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**Stress and Coping Experiences of UK Professional Football Managers During the
COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Abstract

Guided by transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study aimed to explore elite U.K. soccer coaches' perceived stressors, the situational properties, appraisals and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also aimed to explore any variation in stress experiences across football league standards. Thirteen professional first team male U.K. association football coaches aged between 38 and 59 years ($M = 43.00$, $SD = 6.94$) participated in telephone ($n = 5$) or online ($n = 8$) semi-structured interviews. Informed by the philosophical position of critical realism (Danermark et al., 2019), Braun et al.'s (2016) six-phase approach to thematic analysis (TA) was used to generate competitive, organizational, and personal stressor themes. Deductive thematic analysis generated themes reflective of all situational properties of stressors identified by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984), and an array of appraisal, and coping strategies. Future research and recommendations for supporting coach performance and well-being post-COVID-19 pandemic are offered.

Stress and Coping Experiences of UK Professional Football Managers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, with the World Health Organization declaring a global pandemic on the 11th March 2020 (Jia et al., 2021). COVID-19 dramatically changed how individuals in the United Kingdom lived and worked, and caused a significant increase in rates of depression, anxiety, and stress in comparison to population norms (Jia et al., 2021). Research has examined the psychological experience of the pandemic across specific demographic groups such as police workers (Stogner et al., 2020) and teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020), which highlights moderate to severe increases in perceived stress during this time. Stress is defined as a “relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Experiences of stress are idiosyncratic and how an individual may appraise stressors can influence the degree to which this transaction is deemed helpful or detrimental to performance and/or well-being (Didymus & Jones, 2021). Subsequently, the transactional model of stress serves as a useful framework to explore the nuanced (e.g., positive and negative) experiences of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first national lockdown in the U.K. started on March 13 2020 and concluded on July 19 2021. It meant that all sporting fixtures were suspended or cancelled, and coaches faced novel demands in relation to maintaining the competitive performance levels of their athletes (Schinke et al., 2020). In contrast, the postponement of major sporting competitions (e.g., Olympic games) was considered by some coaches to provide additional time to enhance their athletes’ performance (Schinke et al., 2020). During the second U.K. lockdown, which occurred between November 05 2020 and December 02 2020, U.K. protocol and guidelines were developed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2020), and

released for elite coaches to follow when planning training and competitive matches. Elite athletes were able to continue to train and compete behind closed doors to contain transmission of COVID-19 (Bowes et al., 2020). The protocol and guidelines involved substantial environmental changes (e.g., reducing the number of players training within a group, the use of face coverings off-pitch; DCMS, 2020), which presented significant challenges for training practices (Bowes et al., 2020) and may underpin the increase in self-reported coaching stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Santi et al., 2021).

Elite coaches report a range of personal (e.g., own high expectations; Norris et al., 2017), competitive (e.g., preparing for major events; Didymus, 2017), and organizational (e.g., funding; Olusoga et al., 2012) stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic may have presented additional stressors for those participating in high-performance sport, such as significant financial challenges and coaching constraints (e.g., player recruitment, training venues; Bowes et al., 2020). Additionally, all sports experienced fundamental differences during the pandemic (e.g., changes in competition schedules and finances) that may have inhibited utilizing typical coping strategies (e.g., escaping the stressful environment) (e.g., Levy et al., 2009). Taking on board these concerns, research is accumulating which illustrates the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by elite athletes (e.g., Schinke et al., 2020), however, few studies have examined the stress experiences of elite coaches. One exception is the work conducted by Santi et al. (2021), which found an increase in perceived stress during the pandemic among a sample of Italian international, national, and regional level coaches during the first lockdown. However, with different countries adopting different containment, testing, and sporting protocol for COVID-19, exploring the stress and coping experiences of elite coaches within the U.K. is warranted.

Aligned with the transactional model of stress, it is essential to focus attention upon the appraisal of the stressors, the core relational themes, and the effectiveness of any attempt

to cope. The term appraisal refers to the evaluative product of appraising, which is the process by which stressors are evaluated and relational meanings are constructed (Didymus & Jones, 2021). Appraising, when viewed from a transactional perspective, includes a set of cognitive actions that consists of at least two discrete but interdependent constructs: primary and secondary appraising (Didymus & Jones, 2021; Lazarus, 1999). During primary appraisal, an individual considers the significance of a situation in relation to his or her own values, personal beliefs, situational intentions, goal commitments, and well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If an individual perceives the encounter to be significant, and thus stressful, there are four possible transactional alternatives: *harm/loss*, *threat*, *benefit*, and *challenge* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Harm/loss appraisals are made when damage to the individual has already occurred whilst threat appraisals are made when there is the potential for damage to occur. Challenge appraisals are made where there is perceived potential for personal gain, growth, development, and well-being. Gain appraisals are made where growth has already occurred (e.g., enhancement of well-being). An individual who typically appraises stressful situations as a challenge is more likely to have higher morale, quality of functioning, confidence, and increased capability to use coping resources during stressful encounters (Didymus & Jones, 2021). Secondary appraisal involves an individual identifying and evaluating the availability of coping resources and consists of three components: an evaluation of blame/credit, coping potential, and future expectancy (Didymus & Jones, 2021). It is from this appraisal process that an individual will emotionally respond, potentially leading to behavioural outcomes and coping efforts that may impact upon the individual's performance and well-being (Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also presented what have become two commonly adopted coping dimensions: *problem-focused* and *emotion-focused* coping. Problem-focused coping aims to directly manage the stressor (e.g., planning), whereas emotion-focused coping aims to regulate the emotional fallout of the

stressful encounter (e.g., distancing; Franks & Roesch, 2006). Three other coping categories have been proposed since Lazarus and Folkman's seminal works to convey the conceptual complexity of coping (Franks & Roesch, 2006): avoidance- (e.g., cognitive or behavioral efforts to avoid the situation), approach- (e.g., increasing effort), and appraisal-focused coping (e.g., re-evaluation; see Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Other coping categories have been proposed since Lazarus and Folkman's seminal works to convey the conceptual complexity of coping (Franks & Roesch, 2006). Since the specific focus of this study is on the transactional alternatives that coaches experience, emphasis was placed on primary appraisal.

Typically, stress literature has focused on listing and categorizing the type and frequency of stressors that coaches may encounter (e.g., Olusoga et al., 2009). However, to understand the nuances of coaches' experiences of stress, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that "it is not the stressors per se that influence appraisal but the situational properties that underpin them." (p. 68). Lazarus' (1999) cognitive motivational relational theory (CMRT) illustrates the importance of viewing stress as an idiosyncratic process. As a result, in addition to exploring perceived stressors, researchers have been encouraged to examine the appraisal of stressors and the situational properties that may influence appraisal (Didymus & Jones, 2021; Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified seven situational properties of stressors: novelty, imminence, event uncertainty, duration, temporal uncertainty, ambiguity, and timing in relation to the life cycle. By shedding light on the associations between situational properties, appraisals, and coping, we can develop enhanced understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underlying coaches' stress transactions.

Bowes et al. (2020) recognized that the demands, opportunities, constraints, and coping resources presented by the pandemic varied by gender, sport type, and standard of competition. Due to the unique, volatile, and high-pressure nature of elite male football environments (Nesti, 2010), it is a sport context that may have been particularly stressful

during COVID-19. Elite male football is also a hypermasculine environment (Goldman & Gervis, 2021). Such environments may reduce elite coaches' willingness to seek and utilize social support, which may explain why elite football coaches report ineffective coping and negative implications for well-being (Baldock et al., 2021). In contrast to other sports during the pandemic (e.g., athletics), football teams that were of elite playing status were able to finish the 2019/20 season.

The English Football League System has 19 Leagues from Tier 1 to Tier 8, and 83 Leagues from Tier 9 to Tier 11. During the 2019/20 season, clubs that were of elite playing status included those from Tier 1 to 6 (Premier League (PL), Championship (C), League One (L1), League Two (L2), National League (NL), National League North (NLN) and National League South (NLS)). PL and C were able to complete the final season fixtures without spectators, in contrast the remaining teams were able complete the league with play-off competitions to determine promotion and relegation (L1, L2, NL, NLN and NLS)

Insert Table 1 about here

There were also notable differences across the English Football League system in the financial support provided to different leagues (see Table 1). The PL agreed to provide a £250 million loan to cover interest, arrangement fees and professional fees across Tier 2 to 6. This loan was to support COVID-19 testing and to mitigate the loss of income from spectators based on a 'lost gate revenue share calculation' for up to three months. As a result of the third national lockdown, NL, NLN and NLS clubs were invited to apply for or low-interest loans from Sport England under the government's winter survival package. Subsequently, some clubs (e.g., Dover Athletic, Tonbridge Angels) opted to not fulfil any upcoming fixtures due to financial hardship. This resulted in growing concerns for the stability of many National League clubs during the 2019/20 season.

To advance understanding of the stress and coping experiences of U.K professional

football coaches throughout COVID-19, guided by transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study aims to answer four research questions: 1) What are the perceived stressors encountered by U.K male elite football coaches during the COVID-19 pandemic?; 2) What is the influence of situational properties of stressors on elite coaches' primary appraisals?; 3) What coping strategies did coaches use to maintain or enhance their own performance and well-being?; and 4) Did coaches' stress and coping experiences during the pandemic vary across different league standards?

Methodology

Philosophical Assumptions and Study Design

This study is informed by the first author's philosophical position of critical realism (Danermark et al., 2019). Fundamental traits of critical realism are that there exists a reality that is differentiated, structured, and changing (Danermark et al., 2019). Critical realists also believe that there are deep structures in the world that can be represented by scientific theories (Fletcher, 2017). Moreover, position assumes that deductive logic can and should be used in analyses of all scientific argument, regardless of what methodology is applied (Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, this research is informed by transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and coaching stress research (e.g., Didymus, 2017). Recognizing that reality is shaped by multiple values (e.g., social and political) and by individuals' subjective experiences (Lincoln et al., 2011), semi-structured interviews were used to explore and better understand professional football coaches' real life stress experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who were first team coaches in U.K. football leagues that were permitted to continue competing during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the point of data collection, coaches

had experienced two national lockdowns (government mandates requiring individuals to stay at home). Participants were 13 male association football coaches aged between 38 and 59 years ($M = 43.00$, $SD = 6.94$). When reporting excerpts from the coaches, pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. All participants were currently employed as a senior first team coach at the Championship level ($n = 1$: Adam), or within the English Football League (EFL; League One $n = 4$: Coaches Brian, Calum, Dion, Ed; League Two $n = 4$: Coaches Fred, Gary, Harry, Ian) or National League (League $n = 2$: Coaches Jamie and Kieron; North $n = 1$: Coach Liam; South $n = 1$: Coach Mark). The participants had between one and 12 years of experience ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 5.21$) as first team professional coaches.

Procedure

There was a potential of 137 first team coaches' during the COVID-19 2019/20 season who would meet inclusion criteria (e.g., currently employed as a first-team coach /manager). Using the lead author's existing network in elite football, potential participants were contacted by email. Participants were also identified and contacted via social media (Twitter and LinkedIn), which is a commonly used platform that can enable reach to wider segments of the population than may otherwise be accessible (Sanchez et al., 2020). Coaches who expressed interest in participating were given a participant information sheet outlining the study aims, details, their ethical rights (e.g., right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity), and risks and benefits of participation, and were given the opportunity to ask questions about their participation. They were also, given the opportunity to ask questions about their participation. Participants were then asked to provide written informed consent before taking part. Two coaches across the NL and One coach from L2 who initially agreed to participation opted to withdraw from participation due to time constraints. Given the various geographical locations and time commitments of the coaches, video-call interviews were offered using the online call platform Microsoft Teams (Gray et al., 2020). Qualitative

interviews performed through video, telephone, and online are valid and trustworthy alternatives to traditional face-to-face interviews (Saarijarvi & Bratt, 2021). Specifically, video calls allow for the participant to conduct the interview in a space of their own choosing which can increase the comfort in speaking about personal experiences during challenging circumstances, such as COVID-19 (Gray et al., 2020). Such methodologies are particularly advantageous when looking to explore the experiences of professional football coaches who are a hard to access sample (Higham et al., 2021). As such, coaches' who were unable to participate in video-call interviews completed telephone interviews. Telephone interviews ($n = 5$) ranged in duration from 37 minutes and 52 seconds to 58 minutes and 7 seconds ($M = 46\text{mins } 50\text{s}$; $SD = 8.3$). Video call interviews ($n = 8$) ranged in duration from 30 minutes and 13 seconds to 1-hour and 1minute ($M = 51\text{mins } 7 \text{ seconds}$; $SD = 11.5$).

Interview Guide

In line with the critical realist paradigm, a semi-structured interview guide was developed that comprised of four main sections. First, the interview began with rapport-building questions to build a relationship with participants (Hay-Gibson, 2009; e.g., “What has been your biggest achievement so far in your managerial career?”). Section two briefly explored the perceived stressors encountered by the coaches before the pandemic (e.g., “What demands have you faced in your coaching role?”). This was to assist the coach and lead author in establishing changes in stress experiences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic later in the interview (Pessoa et al., 2019). The third section of the interview explored perceived stressors encountered as a first team coach during the pandemic, as well as a detailed exploration of the situational properties of these stressors, the coaches' appraisals, and the coping strategies used. Underpinned by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional stress theory, coaches were asked in this section to discuss antecedent variables that contribute to emotional and outcome states. These include; the frequency (e.g., “Which

are your most frequent demands?") and intensity (e.g., "Which are your most intense demands?") of stressors encountered, as well as how they were appraised (e.g., "What were your thoughts about this situation?") and coped with (e.g., "How did you try and deal with that demand?") (Hadd & Crocker, 2007)

In the final section of the interview guide, coaches were asked to consider the outcomes of stressors encountered during the pandemic (e.g., "Have you been able to achieve/sustain your desired performance this season?"). At the end of the interview, participants were encouraged to discuss pertinent issues that had not already been addressed, and to reflect on the efficacy of the interview. Detail-oriented (e.g., "Who was with you?"), elaboration (e.g., "Can you give me an example?"), and clarification probes (e.g., "Can you clarify what you mean?") were used throughout the interviews to develop deeper understanding of coaches' experiences and the contexts and situations in which they occurred (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Interviews ranged in duration from 51 to 82 minutes ($M = 69.30$ minutes; $SD = .34$).

Data Analysis

Transcribed interview data were transferred to, sorted, and organized using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (NVivo; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 12, 2019). Braun et al.'s (2016) six-phase approach to thematic analysis (TA) was used. Phase one focused on familiarization with the raw data, which entailed the first author reading and re-reading the dataset. In phase two, abductive coding was used to produce succinct, descriptive, or interpretive labels for information that was of relevance to the coaches' stress experiences during the pandemic. Abductive coding was utilized for two reasons. First, there are widely accepted research-informed expectations regarding elite coaches' stressful experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As such, the construction of codes came from pre-defined themes (deductive) from the well-established existing theoretical works by Lazarus and Folkman

(1984) and Lazarus (1999), and the pre-existing categories of competitive, organizational, and personal stressors (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2021). However, as COVID-19 represents a novel situation, we remained open to the generation of new themes and sub-themes throughout our analyses (inductive). Phase three involved reviewing the coded data to consider how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings to form themes. In doing so, Byrne (2021) suggests that it is important that themes tie together to produce a coherent and lucid picture of the dataset. Phase four involved refining and reviewing the themes to ensure identifiable distinctions between them, and that sub-themes were appropriately condensed where differences were indistinguishable. Phase five involved a critical review of the thematic framework by all authors to ensure each individual theme and sub-theme was expressed in relation to both the dataset and the research questions. To offer a vivid and compelling account of each respective theme, phase five involved selecting illustrative data extracts from the transcripts. The results were written for the purpose of this manuscript during phase six of our analyses.

Methodological Rigor

Aligned with the critical realist approach and to enhance methodological rigor, the lead author maintained (and shared for discussion with the second and third authors) reflexive notes throughout the data collection process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The reflexive notes allowed the first author to document an audit trail of the project, and become aware of biases and motivations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The reflexive notes were used alongside a pilot interview that was conducted with a current first team manager from National League South. The first author and pilot participant took part in member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018) to explore gaps or shared concerns with interpretations of the interview guide. This resulted in the interview guide being modified to simplify the language used. As an example, the question “What strategies do/or have you used to cope successfully with similar

challenges?” was altered to “Describe an occasion in which you successfully coped with a similar demand” with the follow up question “What did you do?” To enhance rigor and quality during the analyses, the co-authors acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The co-authors encouraged first author reflexivity to increase consistency of judgement, make a defensible case that the available data supported, and construct themes that best fit the data and addressed the research questions (Braun et al., 2016).

Results

Using Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional stress theory as a framework to guide our analyses, stressors experienced by the coaches during the pandemic are organized around three themes; competitive, organizational, and personal (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). To understand the nuances of coaches’ experiences of stress, each section of the results interweaves the findings on situational properties of stressors, appraisals, coping and as appropriate, the discussion of further appraisals.

Competitive Stressors

The definition of competitive stressors used in this work is “an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with competitive performance” (Hanton et al., 2005, p. 1130). Unique to COVID-19 was the competitive sub-theme of *opposition* (see Figure 1).

Opposition

Irrespective of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ian discussed how ‘*the pressures of management are still there, and you're still judged on winning, losing, and how your team performs*’. However, opposition (players, coach, and support staff) was discussed as stressful due to side-line behaviors that were perceived as attempts to sway officials’ decision making (e.g., free-kick) and evoke (e.g., encourage a red card) or avoid punishment (e.g., discourage a red card):

I am seeing people use this [lack of fans] to their advantage... the loudest shout won decisions, they'll all scream and be berating the fourth official...Some teams were positioning staff around the ground, so that they can appeal everything... (Adam).

During the COVID-19 season, it was not that the side-line behaviors per se, rather coaches' discussed the capacity to hear and potentially be influenced by them to be novel. In an attempt to cope, Fred and Dion stated how they tried to engage in the same verbal side-line behaviors in attempts to out manipulate their counterparts and gain an advantage, thus evidencing problem-focused coping. However, for Kieran who appraised opposition side-line behaviors as threatening engaged in emotion-focused coping to vent his frustration. Kieran reflected that was particularly unhelpful due to the sanctions associated with this coping behavior: "My emotions can get the better of me...[I was] sent off for fighting [physically with the opposition] in the dugout...slapped with a big fine, [that] was when I thought I've got to do something about this."

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Organizational Stressors

Organizational stressors are defined as "an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organization within which he or she is operating" (Hanton et al., 2005, p. 1130). Coaches across all competitive league groups discussed organizational stressors arising during the COVID-19 season. These included the following sub-themes; *leadership and personnel issues, team and cultural issues, logistical and environmental issues, and performance and personal issues* (see Figure 2).

Leadership and personnel issues

Leadership and personnel issues encapsulated organizational stressors associated with *the absence of spectators and fans and distribution of information from the football*

association. The absence of spectators and fans were appraised as having the potential for harm/loss, threat, benefit, and challenge (see Figure 2). For example, Calum discussed how spectators' absence as harmful due to a perceived loss of energy drawn from supportive crowds, particularly 'at the back end of the game...because of the lack of adrenalin in the body because the fans aren't there.' Coaches discussed problem-focused coping in the form of changing or increasing awareness of their side-line behaviors to maintain performance. For instance, Ian discussed how "when there's no crowd there and everyone can hear my voice they need my constant support and praise". In contrast, the absence of a crowd could also serve as an opportunity to enhance performance and gain an advantage due to "the information you're passing out onto the pitch it is much clearer and less volatile" (Liam). However, the lack of stadia noise resulted in private coaching conversations to be overheard by the opposition and television media. To overcome this concern Gary and Dion removed themselves from the pitch side-lines and situated within the empty stands, thus evidencing problem-focused coping. Dion noted this also had positive implications for football tactics and emotion regulation "I was able to calm down a little bit...you get very wrapped up in the game [on the side-lines], but [in the stands] I sort of detach myself... I've found it's also helped me analyse the game a lot better."

The absence of spectators was appraised as a gain by Simon because "[pre-COVID] it would be infuriating, because we [the club] bring fans but never enough to influence the officials so it has been an advantage...[during COVID] we have had [a] really good away record, I think that's played its part." Officials were also discussed as a stressor by L1 and L2 coaches' during the pandemic due to the lack of perceived experience. Coaches' such as Brian perceived how the implementation of the EFA National Refereeing Strategy (2016) was hastened, and therefore the selected referees were deemed to lack the required competence and experience to perform at the highest levels. This was discussed in the context

of presenting a leadership and personnel stressor. In addition, coaches' discussed how the perceived de-conditioning of officials following COVID-19 lockdown was appraised as both threatening and harmful to performance as illustrated in the following quote: "they're not as quick, they're not as professional, they're not as concentrated...I find that is one of the most stressful things" (Brian). To cope with officiating decision stressors, emotion- focused coping in the form of venting, shouting, and expressive actions on the side-line during competition were discussed (e.g., "I shout at the ref more than I should...the emotions getting the better of me too often" (Ed).

Distribution of information from the football association (e.g., English Football League or National League) was a stressor cited by coaches due to the ambiguity of information regarding the continuation of football, changes in COVID-19 protocol and restrictions (e.g., testing frequency) .This ambiguity of information also contributed to the temporal uncertainty and subsequent appraisal of threat regarding other organizational stressor themes (e.g., performance and personal issues; "We don't know when are we getting our fans back in and the economic impact of that" (Calum). Additionally, the ambiguity over information provided from the football association regarding COVID-19 testing protocol was discussed by all coaches. However, confidence in the application of problem-focused coping was often utilized to seek solutions to government imposed COVID-19 requirements and reduced number of players training. For example, Ian discussed 'you just adapt and that's the sporting world pandemic or no pandemic. If I'm in a meeting the mask goes straight on, [players are] not wearing the same bibs and not sharing water bottles.' However, Harry reflected that while "there could have been better leadership from the EFL," he was able to reduce his frustration through empathy and acceptance noting: "there are reasons as for why it was not run as smoothly." Contextual differences were identified within National League coaches who specifically compared their experiences of COVID-19 protocol guidelines from

their association in comparison to the EFL coaches. Such comparison impacted upon the trust and safety with guidelines due to the implications this could have upon COVID-19 transmission:

when started the new season and testing at our level of football didn't exist...all these above you, all the bigger clubs were all being tested and it just didn't sit right...there was real worry of contamination (Liam)

Unique to the NL, NLS and NLN was also discussions with the DCMS and Sport England to secure funding for the financial stability of clubs in the absence of spectator revenue. The ambiguity and timing of information provided to clubs were situational properties that also underpinned the threat and harm appraisals of performance and personal organizational stressors "time to recruit and with a different budget" and logistical and environmental organizational stressors "disruption all of our pre-season plans" (Jamie).

Cultural and team issues

Cultural and team issues included organizational stressors relating to *team atmosphere* and *players behaviors and interactions* (see Figure 2). COVID-19 social restrictions (e.g. group numbers) posed novel restrictions that were appraised to harm team atmosphere and cohesion:

I think the first thing that's gone missing from our environment is camaraderie, team spirit... ..they can't eat lunch together after training...they can't have breakfast together anymore (Fred).

Social support from colleagues, partners, and board members was perceived to provide particularly helpful sources of informational and emotional support relative to efforts in maintaining team cohesion and or coach-athlete relationships. Irrespective of tactical football knowledge, coaches across league levels, specifically perceived their romantic partner to be a valuable coping resource that could offer:

An alternative perspective it's certainly not the nuts and bolts of football. It's understanding people... Why doesn't he listen to me? Why can I not get him to understand me? That's not a football thing. That's a person to person thing ... she [my partner] can be very impartial and without any egos... being a woman as well, not a man (Ed).

Brian also discussed the importance of increasing '*player and family protection*' (e.g., financial and emotional support) when trying to maintain a positive team atmosphere. Brian stated how increasing such support during COVID-19 served as a valuable learning opportunity for building and maintaining team cohesion and culture:

You have a natural instinct to protect people [players and their families] when you're a leader... I have had the time to reflect and see how important this is... if you've got happy players you've got better cohesion and a better culture... [following the return to football] the dial has changed to a more holistic view of the all-round individual and this will be the performance driver.

The use of technology was a helpful problem-focused coping strategy for cultural and team issues during the onset of COVID-19. Specifically, the NL, NLS and NLN coaches described how the use of technology provided an opportunity to enhance their individual coach-athlete relationship with players off-pitch. For example, Liam described how pre-COVID: "I may have spoken to that player individually for about 45 minutes over a season... now I am really getting to know players' and staffs' personal needs."

All coaches were required to reduce their match day squad which was a novel stressor that was appraised by Gary to threaten the strength of the coach-athlete relationship: "[players not in the squad] were having to train separately, we'd normally go 'You're all part of it,' but they're not allowed to attend the game... you feel like you're letting them down but it's protocol." Communication when providing such difficult feedback or decisions became

particularly stressful due to the wearing of masks which was appraised by all coaches to harm communication, notably when providing difficult feedback or decisions. Ian explained: “that was the hardest aspect of my job...because you couldn’t interact with them, you couldn’t shake their hand, you couldn’t hug them...it was very, sort of, cold.”

Players’ behaviors and interactions when communicating were also underpinned by the situational property of timing in relation to the life cycle. Specifically, Adam discussed how players did not always consider the vulnerability of support staff within the team (e.g., age) which increased threat appraisal:

My frustration has been protecting the staff...players think they’re invincible, not wearing their masks, keeping to social distancing, but then getting treated by a 55-year-old staff member or a 50-year-old goal-keeping coach.

In an attempt to cope, problem-focused coping was frequently discussed by coaches’ (e.g., regular messages to the players and staff about social distancing). However, engaging in problem-focused coping and learning more about players’ off-pitch lifestyles could produce additional worries and concerns and increase the appraisal of threat. In view of this perceived lack of control, Harry also discussed how coping flexibility was important and that using acceptance could present itself as a helpful coping strategy:

You can start worrying yourself sick...If my players want to go and lick shelves at [name of supermarket], I can’t do anything about [that] can I? So, I’m not going to lose sleep on that. I’d say to coaches, control what you can control in your environment. (Harry)

Performance and personal issues

Performance and personal issues included stressors relating to the *financial implications of COVID-19* (see Figure 2). For example, Ian suggested “with no revenue coming into clubs, you have to adapt to make sure you fit a different parameter.” Temporal

uncertainty underpinned threat appraisals relative to financial demands, particularly at the onset of COVID-19 lockdown one, as illustrated by Calum: “economic fear with COVID and how long will this go on for.” A reduction in budget to recruit players was a novel stressor that was perceived as harmful to the strength of the squad. Alongside the use of problem-focused coping (e.g., recruitment of cheaper players), assistant coaches were described as a valuable source of emotional and information support, particularly where they have: “great knowledge base of players at this level... it was great having those [assistant coaches] to lean on because if I had to do everything [recruitment] I would have drove myself mad.” (Jamie). Additionally, Jamie noted that engaging in re-appraisal he was able to view a restricted budget as an opportunity to “get some great deals and good contracts on the finances... as opposed to worrying.”

Finally, the ambiguity of information provided from the NL also contributed to the appraisal of threat within the sub-theme of reduced budget and financial implications. Specifically, the potential negative financial implications of COVID-19 was deemed stressful and threatening for Mark because “a small club like us we would have gone bust at Christmas...it was stressful not knowing if we would get the grant.” Positive re-appraisal seemed helpful for coaches to cope with such demands, with Mark acknowledging that “there's a lot of people that's not involved in football at the moment, it's a very privileged position to be in.”

Logistical and environmental issues

The final organizational theme of logistical and environmental issues comprised of *restrictions impacting coaching development, restrictions directly before performance, and restrictions influencing training/match preparations* (see Figure 2).

Restrictions harming coaching development opportunities (e.g., observation of other positions of leadership) were described as a novel stressor by Ian. COVID-19 restrictions also

impacted pre-match preparations, such as the restriction of changing facilities which was also perceived to be a novel stressor appraised as harmful to performance; “we were changing in a bar...you’re changing in bizarre areas, there is no noise...you hear every single utterance, it was really bizarre” (Adam). Adam felt that acceptance of the situation was not helpful in coping with this novel situation “we didn’t deal with it well at all but how can you prepare any players for a situation we have never been in before”. A third sub-theme related to the training and match preparation throughout COVID-19 which included: travel restrictions, infection, the re-arrangement of fixtures, and limited numbers in groups. COVID-19 restrictions limited travel to view opposition players, which was appraised as a threat for prospective player recruitment and preparation for future performances. However, Kieran discussed how travel restrictions created more ‘free time’ providing the opportunity to engage in League Manager Association (LMA) support services that were perceived to enhance both personal wellbeing and performance:

I’d usually be going to games to watch players and eating badly...over the last twelve months I’ve addressed a lot of those issues in terms of when I eat, when I have caffeine etc.

The novelty of travel restrictions also enhanced the ability to spend more time with family and served as an opportunity to enhance well-being (e.g., I think [COVID-19] has given me the biggest wake-up call...it was always game, game game...when really, I should be at home with my family...time has put that in perspective).

A third sub-theme of logistical and environmental issues was COVID-19 infection. Infection was appraised as a threat by coaches’ due to the temporal uncertainty of when players and staff may contract COVID-19 and the unknown health consequences that may influence future selection availability and competition preparation. For example, Dion explained: “COVID hit our right back particularly hard...his lung capacity is not right but we

miss him [in the squad]...it is still a guessing game...do we push them as much as what we usually would?" Coaches' discussed how their past experiences of coping with injured players enabled them to utilize problem-focused coping adaptively, noting "you've got to be able to adapt, pandemic or no pandemic" (Ian).

By personally contracting COVID-19 coaches were no longer able to attend training and competition. Gary discussed how this was a novel stressor that he perceived could threaten player performance:

these are the first games I've missed in eleven and a half years...[watching the performance] I lost the connection to the streaming a couple of times and I felt like throwing the laptop through the window! You feel a lot more in control on the sideline as your words are there.

Gary then described how engaging in problem-focused coping (e.g., communicating to his assistant via telephone) and positive re-appraisal was helpful to performance. Specifically, Gary discussed how his absence did provide an opportunity to "see things in the game, from an elevated position [camera viewing the game], which is better than on the touchline."

COVID-19 restrictions impacted upon the number of players allowed within performance analysis sections. Such restrictions were appraised as harmful, due to the increase in workload and the quality of coaching discussions because: "you have to do three meetings rather than just one. You can't always remember what you've said and at the third meeting it might be completely different and less emotional." Ed discussed how emotional-focused coping in the form of comfort eating sugary-foods was helpful in coping with the demands of increased workload associated with COVID protocol, but acknowledged the harm that this could have upon physical well-being:

I think that is borne out of stress... If I'm going to put myself through the wringer I

can enjoy a pack of biscuits...I'm fully aware it's probably doing nothing for my waistline, and probably nothing for my arteries (Ed)

The cancelling or rescheduling of fixtures was perceived as a threat or with a sense of harm/loss due to imminence. Kieran discussed how cancelled fixtures influenced perceived success or under performance on the league table, which could be deemed threatening.

Kieran discussed how avoidance coping in the form of not looking at the league tables and focusing on performances could reduce levels of anxiety. Alternatively, Harry discussed how re-appraisal was helpful for emotion regulation and was achieved by "looking at other managers' [under performance] results ...so part of my rebooting was knowing it could be worse, I could be them at the bottom of the table."

Re-scheduled fixtures could also result in excessive or insufficient time between games, which could threaten tactical preparation (e.g., "fixture changes resulted in limited time to review the previous game and then preparing for the opposition as they're [league] trying to cram a season into a shorter period" Adam). Excessive time between games could threaten the match fitness of players. Insufficient recovery time could also influence physical and psychological welfare:

You're seeing a dramatic rise in anterior cruciate injuries...they are just being asked to compete at a physical level unlike anything before...I get frustrated but I have had to adapt and make [training] more specific to the individual player (Adam)

In an attempt to cope with the cancellation of fixtures, Fred discussed an increase in the use of mental preparation, which, when over-used, was recognized as detrimental to well-being:

I was over-analyzing everything and constantly switched on...I'd lay there for an hour thinking about a formation...I notice I haven't got to sleep quite as well [which] then impacts going for a run or going in the gym because you haven't got as much

energy (Fred).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Personal Stressors

Personal stressors were defined as stressors associated primarily and directly with personal “nonsporting” life events (Hanton et al., 2005). Three sub-themes were generated: *non-football COVID-19 restrictions, transmission of COVID-19 and family bereavement* (see Figure 3).

Non-football COVID-19 restrictions

Coaches each discussed how non-football related COVID-19 restrictions had removed their ability to engage in of adaptive distraction strategies used pre-pandemic to maintain well-being (e.g., coffee shops, golf) which could have detrimental influence upon their well-being:

I am just sat at home watching different movies...it's hard, because I'm quite a social person....but during this period of time your release mechanisms are reduced. I love golf and not having that, I've definitely found it stressful. (Calum)

In an attempt to cope, new strategies for coping with personal stressors were discussed and perceived to be beneficial for physical and mental well-being. For instance, Kieran discussed: “before COVID, I'd go to the pub and have a pint on a Sunday to get over the game...but now I leave the phone at home, and just try to get out of the house more...get on the bike and just go into the country park.”

Transmission of COVID-19

A second personal stressor, COVID-19 transmission, was appraised as a threat to coaches' own and others' health. Liam described the threat of “cross contamination... you're constantly thinking I'm coming home to my family after training ...and then coming home where my son has been at school, what's he giving me to then take back to football?”

Coaches' from the NL, NLS and NLN, perceived inequity about measures to maintain safety and well-being in comparison to higher leagues:

all the bigger clubs were all being tested regularly but we're not...I felt like we were almost being told "you're lucky that you are playing"...It was a disgrace we do nothing different than other [league] clubs ...I could be bringing this [COVID-19] home to my family (Liam)

Liam and Mark also discussed the importance of emotion-focused coping in the form of social support to vent frustrations with COVID-19 protocol or safety concerns, namely assistant coaches and volunteers.

Family bereavement

The final personal stressor, family bereavement was appraised as harm/loss. Jamie described how grief impacted upon his ability to regulate emotions associated with performance stressors:

[bereavement] definitely affected me on the side-line...and [you need to] just focus on the game but when you're dealing with stuff [bereavement] it can be emotionally challenging. I've definitely over the last five or six weeks been a lot more aggressive to the officials.

Seeking informational support from professionals associated with the League Managers Association was a strategy helpful for developing adaptive problem-focused and emotional-focused coping strategies. Jamie discussed how following family bereavement this involved "venting, or giving me little triggers and little tools to try and help me manage my own sort of space."

[Insert Figure 3]

Discussion

This study aimed to explore elite football coaches' perceived stressors, the situational

properties, stress appraisals, and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also aimed to explore if there was any variation in stress experiences across football league standards. A number of competitive, organizational, and personal stressors were identified. However, opposition side-line behaviors were a stressor that offers new insight to coaches' stress experiences. Opposition side-line behaviors have not previously been noted as stressful by other coaches (e.g., Baldock et al., 2021; Olusoga et al., 2012). One explanation for the threat and harm appraisal of opposition demands was due to the reduced stadia noise, thus increasing coaches' awareness of opposition coaches' communication and behavior, and their attempts to influence referee decision-making.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational stressors continued to be the most prevalent and problematic stressors for coaches (Simpson et al., 2021). The current study identified the significant implications of leadership and personnel stressors, namely the influence of spectator restriction, which makes a novel contribution to extant knowledge. Pre-COVID, crowd noise has been found to influence the execution of skills and decision-making of referees (Scoppa, 2021). Football coaches have also openly shared accounts of "cheating", "verbal aggression", "fighting" and "influencing the referee" (Higham et al., 2021). Coaches' aggressive side-line behaviors are often 'normalized' and justified due to the highly competitive environment of football and 'need to win' (Higham et al., 2021). Yet, when drawing comparison of coaches' experiences in COVID-19 throughout other sporting contexts, there was recognition of the challenging and unprecedented environment that promoted a need to review, adjust, focus or re-engage with different goals (Costa et al., 2022). However, within this study, coaches' maintained the perceived pressure to win, avoid relegation and survive at all costs. This may explain why coaches' stepped-up efforts to influence officials through their coaching side-line behavior throughout COVID-19. Subsequently, facilitating adaptive conduct and morality within professional football coaches

continues to be an area of perceived need. To date, coaches' have discussed that the current protocol to facilitate 'sporting conduct' and moral behavior is ineffective (e.g., individual reflective tasks on coaching badges) (Higham et al., 2021). As such, league associations could consider group reflective discussions about common moral issues coaches experience to improving side-line behaviors (e.g. the perception that you will obtain favorable officiating outcomes by engaging in aggressive side-line behaviors) (Higham et al., 2021). Group discussions may assist coaches' to be more reflective and honest with their side-line behaviours by sharing experiences (Higham et al., 2021). Following the insights of our coaches interviewed, educational sessions could also be provided to coaches' regarding the negative implications of aggressive side-line behaviours (e.g., distraction from tactical component of the game) and how adapting their behaviour has potential to enhance their coaching performance.

Cultural and team issues relating to communication and team cohesion with athletes are a typical organizational stressor for coaches, particularly due to the influence that communication may have on performance and well-being (e.g., easing anxiety, athlete disclosure; Didymus, 2017). Furthermore, this would underpin why COVID-19 protocols (e.g., mask wearing, social distancing) that could diminish the capacity to view and interpret facial expressions of players and team activities was appraised as stressful by coaches. Turning to logistical and environmental organizational stressors, COVID-19 evoked stressors associated with pre-performance preparations and coaching development. Additionally, restrictions limited the time available for one-to-one conversations that helped facilitate a holistic (i.e., whole-person) understanding of the player and their well-being. Problem-focused coping in the form of increasing the use of technology was appraised as highly beneficial in overcoming this stressor. Particularly for NL, NLN and NLS coaches who discussed that pre-COVID-19 they often had to share their training facilities with community

sport programs or academy clubs, limiting their one-to-one contact time with players. The novelty of COVID-19 restrictions and the increased popularity of technology in the form of video-calls allowed these particular coaches' to engage in unique methodologies that now allowed opportunity for building stronger coach-athlete relationships and understanding of the person (McHenry et al., 2022).

Consistent with other literature, coaches continued to report personal stressors in the form of personal sacrifices (Olusoga et al., 2012) during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, rather than a sacrifice of personal time, coaches' discussed the potential sacrifice and implications for their family member's health if they were to contract and transmit COVID-19. Many elite coaches accept that personal sacrifice is a stressor that is inherent in their role; however, this study suggests that, despite potential health risks, coaches perceived that they were expected to continue to engage in competition and training, which could risk transmission of COVID-19 to their family members.

To understand why coaches appraised stressors as stressful, this study explored the situational properties that underpin environmental demands. Novelty (lack of prior knowledge) of stressors during the pandemic did contrast with the findings of Didymus and Fletcher (2012) who identified novel stressors to be associated more frequently to challenge appraisals. Indeed, novel stressors in the present study were aligned with threat and harm appraisals, which may be explained by a lack of relevant experience and extensive contextual information. For instance, COVID-19 represents a great unknown regarding the physiological changes induced in athletes when returning to sport (Bisciotti et al., 2020). Although the novelty of COVID-19 could initially evoke threatening organizational stressors, informational and problem-focused coping served as a coping mechanism for the coach to re-appraise that stressor as an opportunity for growth or gain (e.g., player recruitment). Temporal uncertainty, imminence, and duration of stressors was discussed by coaches as

underpinning the appraisals of threat and harm/loss. In previous studies temporal uncertainty was not identified due to general awareness of scheduled training and competition (Didymus & Fletcher, 2012). However, COVID-19 created temporal uncertainty in game delays, which evoked significant concerns over the league table and performance preparations (particularly for those testing positive for COVID). Additionally, prior to COVID-19, a significant factor among elite football coaches was the duration of stressors, including high workload (Baldock et al., 2021). During the pandemic additional working hours were required (e.g., to accommodate repeat sessions) and were appraised as harmful to both performance and well-being.

Overall, coaches discussed each of the four transactional alternatives (benefit, challenge, harm/loss, and threat) that are incorporated within the CMRT (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, how crowd absence could be appraised as either a benefit, challenge, threat, or harm/loss for performance depended on a team's ability to manipulate the situation to their advantage. Subsequently, coaches used various coping strategies aligned with problem-focused coping (e.g., information seeking, acceptance) and emotional-focused coping (e.g., avoidance, distraction, re-appraisal). Our study supported the findings of previous research by indicating that coaches use multiple strategies in combination to cope with stressors (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017). Additionally, this study supported the importance of coaches' abilities to flexibly apply their coping strategies depending on stressor properties, appraisals, and coping resources (Skinner et al., 2003). For example, problem-focused coping was perceived as helpful among coaches for increasing actual or perceived control (e.g., using WhatsApp as a means of sharing information and updates). However, the use of problem-focused coping in isolation and in contexts where the coaches had limited control (e.g., players' off pitch behaviors, virus transmission) was likely to evoke unpleasant emotions (e.g., worry, frustration). This may suggest why avoidance (e.g., not

looking at league tables) and or acceptance strategies (e.g., accepting the re-arrangement of fixtures) were deemed helpful when coaches had limited control. In addition to avoidance and acceptance coping, our findings suggested that coaches used distraction strategies (e.g., increased consumption of sugary foods). One reason why individuals may consume palatable foods (i.e., those that are high in sugars and fats), as evidenced also in the present study, is as a means of distraction (albeit temporarily) from the cause of an unpleasant emotion (e.g., fatigue from work overload) (Devonport et al., 2017). Whilst emotional eating as a coping strategy has not previously been identified in coaching literature, it is not unusual among community populations (Ruiz et al., 2021). However, should it evolve to a heavily used strategy it may result in negative implications for health (e.g., fat body mass, cholesterol), well-being (e.g., mood) and performance (e.g., fatigue and focus).

Impartial external support (e.g., from a romantic partner) was deemed to be beneficial when coping with stressors. The male football environment has been identified as a hyper-masculinized sporting environment that promotes a disinclination to show dependency or weakness, and the repression of emotions other than anger (Goldman & Gervis, 2021). This may explain why female presence (e.g., support staff) and romantic partners were deemed to be of benefit in providing an outlet for emotional expression and seeking alternate solutions.

Historically, the NL was a semi-professional football league (King, 2022). In recent years, most teams within the NL are full time due to the increase in revenue generated from television and commercial contracts and player transfers. This would suggest why we identified comparative performance stressors among NL coaches to those experienced by their higher league peers (King, 2022). However, there were contextual differences across the situational properties of organizational stressors experienced by those within the NL, NLS and NLN leagues, namely ambiguity. NL coaches appraised ambiguous stressors with a sense of harm/loss and threat due to the changing information on COVID-19 protocol and finance.

For instance, NL clubs were initially informed that a funding model would be utilized to distribute grants on a pro-rata basis, which later changed to splitting clubs into four bands aligned with their average gate receipts and distributing money in accordance with their allocated band. Occupational literature illustrates similar COVID-19 protocol organizational stressors due to differing perceptions of top-down communication and resource allocations. For instance, Ravalier et al. (2020) identified how poor communication from senior management occurred frequently throughout COVID-19 within smaller NHS trusts, particularly regarding changes directly relevant to nursing staff. Additionally, Stogner et al. (2020) identified how smaller police forces received less frequent informational support and mental health support during COVID-19.

Applied Implications Post-Pandemic

This study highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic evoked many novel and ambiguous stressors which could be appraised as threatening and harmful. Particularly, competitive stressors in the form of opposition and organizational stressors such as spectators and officials. Although, officials were not a novel stressor for coaches per se, it is important to acknowledge the perceived increase in aggressive side-line behaviors to manipulate or cope with officiating decisions during COVID-19. However, such behaviors present one contributory factor towards referee discontinuation, and any reduction in such abuse would assist national FAs in their mission to recruit and retain more referees (Webb, 2021). Following the appraisal of threat, aggressive side-line behaviors were also recognized as a maladaptive coping strategy for emotion regulation. As such, we recommend that league associations should aim to optimize stress responses by facilitating reappraisal interventions that aim to alter individual's appraisal of stressful officiating decisions. For instance, challenge appraisal can facilitate better coping (e.g. avoiding monetary fines for poor side-line conduct) and performance benefits (e.g., increased focus) (Hagger et al., 2020). Football

association leagues may also wish to utilize morality-based behavior change interventions (e.g. doping; Kavussanu et al., 2020 and domestic violence prevention; Bellini et al., 2020) that can significantly reduce the likelihood for individuals to engage in unethical behaviors such as the intimidation of officials for competitive advantage.

There were many adaptive behaviors that occurred throughout COVID-19, particularly the emphasis on ‘person-centered’ coaching. Person-centered coaching has been influential as a discipline concerned with optimal functioning and through the process of self-actualization (Dickinson et al., 2019). The focus within person-centred coaching is to foster people to be “all they can be” and develop a true sense of self through understanding the person and not just the player (Dickinson et al., 2019). The tendency to focus on performance outcomes (e.g. winning and losing) can often overshadow the impact upon athletes’ quality of life and thriving (Gabriel et al., 2014). However, this study captured how as a result of their COVID-19 experiences, optimal well-being and optimal performance co-exist. Thus, an implication of this study is to continue to develop coach awareness on the value of person-centered coaching and how this may positively impact both sport performance and well-being.

The unfamiliar and challenging conditions of COVID-19 also presented an opportunity for coaches to reflect upon the type and usefulness of current coping strategies and from this enhance coping flexibility. For instance, those coaches’ who opted to engage in informational support from the League Managers Association (LMA) noted an increase in coping knowledge that enhanced physical health, particularly sleep and diet. The LMA is a provision provided to managers and coaches’ free of charge within the English Football League, but this is not a free service offered to coaches within the NL, NLS and NLN. Furthermore, we contend that given the contextual similarities in stressors experienced within this study it is important that NL, NLN and NLS coaches’ begin to receive equal

opportunities with the access to informational support, well-being and performance services.

Despite the noted benefits of this service discussed within this study, many elite football coaches often lack willingness to seek support services due to the hypermasculine elite football environments that favour demonstration of masculine worth (Baldock et al., 2021). Psychoeducation workshop sessions that aim to increase mental health literacy have could encourage and increase the use of such professional services (Horn et al., 2017). Additionally, psychoeducation programs with a gatekeeper focus- that is, to educate family members and romantic partners on well-being and mental health provision can also increase help-seeking behaviours (Horn et al., 2017). However, within sport, the how, when, and why coaches rely on their romantic partners during episodes of psychological stress and their influence is unexplored. This vacancy in knowledge is problematic for sport associations who are interested in supporting coaches to cope with the high-pressure environments in which they work. We contend that future research should aim to understand the role of the romantic partner and how they may contribute to the sustenance of coaches' performance and well-being.

The present study offers novel contributions to the coach stress literature and highlights areas for further investigation. A strength of this research is the illustration of appraisal and coping strategies not previously reported to be used by football coaches during times of stress have been identified, such as emotional eating. Future interventions could, and we would argue should, explore the reappraisal interventions that aim to alter individual's appraisal of stressful situations (e.g. officiating decisions) and psychoeducation workshops that may increase the use of well-being and performance services.

A limitation with the current study was the absence of Premier League coach representation. A difficult population to reach, Premier League coaches perform at the highest level of football and as such may have experienced different stressors or resources

that may have influenced the subsequent stress process (e.g., appraisal, coping).

Conclusion

Guided by transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study identified various competitive, organizational, and personal stressors experienced by football coaches throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Typically, coaches alluded to stressors being underpinned by the situational properties of novelty, temporal uncertainty, imminence, duration and timing in relation to the life cycle. Coaches also reported how coping flexibility could have positive implications for well-being and coaching performance. Future research should seek to explore interventions that strengthen coaches' coping flexibility and understanding of the stress and coping experiences of stakeholders (coaches', players, staff) within the National League context.

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League	Average Crowd Attendance (22/23)	Highest Attendance (22/23)	Lowest Attendance (22/23)	Average player salary per week (£)	Total financial support received during COVID-19 (£)
Premier League	39,966	74,674	10,179	60,000	None
Championship	18,793	39,368	9,831	35,000	117,500,000 (loan)
League One	12,407	28,588	2,382	5,000	30,000,000 (additional 20 available upon application)
League Two	4,924	18,036	2,721	1,000	30,000,000(additional 20,000,000 available upon application)
National League	2,331	9,880	1,305	1,000	24,000,000
National League North	952	2,215	293	500	15,000,000
National League South	733	1,991	286	500	15,000,000

Table 1. League table demographics

Figure 1. Competitive stressors, appraisals and coping strategies

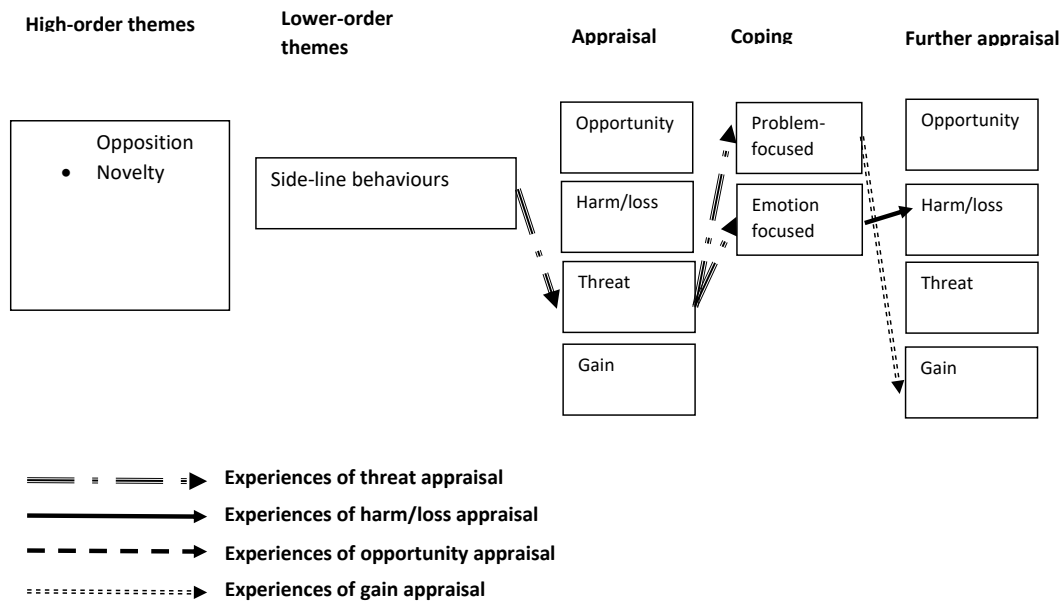


Figure 2. Organizational stressors, appraisals and coping strategies

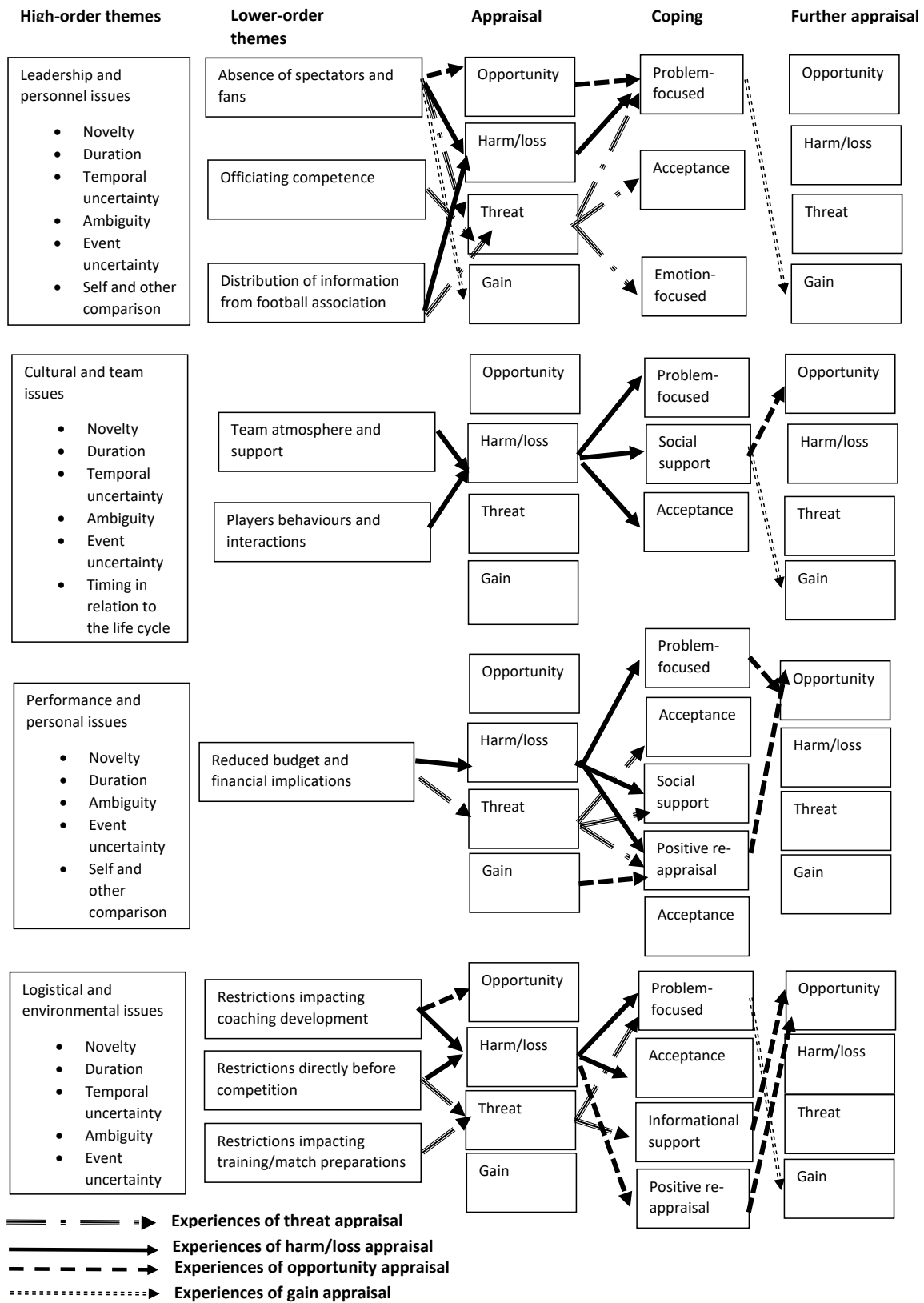


Figure 3. Personal stressors, appraisals and coping strategies

