



## ***The Coach's Role in Young Athletes' Emotional Competence and Psychological Well-being***

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This paper presents a model that analyses the relationship between the coach's emotional competences and the training climate as predictors of the youngsters' emotional competences and psychological well-being. In the present study, 309 athletes and 17 coaches participated in the study. A general predictive model was estimated with path analysis and the maximum robust likelihood (MLR) estimation method. The results showed that the coach's emotional competences are associated with autonomy-supportive climates ( $\beta = .15, p < .005$ ). This climate is related to youth's emotional competences ( $\beta = .30, p < .005$ ) and lower emotional ( $\beta = -.27, p < .005$ ), behavioural ( $\beta = -.51, p < .005$ ), and social ( $\beta = -.33, p < .005$ ) symptomatology. These results have important practical implications in designing interventions that promote coaches' emotional competences given its association with autonomy-supportive climates, which in turn are related to athletes' emotional competences and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** coaching, athletes, autonomy-supportive climate, mental health, well-being.

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### **Introduction**

Sports have long been considered as an ideal context for the healthy development of young people (Weiss, 2016). Its interactive, emotional, and social nature offers multiple opportunities to promote the growth of the people who practice it (Danish et al., 2004; Hellison et al., 2007). Various studies have shown how, through

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sports, young people acquire multiple life skills,-behavioural, cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences, - necessary to cope with daily demands (Cronin & Allen, 2015; Johnston et al., 2013). Among the life skills that young people can develop through sports are emotional competences (Johnston et al., 2013), which are defined as “a set of knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand, express, and regulate emotional phenomena appropriately” (Bisquerra, 2003, p. 22). According to Kopp and Jekauc (2018), emotions in sports influence athletes’ perceptions, cognition, neurophysiology, behaviour, motor expression, feelings, and decision making. These do not only facilitate their learning (Bisquerra & Pérez, 2007) and performance (Beedie et al., 2000; Jekauc & Brand, 2017) but their well-being as well (Laborde et al., 2016). Meta-analytical studies (Kopp & Jekauc, 2018) and systematic reviews (Laborde et al., 2016; Magrum et al., 2019) have supported these conclusions, highlighting the relationship between athletes’ development of emotional competences and lower levels of anxiety, more positive emotions, adequate coping strategies, happiness, and satisfaction with life.

Although sports can contribute to practitioners’ emotional development and, consequently, well-being (Ajamil et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2003), its positive effects will depend on how the sports activity is oriented (Benedicto & De Los Fayos, 2003). Young people may have different experiences during their sports practice, with both positive and negative emotional consequences (Broh, 2002; Mahoney, 2000). Therefore, it is necessary to continue exploring the mechanisms through which sports practice promotes positive emotional competences by identifying the respective predictors and benefits of these competences (Cronin & Allen, 2015).

The ability to develop emotional competences through sports practice in the initiation stages depends, to a large extent, on the figure of the coach (Aguado et al., 2015). In this sense, the coach’s behaviour, their relationship with the athletes, and the way they communicate affect young athletes’ training process (Ramírez et al., 2016). However, despite the coach’s influence on their athletes, few studies have focused on their role in transmitting emotional competences (Estero, 2008; Sánchez et al., 2001; Villora et al., 2009).

As Watson and Kleinert (2019) point out, coaches’ emotional competences influence both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. On the one hand, they allow coaches to properly understand and regulate their own emotions, demonstrate emotional stability, and positively influence their athletes (Becker, 2009). On the other hand, the development of emotional competences influences the ability to correctly perceive and understand other people’s emotions, which helps them infer athletes’ intentions and act according to their needs (Lorimer, 2013). In fact, Watson and Kleinert (2019) observed that, compared to competent coaches, coaches who were not emotionally competent tended to mistakenly consider that the needs of their athletes were satisfied when, in fact, they were not. On the contrary, emotionally competent coaches constantly tried to create training climates that satisfied the needs and improved the psychological well-being of their athletes (Watson & Kleinert, 2019). They could recognize, process, and modulate their behaviour according to the emotional information received. Studies have also shown that, when coaches generate training climates according to their athletes’ needs, they have a greater impact on their athletes’ level of learning (Afkhami et

al., 2011; Thelwell et al., 2008). The athletes, in turn, show more prosocial behaviors (Andrews, 2014) and more adaptive leadership skills (Hwang et al., 2013; Lobinger & Heisler, 2016). These studies show that not only does coaches' emotional competences lead to the creation of training climates that facilitate youngsters' development, but that these coach-created climates are critical to understanding the development of athletes' emotional competences.

The process through which, by their behaviour and interaction, coaches generate favourable climates for the development of young athletes, has been analysed mainly from two theoretical frameworks: the achievement goal theory (AGT) (Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Nicholls, 1989) and the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). The AGT proposes that the coach can create a climate oriented to the task or the outcome. When coaches create a task-oriented environment, as opposed to an outcome-oriented one, they value the effort of their athletes, focus their attention on aspects of learning, take the athletes' point of view into account, and promote positive personal relationships (Newton et al., 2000). The SDT proposes that the coach can generate controlling climates or autonomy-supportive climates for the athletes. Coaches who support autonomy, as opposed to controllers, justify the tasks, create a non-controlling environment by offering a choice, allowing athletes to take the initiative and work independently, and they recognize the athlete's feelings (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Authors such as Sáenz-López et al. (2017) have shown that the autonomy-supportive climate is significantly related to the task-oriented climate.

Based on the principles and theoretical concepts of AGT (Nicholls, 1989) and SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), Duda (2013) presented a multidimensional model of empowering and disempowering motivational climate in sports. Within this model, a motivational climate that is task-involving, autonomy and socially supportive, might be considered empowering (Solstad et al., 2018). In contrast, a disempowering climate is created when ego-involving and controlling features guide the behaviour of coaches. The literature encourages the creation of empowering as opposed to disempowering climates as they have been linked to athletes' greater satisfaction of psychological needs and psychological well-being, and negatively correlated with athlete burnout (Balaguer et al., 2012; Cronin & Allen, 2015; Duda, 2013; Smith et al., 2007). Such studies show that a motivational climate in which the coach shows more empathy, facilitates communication, and recognizes and accepts athletes' feelings is ideal for youngsters' emotional development.

Finally, although acquiring emotional competences has an essential link to positive development and well-being (Humphrey et al., 2011; Pérez & Filella, 2019), particularly in specific stages of development such as the transition from childhood to adolescence (Sánchez-Calleja et al., 2016). At this stage, changes, tensions, and conflicts can contribute to adolescents' emotional instability and discouragement (Filella-Guiu et al., 2014; González & Villanueva, 2014). If emotional competences are present at these early stages of the life cycle, adolescents would be manage these changes, tensions, and emotional problems more appropriately, leading to greater psychological well-being (Sánchez-Calleja et al., 2016; Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal, 2004). Emotional education before adolescence has been shown to promote positive adolescent development, contributing to personal and social well-being through resilience, self-efficacy, identity, hope about the future,

and prosocial behaviour (Catalano et al., 2004; Extremera et al., 2011). However, the relationship between emotional competences and psychological development and well-being in these early stages of development has received little attention in sports practice (Buñuel et al., 2020).

In conclusion, understanding emotional competences in sports practice should consider the relationship between the coach's emotional competences and the autonomy-supportive training climate as predictors of youngsters' emotional competences, as well as the role of these competences in the athletes' psychological well-being. The present study adopts a systemic stance and aims to understand the coach's role in athletes' acquisition of emotional competences and their psychological well-being. A secondary objective is to examine whether these associations are moderated by sex and age of child and adolescent athletes. Although gender differences in emotional competences are a controversial topic in the literature, some research has found differences in the stages of childhood and adolescence (Harrod & Scheer, 2005; Santesso et al., 2006), indicating that girls are more emotionally competent than boys (Heras Sevilla et al., 2016). On the other hand, authors such as Mayer et al. (2003) and López-González and Oriol (2016) propose that emotional competences increase with age and cognitive ability. The existing heterogeneity may explain these evolutionary differences between children and adolescents aged 9 to 14 years (Rodas Martínez, 2016). However, as some authors (Tsaousi & Kazi, 2013) point out, there are not enough studies to elucidate the possible differences in terms of emotional competences.

In the present study we hypothesise that the coach's emotional competences will be positively associated with creating an autonomy-supportive climate. This climate, in turn, will be positively related to athletes' emotional competences and, consequently, greater psychological well-being. As a secondary objective, we expect gender and age to moderate this relationship, such that the female and the older participants will show higher emotional competences.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample comprised 309 athletes and 17 coaches belonging to 5 soccer clubs in the Basque Autonomous Community. Of the total, 166 were boys, 139 girls, and 4 did not define themselves as either boys or girls. Figure 1 shows a more detailed description of the gender distribution of athletes by club. Athletes were aged between 9 and 14, the boys' average age being 11.59 (SD = 1.10), and the girls' 11.37 (SD = 1.17). A total of 53.4% of the participants were adolescents born in 2009 and 2008, and 46.6% children born in 2010 and 2011. The sample had played in a soccer team for an average of 4.76 years (SD = 2.32). Five of the coaches were females (mean age 24.20) and 12 males (mean age 29.67) with overall age ranging from 19 to 43 years. The average number of years of training a sports team was 3.29 (SD = 1.09). According to this sample, the study guarantees a maximum margin of error of 5.58% assuming a 95% confidence level.

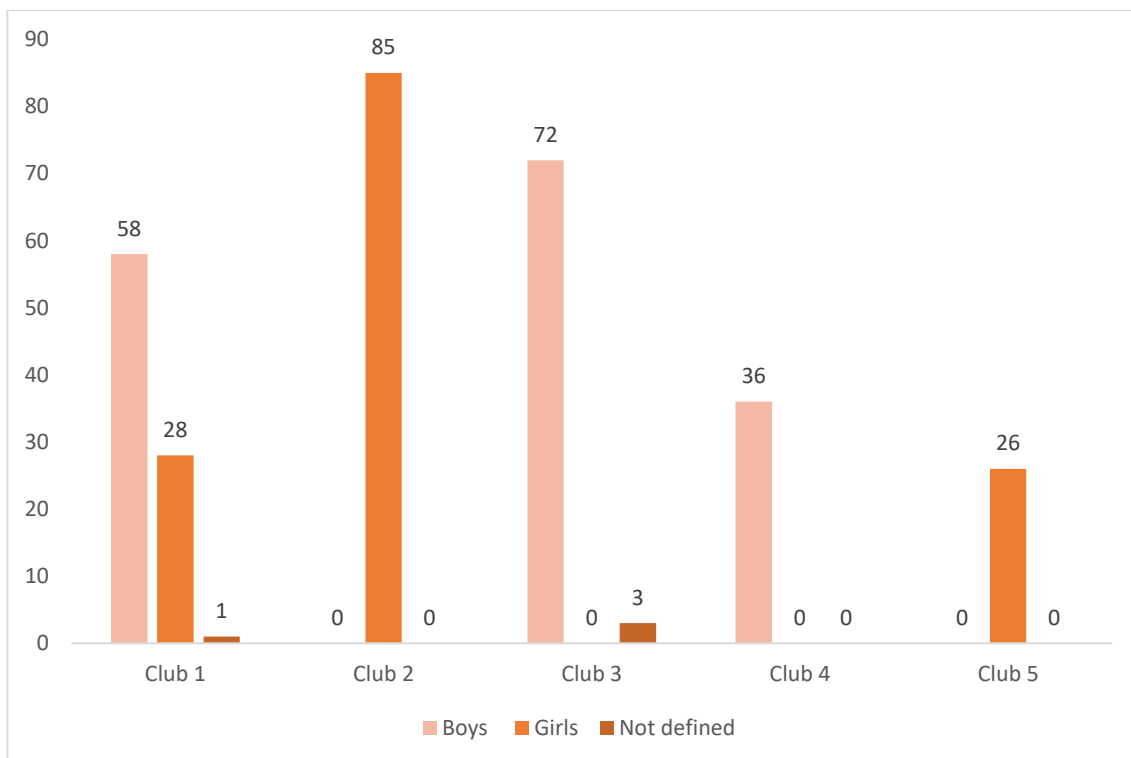


Figure 1. Gender distribution of athletes by club

### Procedure

A convenience sampling method was used, with different clubs of Bizkaia in the juvenile and children's categories invited to participate. Subsequently, we informed the families from the clubs who agreed to the objectives and characteristics of the study and provided the contact details of the researchers to resolve any doubts that might arise. Following parental consent, the questionnaires were administered to the coaches and athletes of all the clubs on the same day, at the facilities of each club. Before administering the questionnaires, we explained the conditions of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Questionnaire completion required approximately 15 minutes. The data management followed the guidelines established by Organic Law 3/2018 on the Protection of Personal Data. There was no economic remuneration for participation in the study.

### Instruments

*Sociodemographic questionnaire.* This included information on the following variables: age, sex, club, and years playing soccer with a sports team.

*Emotional Quotient Inventory Youth Version (EQ-i:YV;* Bar-On & Parker, 2000, adapted to Spanish by Ferrándiz et al., 2012). This self-assessment scale was completed by young athletes to measure their emotional competence. It consists of 60 items divided into five scales rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (it never happens to me) to 4 (it always happens to me). In the present study, we used 30 items corresponding to the dimensions of Interpersonal Skills (e.g. "It is hard to talk about my deep feelings") Intrapersonal Skills

(e.g. “I am good at understanding the way other people feel”) and Stress Management (e.g. “I can talk easily about my feelings”). The scale has been validated with a Spanish adolescent sample by Ferrándiz et al. (2012) in which the concurrent validity was confirmed and adequate reliability was established for each dimension (Cronbach's alpha from .63 to .80). Similar values were found in the present research with a McDonald Omega of .75 for the Interpersonal Skills, .71 for Intrapersonal Skills, and .75 for Stress Management.

*Profile of Emotional Competence* (PEC; Brasseur et al. 2013, adapted to Spanish by Páez et al., 2016). This self-assessment instrument was completed by coaches to measure their emotional competence. It consists of 50 items divided into two scales: Intrapersonal (e.g., “When I am touched by something, I immediately know what I feel”) and Interpersonal Competence (e.g., “I often take the wrong attitude to people because I was not aware of their emotional state). Items are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally agree) to 7 (totally disagree). Páez et al., (2016) validated the scale in a Spanish sample in which the concurrent validity was confirmed and adequate reliability in the Intrapersonal (Cronbach alpha of .85) and Interpersonal (Cronbach alpha of .87) scales was observed. The overall reliability of the questionnaire in the present study followed the same behaviour with a McDonald Omega of .78 and .81 for the Intrapersonal and Interpersonal scales respectively.

*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997; adapted to Spanish by Rodríguez-Hernández, 2014). This scale was completed by athletes to measure their psychological well-being, operationalised through the 15 items that make up the subscales of Emotional Symptomatology (e.g., “I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness”), Behavioural Problems (e.g., “I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want”), and Peer Problems (e.g., “I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep to myself”). Items are rated on a Likert scale with three response options: 0 (no, not at all), 1 (sometimes), and 2 (yes, always). Different studies have analysed the validity of the scale in the Spanish population, confirming criterion validity and observing both discrete and adequate reliability in the dimensions of Emotional Symptomatology, Conduct Problems and Problems with Peers (Cronbach’s alpha range from .56 to .71 and McDonald’s Omega from .83 to .87) (Español-Martín et al., 2020; Ortuno-Sierra et al., 2015). The internal consistency observed in the present research was moderate and similar to the one reported by Ortuno-Sierra et al. (2015) in Spanish adolescent population, with a McDonald Omega of .55 for Emotional Symptomatology, .58 for Behavioural Problems, and .54 for Peer Problems.

*Sport Climate Questionnaire* (Balaguer et al., 2009). This questionnaire was completed by athletes to measure their perception of the degree of autonomy support provided by their coaches. We used the reduced 6-item version, where responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The questions included items such as, “I feel understood by my coach”. Balaguer et al. (2009) confirmed the convergent validity and reliability of the reduced version of this scale in a sample of Spanish athletes with a Cronbach alpha of .93. The internal consistency of the reduced 6-item version in the present research was also high with a McDonald Omega of .84.

## Results

The general predictive model of analysis included paths going from the coach's emotional competences to the generated autonomy climate, from the autonomy climate to the athletes' emotional competences, and, finally, from the athletes' emotional competences to the subscales of Emotional Symptomatology, Behavioural Problems, and Problems with Peers. The model, which considered correlations between the dependent variables, showed adequate fit ( $\chi^2(7, N = 309) = 8.58, p = .28, RMSEA = 0.027$  (90% CI [0.0, 0.078]), NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.035). Figure 1 shows the main parameters of the final model. The paths of all the variables were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Specifically, the coach's emotional competences were associated with an autonomy-supportive climate. The coach-created autonomy-supportive climate was related to the young athletes' emotional competences, while the athletes' emotional competences were associated with a decrease in Emotional Symptomatology, Behavioural Problems, and Problems with Peers.

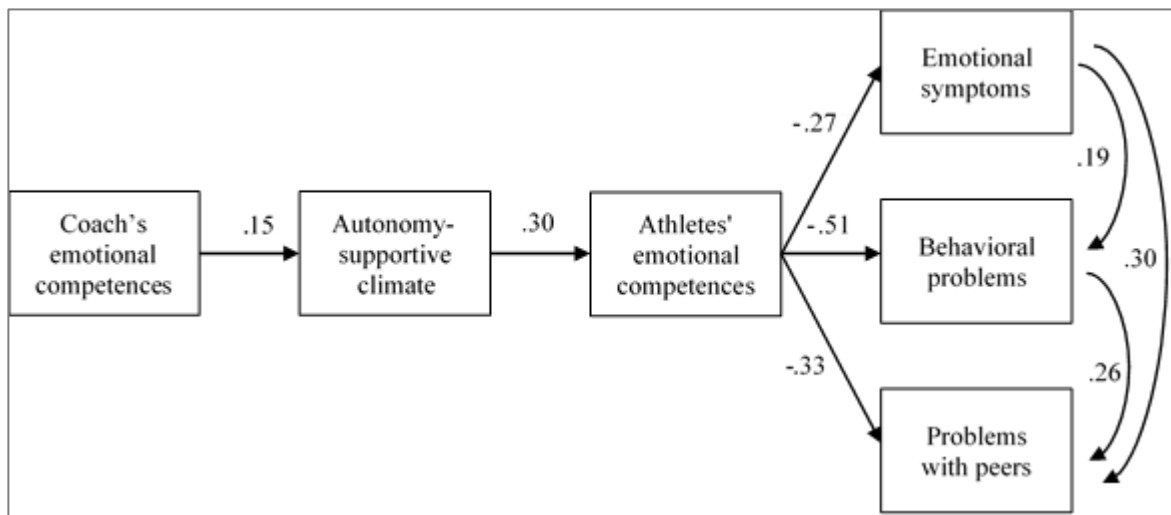


Figure 2. Predictive model for coaches' emotional competences and autonomy climate, and athletes' emotional competences, emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, and problems with peers.

### *Sex and age differences*

The invariance of the model according to sex was then examined, excluding from the analysis those participants who did not define themselves as boys or girls. The unrestricted model on all parameters showed good fit indices ( $\chi^2(14, N = 309) = 11.35, p = .66, RMSEA = 0.02$  (90% CI [0.0, 0.06]), NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.045). This model was compared to a restricted model in which paths were constrained to be equal in both subsamples. This imposition did not increase the value of  $\chi^2$  significantly ( $\Delta\chi^2[5, N = 309] = 7.23, p = .20$ ).

A similar procedure was performed to analyse invariance as a function of age (children aged 9-11 years vs. adolescents aged 12-14 years). The unrestricted model showed good fit indices ( $\chi^2(14, N = 309) = 23.49, p = .05, RMSEA = 0.066$  (90% CI [0.0, 0.11]), NNFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.062). This restricted model increased the value of  $\chi^2$  significantly ( $\Delta\chi^2[5, N = 309] = 12.98, p < .05$ ), indicating that the model

differed between child and adolescent athletes. Finally, individual paths were studied to determine where the differences between the models were.

The difference in the path between the coaches' emotional competences and the coach-created autonomy-supportive climate was statistically significant and higher in the subgroup of older athletes than in the younger ones ( $\beta = 0.10$  [SE = 0.02];  $p < .05$  vs.  $\beta = 0.01$  [SE = 0.02],  $p > .05$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2$  [1, N = 309] = 12.12,  $p < .001$ ). The rest of paths were not statistically significant, either between the autonomy-supportive climate and the athletes' emotional competences ( $\beta = 0.48$  [SE = 0.11];  $p < .05$  vs.  $\beta = 0.47$  [SE = 0.14],  $p > .05$ ), or between the athletes' emotional competences and their Emotional Symptomatology ( $\beta = -0.06$  [SE = 0.01],  $p < .05$  vs.  $\beta = -0.04$  [SE = 0.01],  $p > .05$ ).

## Discussion

The present study explored the mechanisms underlying how sports practice promotes positive emotional competences by seeking to identify the predictors of these competences and the benefits of their acquisition. We found that the coach's emotional competences and the coach-created autonomy-supportive climate relate to the athletes' emotional competences and, consequently, to their psychological well-being. Previous research has already shown that the greater the coach's emotional competence, the greater their sensitivity to the needs of their athletes (Lorimer, 2013; Watson & Kleinert, 2019). However, to our knowledge this is the first study to find a relationship between emotionally competent coaches and the creation of climates that support athletes' autonomy. These data support the Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which highlights the relevance of contexts that promote people's autonomy to meet their basic needs.

On the other hand, the autonomy-supportive climate was associated with the athletes' emotional competences. This result is consistent with existing literature (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003, Smith et al. (2007) and the multidimensional model of empowering and disempowering motivational climate (Duda 2013). According to these authors, autonomy-supportive coaches, in contrast to coaches who generate controlling climates (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Mars et al., 2017), recognize their athletes' feelings and allow the athletes to take the initiative, leading to a positive emotional experience as well as emotional competence (Buñuel et al., 2020).

The results of the present research showed that the athletes' emotional competences were related to fewer emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, problems with peers and, therefore, greater psychological well-being. These results reflect previous findings in non-sports samples, where emotional competences are related to a reduction in internalizing problems such as anxiety or depression, whilst externalizing problems such as aggression, behavioural problems, delinquency and substance use are associated with a lack of emotional competences (Durlak et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 2003; Martín Jorge et al., 2008; Wilson & Lepsey, 2007). Thus, the present study shows the need to generate training climates and interventions in the sports context aimed at improving athletes' emotional competences.



There were no statistically significant gender differences in the study, contrasting with the limited research to date, which indicates that females are more emotionally competent than males. This apparent contradiction requires further investigation (Heras Sevilla et al., 2016). However, the results obtained in this research could also lead us to hypothesize that, in the early stages of development as in the present study, there may be either no emotional competence differences or that the current educational process contributes to an emotional approximation between boys and girls. These aspects need to be confirmed in future research. We found a significant difference between the younger (9-11 years) and older athletes (12-14 year) (López-González & Oriol, 2016; Mayer et al., 2003), highlighting the need to consider children and adolescents differently in training programs and to adapt the contents according to the athletes' developmental stage.

The findings of the study need to be considered in the light of its limitations. Firstly, the participants were exclusively young soccer players and coaches for children and young people, so the results obtained cannot be generalised to other sports and ages. Further studies may replicate this research with different sports disciplines. Moreover, given the absence of validated instruments in sports, emotional competences were analysed through a generic instrument that might not adequately identify emotional competences and specific well-being related specifically to sports practice. In fact, the subscales of the SDQ scale did not reach the recommended values to ensure reliability (Nunnally, 1978). The homogeneity of the sample or the small number of items in each subscale, might be affecting the discrete levels of reliability found in the present study. It has also been suggested that reliability of the SDQ scores could be improved by using a five Likert response format (Lozano et al., 2008). Finally, the present correlational study only examined the relationships between the above-mentioned variables, and we recommend a longitudinal design to analyse causal relationships and the maintenance of the relationships over time.

Despite these limitations, the results of the present study contribute to our understanding of how the coach can influence the athletes' emotional and psychological well-being. Likewise, the conclusions obtained have a direct application in professional practice. Firstly, the findings highlight the importance of sports psychology as a discipline that enhances not only sports performance but also its practitioners' well-being. Secondly, coaches need to acquire skills that favour their emotional competence, given its role in developing autonomy-supportive climates that positively influence athletes' emotional and psychological well-being. Thirdly, age differences suggest the need for training to be tailored according to developmental needs (Tsaousis & Kazi, 2013).

## **Disclosure**

This is to confirm that the authors of this paper do not have any conflict of interest.

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