



**4th International Academic Conference  
on Teaching, Learning and Education**

**Characteristics of Coaches' Behaviour  
Towards an Elite Japanese University  
Athlete Displaying Psychosomatic  
Movement Disorders: A Longitudinal Case Study  
in Elite Sports Education**

**Olivia C. OGAWA, Ph.D.**

The University of the Ryukyus

**Abstract.**

This study longitudinally explored the characteristics of coaches' behaviour towards an elite Japanese university athlete exhibiting a psychosomatic movement disorder and examined avenues to provide psychological support to coaches throughout their career. Generally, coaches in elite sports education are teachers and ex-players who began their athletic careers in early childhood. According to existing literature, some coaches exhibit problematic behaviour such as abuse and violence. From the psychodynamic perspective, this is likely the result of psychological characteristics that were developed based on their parents and surrogate relationships since childhood. Research data using semi-structured interviews and Sano and Makita's sentence completion tests were initially collected to analyse the psychological development of the athlete. The participant was longitudinally followed up after five years. The data were analysed using Marcia's identity status rating scale and Kawakita's affinity diagrams. Consequently, in the first study, the athlete was categorised under 'foreclosure' as per Marcia's model and 'invaded' as per Ogawa's categorizations, which demonstrates psychological immaturity and family dependency. In the first study, coaches and parents often interfered excessively, which annoyed the athlete. At the five-year follow up, it was noted that the athlete began considering their athletic retirement independently. However, coaches tended to display continuous interference and sabotage the athlete's independence. Therefore, (a) considering co-dependency in the coaches and athlete relationships is essential for their psychological development, and (b) focusing on coaches' psychological development should be important for supporting coaches' aptitudes.

**Keywords:** athlete and surrogate relationships, elite education, family dependency, clinical psychology, school counselling



# 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

## 1. Introduction

Elite athletes in Japan tend to have unique lifestyles compared to other people. For example, they start their athletic careers in early childhood and spend most of their time in small groups, such as with coaches, families, and teammates. They are often absent from school because they need to travel and participate in national or international sports games. Athletes often start their athletic careers, because of their parents' directions or coaches' enthusiastic recruitment. Especially in Japanese elite sports education, athletes usually enter school with special recommendations for sports based on their athletic achievements rather than academic achievements and often commence coaching careers as their post retirement careers. Furthermore, coaches in Japanese elite sports education are generally ex-players who also began their athletic careers in early childhood. Since they have been strongly influenced by their parents or coaches as athletes, after their coaching career begins, they exert a considerable influence on the players they coach. Therefore, coaches play the important roles of surrogates who behave like real parents for athletes. In Japan, athletes tend to be immature in their relationships with parents and surrogates (Kemuriyama & Ogawa, 2021). Since the athletes are usually together, elite sports may have limited and distinct cultures that lead to athletes not creating their own networks, and as a result, their psychological features are passed down through generations like family relationships. Furthermore, coaches are sometimes athletes' biological parents who have played in elite sports.

According to the author's previous research which started with Ogawa (2013) and other public reports such as Human Rights Watch (2020) and NSPCC(2021), some coaches exhibit problematic behaviour such as abuse and violence. The discussions imply that child abuse happens in the relationships between athletes and coaches, who act as parents. From the psychodynamic perspective, this is likely the result of psychological characteristics that were developed based on interactions with their parents and surrogate relationships since childhood. This study discusses a case study of coaches' behaviour towards an athlete who displayed psychosomatic movement disorders.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction of the participant

This research was conducted longitudinally. In the first study, the participant was a 22-year-old athlete who had just graduated from university and continued participating in competitive sports in the workplace. They originally started their sports in the lower grades of elementary school, but they did not play competitive sports during junior high school. They encountered a different sport and wanted to play it in high school. After consulting with a teacher, they decided to take an entrance examination for a high school that required special skills apart from sports. During high school, they achieved the goal of being a high-ranking player at the national games for Japanese high schools. Around the same time, they started displaying a psychosomatic movement disorder. After completing high school, they entered university, obtaining an athletic



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

scholarship in elite education and again attained high-ranking scores at the national games. In addition to the psychosomatic movement disorders, they struggled with tight schedules and difficult human relationships in family and sports during university. Difficult interpersonal relationships persisted after they graduated from university. In order to acquire psychological and life stability in both human relationships and the workplace, they eventually decided to attend another job interview for those with special skills related to sports and were successfully in obtaining a new job that allowed them opportunities to participate in competitive sports games. In the second study, they started thinking about their athletic retirement after a traffic accident.

In terms of their coaches, several people coached the participant based on their schools or workplaces.

### 2.2 Research method

Research data were initially collected to analyse the psychological development of the athlete. The participant was longitudinally followed up after five years. Semi-structured interviews and Sentence Completion Tests (SCT; Sano & Makita, 1960) were conducted in order to analyse the athlete's psychological state. Interview questions were based on the identity status interviews (Marcia, 1964), the participant's developmental history, and family condition, including the characteristics of coaches, acting as surrogate parents to the athlete. Data were analysed using the identity status rating scale (Marcia, 1964), the developmental theory (Erikson, 1959), and the KJ method<sup>1</sup> (Kawakita, 1967), which is a common qualitative research method in Japan. In this study, the coaches' psychological characteristics were focused on and discussed based on the affinity diagrams of the KJ method.

As for validity in the first study, three clinical psychologists supervised different elements of this research, and all three evaluated the data analysis process to ensure efficacy. They confirmed that the research design was valid. In the second study, four psychologists ethically evaluated and validated the methodology of this research before the second research was started. Two psychologists evaluated and validated the analysis after the data were collected.

### 3. Results

Regarding the participant, their psychological development status was categorised under 'foreclosure' (Marcia, 1964) and 'invaded' (Ogawa, 2013), which demonstrates psychological immaturity and family dependency. Ogawa (2013) stated that, in the 'invaded' category, athletes often feel annoyed with excessive interference by parents or surrogates. After they

---

<sup>1</sup> The KJ method includes the following four steps: (a) card making, (b) grouping, (c) chart making and (d) explanation. Figures 1 and 2 in this research were created during step (c). Regarding details in each step, see original discussions in Kawakita (1967) in Japanese or summary in English in Ogawa (2021).



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

move away from the interference, they feel frightened and try to find a safe environment; otherwise, they return to the protection of their parents or surrogates. This indicates a vicious circle of evasion and dependence. Hence, they are dependent on their parents or surrogates permanently. On the other hand, sports become a defence against the interference of parents. Athletes tend to get agitated because of unexpected situations. Furthermore, somatic symptoms and problematic behaviour are displayed when they cannot handle situations with rules and orders given by parents or surrogates. It has been observed that athletes are rarely challenged to tackle developmental tasks since childhood; therefore, they do not acquire efficacy. The basic spatial pattern of this category, according to Ogawa (2013), is shown in Fig. 1.

### 3.1 Coaches' characteristics in the first study

In this case, the first research was conducted just after their university graduation, so they talked about several coaches who had been dealing with the athlete throughout their sports career. In addition to coaches, a teacher suggested that the athlete should appear for a high school entrance examination. The examination was designed for the people with special skills unrelated to the sports they wanted to participate in at that school.

A coach at the university recruited elite athletes, including the participant, but later behaved abusively towards the participant when their behaviour or achievements in sports were

---

unacceptable to the coach. Another coach at the university was an active international sportsperson, but their narcissistic coaching style was not accepted by the participant.

Around the same time, the participant also felt annoyed by the excessive interference from their mother. Based on the affinity diagram in Fig. 1, the participant unconsciously wanted sports as a psychological protection from their mother's interference. However, as the environment, with respect to coaches' behaviour was unstable, sports did not always provide them with psychological stability. Therefore, they would go back to the protection of their mother when confronted with the problematic situations created by their coaches in elite sports education.



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

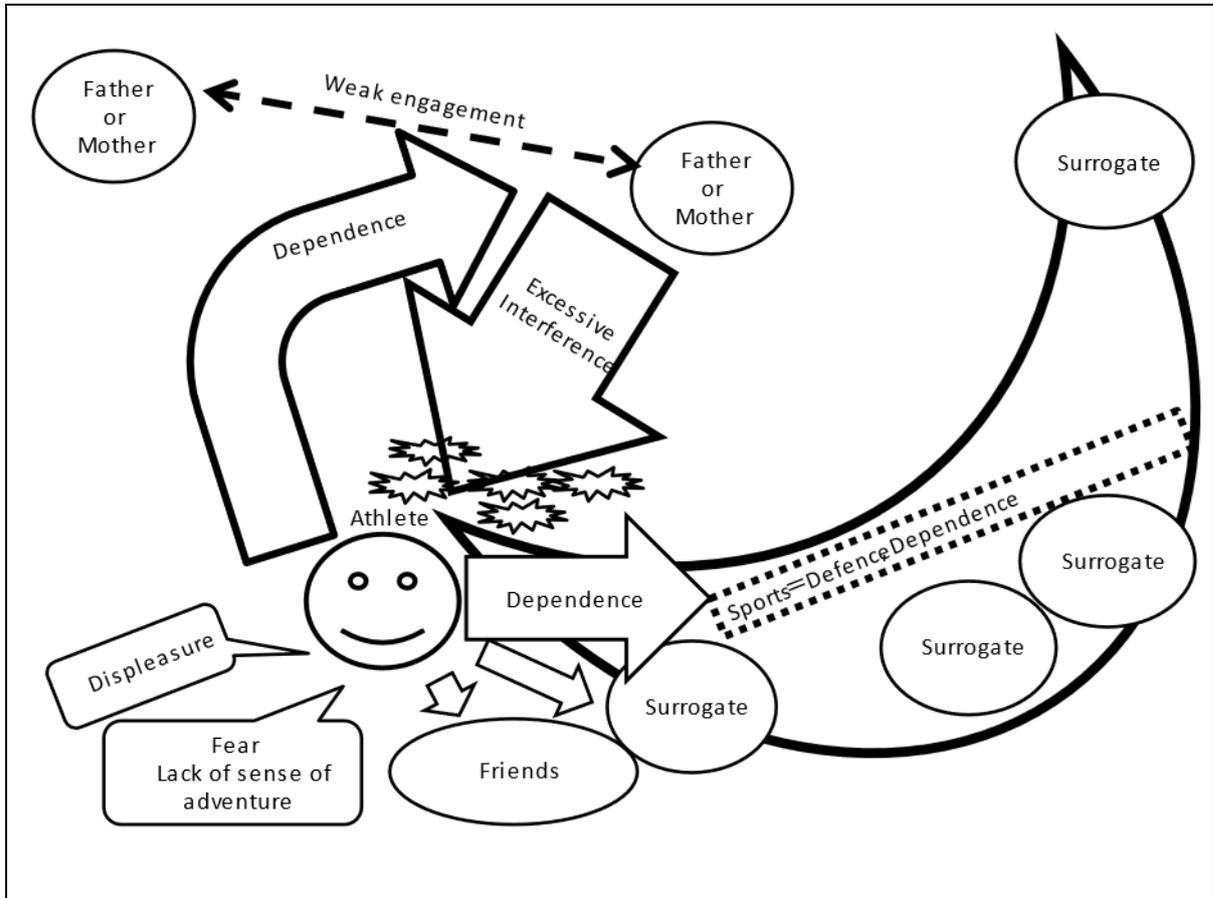


Figure 1: The inner world of invaded

### 3.2 Coaches' characteristics in the second study

After five years, in the second study the participant mentioned that they required prolonged rest due to a traffic accident. The accident was a stressful event, but it made them begin considering their athletic retirement independently. They decided to attend a job interview for a workplace that would provide a stable environment including human relationships. Meanwhile, the coaches in the workplace, who were different from the people at university, strongly sabotaged the participant's challenge by placing the participant in the office and giving long lectures in order to control the participant. It is considered that the participant was again abused psychologically by the coaches, who were strongly dependent on the athlete. In that case, the athlete tried to behave independently. However, coaches, in their roles as surrogates, tended to display continuous interference and sabotage the athlete's independence.



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

Furthermore, their grandfather passed away due to an illness. This situation united their family emotionally and provided the mother with an opportunity to change how she interacted with the participant. Meanwhile, the participant hoped to depart from home. The mother was initially surprised and objected to this decision of the participant. However, she eventually showed kindness toward the participant. Finally, the mother tried to understand and support the participant's independence because they made an effort, with their sister's help, to find adequate words to carefully explain their own opinions and their need for independence to their mother.

Thus, in the follow-up study, it was revealed that the participant became psychologically independent because of certain situations and family understandings. However, the coaches remained psychologically immature and were found to be strongly dependent on the participant.

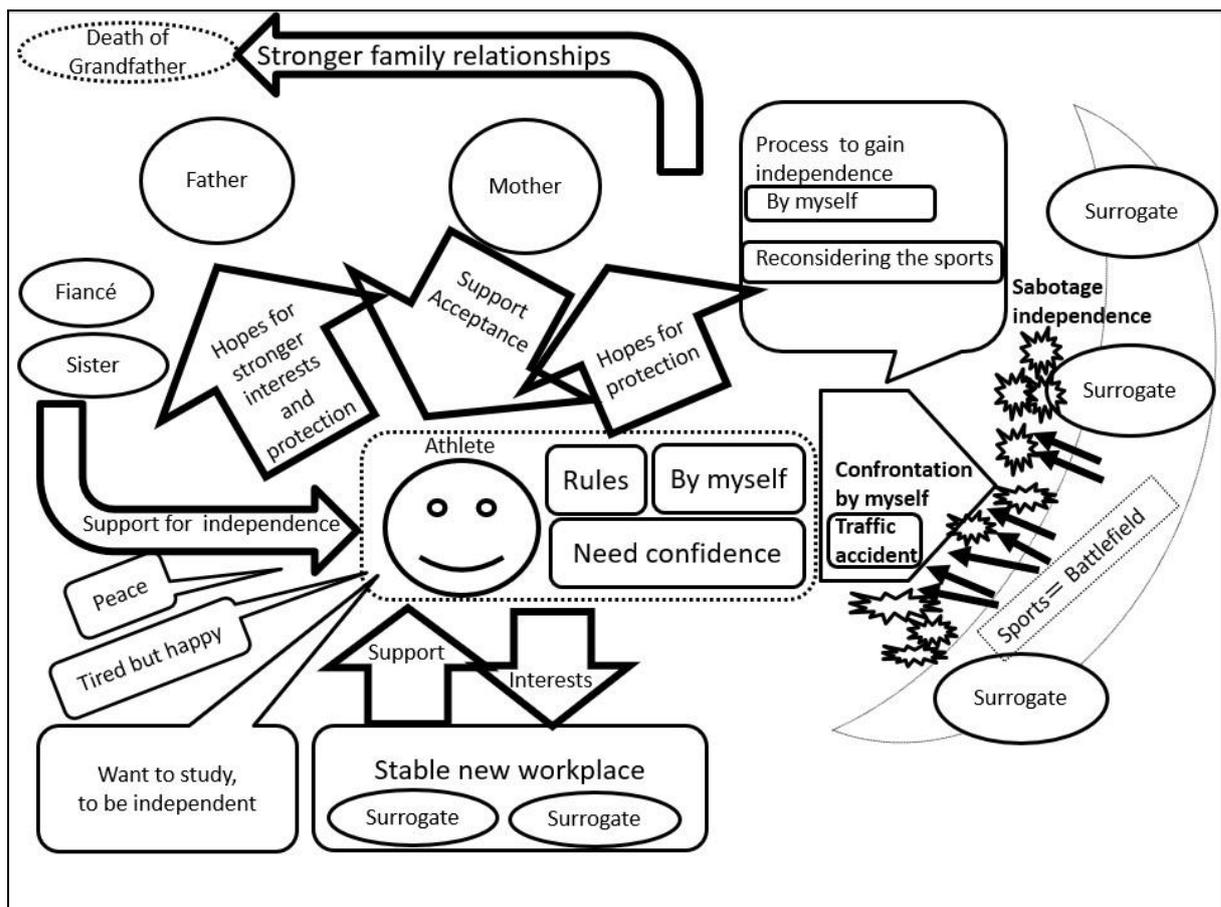


Figure 2: The inner world of the participant in 5<sup>th</sup> year



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

### 4. Discussions and conclusion

This longitudinal analysis revealed that the participant, an elite Japanese university athlete, gradually became psychologically independent from their mother and coaches. They had been suffering from psychosomatic movement disorders since high school. It is possible that their self-efficacy had not developed because of their relationships with parents and surrogates since childhood, and they were unable to cope with the stress put on them by their coaches in elite sports education. Furthermore, the offer to take an entrance examination for special skills apart from sports, which was recommended by a teacher, may have created an unconscious confusion for the participant. However, through the duration of the study, the participant seemed to tackle their developmental tasks on some occasions, such as unstable interpersonal relationships and a traffic accident; they could further become psychologically independent with their family's support.

Additionally, in this case, the coaches were still psychologically immature and were found to be severely dependent on the participant at the five-year follow-up study. To support athletes' psychological independence, it is essential to support athletes from childhood and assist coaches' psychological development after their athletic retirement from elite sports education.

In conclusion, there are two important points for supporting coaches in elite sports education. First, considering co-dependency in the coaches and athlete relationships is essential for their psychological development. Second, focusing on coaches' psychological development after their athletic retirement should be important for understanding coaches' aptitudes in elite sports education and supporting the athletes' psychological independence.

### Acknowledgment

This research was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) under Grant [number 18K03143]; and Support for gender equality program in the University of the Ryukyus under Grant [Number 120, Jan 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022]. I appreciate cooperation by the participant and the assistance of Prof. Furukawa (The University of the Ryukyus).

### References

- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. International University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020, July). *Kazoekirenai hodo Tatakarete [I was hit so many times I can't count- Abuse of child athletes in Japan]*. [Online].  
[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2020/07/japan0720jp\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/07/japan0720jp_web.pdf)
- Kawakita, J. (1967). *Hassouou – souzousei kaihatsu no tameni* [Idea creation – For developing creativity]. Chuokoron-Shinsha, INC.



## 4th International Academic Conference on Teaching, Learning and Education

- Kemuriyama, C., & Ogawa, O.C. (2021). Daigakusei Asuri-to no Kazoku Kazoku-teki Kankei niarumonoheno Isonsei ni kansuru Kenkyu, Shinri-teki Isonsei Shakudo no Kaihatsu oyobi Supo-tsu Suisen Nyugaku Keiken no Umu niyoru Isonsei no Sai no Kentou [A study of university athletes' psychological dependency on family relationships: An examination of difference in dependency based on university admission because of special admission recommendation for sports]. *The Japanese Journal of Educational Counseling*, 11, 13–22.
- Marcia, J. E. (1964). *Determination and construct validity of ego identity status*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The Ohio State University, USA.
- National Society for the Prevention to Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2021). Child abuse in a sports setting. [Online]. <https://thecpsu.org.uk/help-advice/introduction-to-safeguarding/child-abuse-in-a-sports-setti ng/>
- Ogawa, O. C. (2013). Kyogi-intaiki niaru Nihon-jin Supo-tsu Senshu no Shinriteki Mondai to Rinshoteki Shien [Psychological problems and support for Japanese athletes during retirement transitions]. [Unpublished Master Thesis]. The Open University of Japan, Japan.
- Ogawa, O.C. (2018). Saino-kyoikukaniaru Daigakusei Asuri-to no Shinriteki Mondai to Jiritsu ni Kansuru Kenkyu no Doukou [Trends in studies of psychological dependency and independence among top Japanese university athletes]. *Department of Teacher Education Graduate School of Education University of the Ryukyus*, 2, 25–34.
- Ogawa, O. C. (2021). Longitudinal support for the psychological development of an elite Japanese athlete with severe injuries – A case study from the psychodynamic perspective. *Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Technology, Education and Development Conference*, Valencia, Spain, 3794–3801.
- Sano, K., & Makita, H. (1960). *Seiken shiki bunshokanseihou Test SCT* [Sentence completion test: SCT for High school students and adults sheet]. Kanekoshobo.