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A roller coaster of emotions on the bench

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RUGBY COACHES' EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS DURING COMPETITIVE GAMES

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: The stakes of mental preparation for coaches

Context and issues

- Development and implementation of **mental training programs for rugby coaches** in elite training centers
- Need to understand how emotional dynamics unfold during games in order to identify relevant **situational resources** useful to coaches

Insights from the coaching literature

- Importance of awareness and maintenance of ideal emotional states for optimal performance (Davis & Davis, 2016)
- Influence of coach-athlete relationship quality and coaches' emotional intelligence on interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (Braun & Tamminen, 2019; Chan & Mallett, 2011)

Theoretical framework: an embodied view of the mind

An enactive and phenomenological approach to emotions (Colombetti & Thompson, 2007)

Objective of the present study

Characterize the dynamics of emotionally intense moments (as experienced by coaches) that occur during an unfolding game

METHODS: Approaching coaches' lived experience

Participants: Eight coaches of four teams U15 to U2, affiliated with a French elite training center

Data Collection and analysis

Observations and field notes taken during eight games (two games per team)

Immediately after the game, coaches reported a **timeline describing fluctuations in their perceived emotional intensity** during the game (Figure 1)

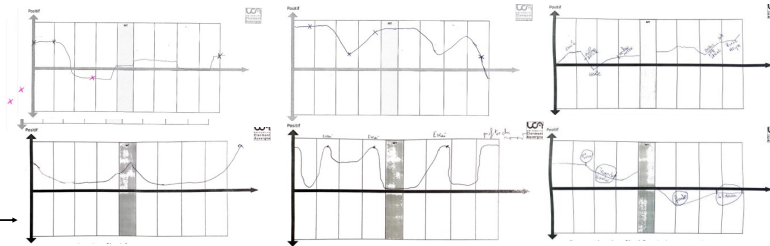


Figure 1. Examples of timelines completed by coaches after the game. The vertical axis represents intensity, and the horizontal axis distinguishes between positive (top panel) and negative (bottom panel) valence. The colored area indicates halftime.

Individual **elicitation interviews** (with the timeline as a support) focused on the moments identified by coaches as intense

Inductive analysis to identify recurring themes

RESULTS: Meaningful elements that are constitutive of emotional intensity

Players' attitudes on the pitch

"In fact, what gives me emotion at the moment of the try is **not the action itself, it's the reaction of the players, where I see them jumping into each other's arms, encouraging each other, and that gave me emotion** to see them, to see them happy, just for the moment."

An event that coaches can relate to as former players...

"In the moment, **it hits you in the gut**. It's like when I was a player, it's always about my past as a player. It's really **the joy of a collective effort**. So even if I'm not with them on the field, I'm **transposing myself to be with them** and I'm happy that this little trick worked, that at this point we're back in the game and maybe we can do something at this moment."

...Or an event that leads to ruminative thoughts

Now I'm getting angry, I'm getting frustrated and **it's getting on my nerves** and I need to express myself... I think I'm yelling [at the referee], "And now you don't give a yellow card for a high tackle, whereas you did for us before!" [...] At that point I'm trying to calm down. That's when I realize that I didn't give the right image... **I'm not happy with myself** because I expressed something that I should have kept to myself in that moment so as not to give the young players that image [...] **I'm ruminating both against the referee and against myself**, saying to myself, 'you didn't react well and you've got kids and parents who saw you'."

(In)adequacy between players' performance and pre-game instructions

"I'm very happy inside. **We're doing exactly what we said and what I said before the game** [...] The planets are aligned. I'm happy with what we've done and I'm very proud."

"I can see it in the **attitudes, the lowered heads**, they were also annoyed with each other. I saw one of them kicking the ground because he was disappointed, and **I thought, I'm losing them**, because not only they're going to lose, but they're also going to be pissed off, they're not going to have any fun all day."

"The beginning of this phase, it's more like frustration, I think. I'm really... it's annoying me, I'm **annoyed because we're not doing the right thing** and then it turns into a little bit more disappointment for them. I mean, they don't deserve to take 2 tries so fast and **I'm annoyed and then it turns into 'shit, I'm disappointed'**."

DISCUSSION: Toward a situated, singular and embodied understanding of emotional dynamics

Emotionally intense moments are situated and singular

- Each timeline was different, even for coaches working together in the same team → **Singularity of meaningful situations** (i.e., when an event is intense, what makes it intense is different from one person to another)
- These moments must be situated in an **ecology of relations** that extends beyond coach-athlete interaction to the broader environment (Lascu et al., 2024)

Perspectives for coaches' mental training

Elicitation interviews as an effective medium to help coaches **describe their lived experience in the "here and now"**, in terms of bodily sensations, concerns, and/or interpretation of a given situation

Identify the **salient and significant situational anchors** that are potential emotional triggers for them

Making sense of the situation to adjust self-regulation strategies during intense moments of the game

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