic from a trauma- and violence-informed perspective should always remain a priority (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; McMahon & Mc Gannon, 2024).

In addition to scaling up existing research, there is also a need for more applied research and insights. Management scholars have a role to play in going beyond understanding the issues, towards managing and trying to solve them. Not one study has been directed at actively preventing psychological abuse in sport by jointly targeting individual and organizational factors. Interventions separately directed at coaches have proven their effectiveness in reducing controlling coaching (Reynders et al., 2019). Nonetheless, improving climate at the organizational level appears extremely difficult. It requires a significant organizational change effort, where formal and informal factors are changed into a new alignment. Participatory Action Research, for example, could be a suited method to intervene on the individual, as well as organizational level (i.e., tackling the problem of normalization).

Conclusion

This study aimed to look beyond the ‘bad apple’ and also include the ‘barrel’ when assessing interpersonal violence in sport. The findings indicate a relationship between coaching style, athlete-perceived club climate and coach-perpetrated psychological abuse in Flemish (sub)elite gymnastics. Athletes that perceived their coaches as more controlling, and/or the club

climate as unethical also experienced more psychological abuse by their coaches. Furthermore, the club climate was found to moderate the relationship between controlling coaching and psychological abuse, subscribing the importance of applying a sport management lens to examine interpersonal violence. We strongly advise researchers and practitioners (including policy makers and managers) on interpersonal violence in sport to create and monitor safeguarding policies and programs, taking into account the prevention of controlling coaching behaviors, as well as holding all club actors accountable for building a (more) ethical club climate in which athletes are safeguarded from harm.

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