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Walking on eggshells? Cultivating adaptive conflict outcomes in performance sport.

Abstract

Conflict is a seemingly inevitable phenomenon in sport, particularly in high-performance contexts. Traditionally, conflict has been perceived as maladaptive, necessitating mitigating action. With the aim of enhancing research informed practice, this critical review of sport and organizational literature frames conflict as a biopsychosocial phenomenon, experienced at the individual level but strongly moderated by sociocultural context. Given the unique context of HP sport, alongside limited research we address the conceptual inconsistencies within the literature, particularly concerning the categorisation of conflict by type (e.g., task/relational) and the role of negative affect in conflict outcomes. Rather than something to be avoided, conflict may yield practically adaptive outcomes under certain conditions. We argue for a deeper consideration of the sociocultural context of high-performance sport, emphasizing the role of negative affect in promoting reflection and motivating change, rather than viewing it solely as something to avoid. Specifically, we propose a shift in orientation, to viewing the outcomes of conflict as being adaptive, or maladaptive, rather than conflict itself. Consequently, we offer practical suggestions that leverage the potential utility of conflict moving away from the mitigation of conflict to careful and context-sensitive orchestration.

Keywords: Teamwork, Performance, Culture, Elite sport, Interpersonal dynamics, High performance milieu.

Across high performance (HP) sport i.e., “contexts where emphasis is on preparation for and performance in competitive sport for achievement of performances that are, comparatively speaking, of the highest level” (Allen & Muir, 2020, p. 171), there is growing interest in the interpersonal dynamics and organisational practices that influence performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). HP sports organisations are demanding, with stressors from performance, organisational, and personal sources (Fletcher et al., 2006; Hanton et al., 2005). Interpersonal conflict, in particular, is cited in the literature as one of the most prominent stressors in sporting organisations (Hanton et al., 2005; Olusoga et al., 2009). Moreover, conflict is more likely to occur within groups (Stirling & Kerr, 2009) and dyads (Hartup & Laursen, 1993) with greater member interdependence and within environments offering zero-sum rewards (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Given the high levels of task interdependence among sports teams (Beauchamp et al., 2002) and the inherently competitive nature of sport it is unsurprising that conflict in HP sport appears to be a prominent feature (Mellalieu et al., 2013; Wachsmuth et al., 2017). However, despite the prevalence of conflict and its perceived consequential impact on both individual and organisational processes and performance outcomes (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Gould et al., 2002; Mellalieu et al., 2013), empirical investigations about interpersonal conflict specifically within the context of HP sport are limited. While there are a few notable exceptions (e.g., Lüdemann & Kleinert, 2023; Mellalieu et al., 2013; Wachsmuth et al., 2018a) research on interpersonal conflict in sport have primarily focused on non-HP, athlete-only samples (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a; Partridge & Knapp, 2016; Sullivan & Feltz, 2001). A possible explanation for the dearth of research on conflict in HP sport could be the lack of conceptual clarity on conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004).

Though conflict in sport is often perceived as something to be prevented or resolved (Smith et al., 2023; Wachsmuth et al., 2018a), there is increasing recognition in both sport

(Lüdemann & Kleinert, 2023) and the organisational context that it may be adaptive for performance outcomes under certain conditions (Bradley et al., 2015; O'Neill & McLarnon, 2018). In their scoping review of interpersonal conflict in sport, Lüdemann and Kleinert (2023) suggest the importance of sports practitioners understanding the influence of moderating variables on conflict outcomes in order to monitor and generate positive outcomes. Historically, the conditions which moderate conflict outcomes have been based on conflict type, with the notion that task conflict enhances performance whilst relational conflict inhibits performance due to the differing levels of negative affect (de Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1997; Rahim, 2003).

Drawing on Wachsmuth et al. (2017) and contemporary organisational and sport psychology literature this critical review conceptualises conflict as a complex emergent process shaped by biopsychosocial factors. In turn, we suggest that the task/relational conflict distinction is an oversimplification offering little utility for practitioners. In practice, we discuss the potential for negative affect to be adaptive for performance, rather than something to be universally avoided. Given the limited number of studies that explicitly investigate conflict as a primary construct within the HP sport milieu and with a view to inform the practitioner on how to navigate, facilitate, or deliberately leverage conflict for adaptive results, this paper focuses on the unique organisational context of HP sport. Crucially, this paper addresses the need to explore the conditions that may moderate adaptive conflict outcomes in HP sport. Building from this, we offer a new perspective on the utility of conflict and suggest research informed practices.

Conflict as a Concept

Defining Conflict

Across the literature, there is a lack of conceptual clarity regarding interpersonal

conflict. With multiple definitions in use, it is challenging to compare and contrast the research (Barki & Hartwick, 2004) with some researchers questioning the practical utility of conflict in sport (Paradis et al., 2014a). “The concept of conflict remains unclear, complicated, and controversial” (Wachsmuth et al., 2017, p. 86), which makes it challenging for practitioners to engage with conflict productively and generate adaptive outcomes.

In a scoping review of the organisational psychology literature, Barki and Hartwick (2004) suggested interpersonal conflict reflected three dimensions: disagreement, negative emotion, and interference, each with cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects. The cognitive dimension broadly relating to the nature of the disagreement including but not limited to; differences in values, needs, opinions or goals. The affective dimension being the experience of negative emotion. Interference characterised by behavioural responses including argument, competition, political manoeuvring or aggression (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). For the practitioner, this definition suggests that whilst conflict episodes will present with cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions, no single dimension can define the concept. By definition, conflict can only occur when disagreement, negative affect and behaviour (individual or group) interfere with goal achievement (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Yet, to this point, research in organisational psychology has tended to isolate dimensions of conflict, most frequently disagreement (Barki & Hartwick, 2001). Unfortunately, this isolated approach is an oversimplification and underrepresents the construct (Paradis et al., 2014a). For example, whilst a group may disagree, unless an issue is perceived to be meaningful, it is unlikely to generate negative emotion and interfering behaviour. Consequently, it cannot be considered a conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). This disparity in how conflict is conceptualised poses challenges when defining the construct and impacts practitioners’ use of research to navigate conflict.

Given the disparity in conceptualisations, Barki and Hartwick (2004) suggested;

“interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 8). This conceptualisation has been utilised in the HP sport research (Mellalieu et al., 2013; Wachsmuth et al., 2018b) and non-elite recreational sport research (Holt et al., 2012; Paradis et al., 2014a). However, whilst Barki and Hartwick (2004) discuss situational and personal factors influencing interpersonal conflict the definition does not consider individual differences among conflict parties, nor does it reflect the sociocultural context in which conflict occurs. Countering this, Wachsmuth et al. (2017) proposed a framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships which defines interpersonal conflict in sport as:

A situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural responses. Further, interpersonal conflict is influenced by the social and cultural context within which it occurs, including individual’s characteristics (p. 88).

This suggests a biopsychosocial phenomenon, experienced at the individual level, but moderated by the local and broader socio-cultural context. The term biopsychosocial refers to a holistic perspective in which biological, psychological, and social factors are not treated independently but as interconnected and inseparable components whose reciprocal interactions influence the phenomenon under investigation (Collins et al., 2023).

Measurement of Conflict

To effectively research and operationalise conflict for applied practice, a reliable and valid method of measurement is required. Previously, a limitation of conflict research in sport was the lack of a robust, context specific measurement instrument (Paradis et al., 2014a) resulting in researchers having to adapt existing measures from the organisational psychology

literature. However, this gap was addressed with the development of the Group Conflict Questionnaire (GCQ) (Paradis et al., 2014b), a 14 item self-report instrument measuring conflict across task and relational dimensions. The GCQ provides a post-positivist approach to quantifying the presence and type of conflict at a specific point in time within a team. Nevertheless, conflict can fluctuate throughout a season (Leo et al., 2015). This dynamic nature highlights a potential limitation of cross-sectional quantitative measures. Whilst reliable they may fail to capture the evolving processes and important contextual factors that underpin these changes and moderate conflict outcomes – unless a longitudinal approach is employed.

Therefore, given the dynamic and context dependent nature of conflict we suggest that post-positivist methods of enquiry including longitudinal quantitative monitoring can be augmented with naturalistic investigation through approaches such as longitudinal interviewing (to examine change over time), case studies (to develop deep contextual understanding) and ethnography (Moon, 2025). While there is a need to augment post-positivist methods to account for the dynamic nature of conflict, it is further necessitated by reductive oversimplification inherent in traditional conflict typologies.

Moving Beyond Typologies: Toward a Biopsychosocial Perspective of Conflict

Given the seeming inevitability of conflict in teams, a historic strand of somewhat reductive organisational research has focused on determining whether conflict is fundamentally ‘good or bad’ (cf. Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). In a similarly reductive manner, organisational psychology has often focused on the difference between task and relational conflict (e.g., Jehn, 1995). Relational conflict relating to disagreements arising from interpersonal incompatibilities, often leading to heightened negative affect, generating emotions such as tension, animosity, and irritation. Whereas, task conflict refers to disagreements among team members about differing perspectives on task-related issues

(Jehn, 1997). Task conflict, associated with actively exploring conflicting viewpoints to identify courses of action (Pelled, 1996; Schweiger et al., 1989) and avoiding premature consensus, has been proposed as a way to enhance performance (Jehn, 1995). On the basis of differences in affect, task conflict has traditionally been viewed as more adaptive for team performance (de Wit et al., 2012; Rahim, 2003). This notion has informed a general consensus of the need to aim for task conflict and minimise relational conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997).

While several meta-analyses have established a consistent negative relationship between relational conflict and performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013), the relationship between task conflict and performance appears more ambiguous (Bradley et al., 2015; Lüdemann & Kleinert, 2023). The relationship between task conflict and team performance is inconsistent across the literature. For example, some studies report a negative relationship (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), while others present mixed findings (DeChurch et al., 2013; de Wit et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013). Consistent with this ambiguity, a scoping review of intragroup conflict in sport suggests no stable relationship between intragroup conflict and team performance (Lüdemann and Kleinert, 2023). Consequently, previous research has struggled to advance our understanding of the complex relationship between task conflict and team performance to a level where it can be effectively operationalised in practice. This is aptly captured by O'Neill and McLarnon (2018), who stated: "it may be premature to encourage or discourage task conflict" (p. 381).

In addition to problematic typology of conflict, there are concerns relating to the tendency to mischaracterise conflict and to study it through isolated components (i.e. cognitive, affective or behavioural). These concerns stem from the growing recognition of the integration of action, cognition and emotion (Pessoa, 2008). For example, theories such as Predictive Processing reject reductive distinctions between cognition, emotion and action

(e.g., Clark, 2023). As an example, task conflict has been characterised as ‘cognitive’, and relational conflict as ‘affective’ with negative affect being suggested as the cause of maladaptive performance outcomes (de Wit et al., 2012). In addition, relational conflict has been purported to threaten self-concept, cause anger and anxiety, and reduce capacity to debate divergent ideas (Behfar et al., 2008; de Wit et al., 2010; Jehn, 1995).

Importantly, much of the interpersonal conflict research has adopted this perspective, reinforcing a fragmented view that separates cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Consequently, conflict is often conceptualised in ways that limit rather than accurately represent its dynamic and integrated nature, compromising theoretical clarity, producing potentially inaccurate findings, and restricting both empirical understanding and practical application. This is also problematic because task and relational conflict are not binary constructs (Wachsmuth et al., 2018b). Consequently, using a binary framing to examine their distinct effects on team dynamics does not reflect conflict as experienced. In practice, this means departing from the assumption that task conflict is adaptive. Instead, shifting focus to the conditions moderating conflict’s influence on performance (Bradley et al., 2015). Given the lack of conceptual clarity and coherence in the literature to date, coupled with a focus on only one aspect of the construct there is a need to re-examine established views of conflict. While earlier research in the sport psychology literature has begun to move away from traditional organisational framings, it has yet to articulate the conditions that may moderate conflict outcomes. As such, a broader understanding of the biopsychosocial conditions that shape these outcomes is required (Engel, 1977; Landers & Schmidt, 2015). This paper proposes a set of such conditions under which conflict may be adaptive, offering a new insight that may guide efforts to more intentionally orchestrate conflict toward adaptive outcomes in HP sports environments.

Moderators of Conflict

Research on task conflict and performance in the organisational context has explored numerous moderating variables (Bradley et al., 2015). These include contextual factors surrounding the conflict (complexity, importance, timing, type), individual attributes (emotional regulation, conflict expression, interpersonal perceptions) and team processes (conflict management norms, leadership). Although conducted in the organisational context, previous research suggests that conditions facilitating adaptive conflict outcomes are characteristic of the HP sport milieu. For example, task conflict was considered beneficial to team performance in complexity (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and where outcomes were critical (de Wit et al., 2012). Further, Bradley et al. (2015) posited that "the majority of evidence suggests that nonroutine, decision-oriented, or important tasks drive task complexity, which creates a context in which task conflict is not only helpful but also potentially critical to performance" (p. 8).

Individual Differences: Conflict in the Eye of the Beholder?

The predominantly negative perception narrative that underpins interpersonal conflict research is far from a universal perception in sport within and across groups, with some athletes and coaches highlighting more positive perceptions of conflict than others (Fletcher et al., 2006; Paradis et al., 2014a; Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). We therefore suggest that the moderators of conflict not only depend on the context of the experience but also on what the individual brings to the conflict experience. For example, in Wachsmuth et al.'s (2017) framework of conflict in sport a number of intrapersonal factors were suggested to impact perceptions and experiences of conflict including personality type, attachment style, age and gender. It is here that we may be able to draw on parallel investigations to better understand individual responses. For example, Crum et al. (2013) suggests that it is not only the nature of stress that can enhance or inhibit performance, but also the perceptions of and the skills used to manage response to stressors. Additionally, the perspective of an individual can have a

profound impact on the way in which affective experiences are interpreted (Smith et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2022b). Consequently, conflict may be perceived and experienced differently by conflicting parties. Furthermore, individual perceptions of conflict will influence conflict expression. For example, communication style and therefore the potential adaptive outcomes (Jehn & Chatman, 2000). These individual styles of conflict expression can moderate outcomes of conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2018b). For instance, ‘positive conflict’, a component of Sullivan and Feltz’s (2003) measurement of effective intra-team communication was considered to facilitate open and constructive engagement in conflict expression, something positively related to team cohesion.

As such, it is important for the practitioner to consider individual team member’s perceptions of a conflict episode, their individual characteristics and how both can influence conflict processes, experiences, and consequently individual and team performance outcomes. Additionally, the performance level of teams may also influence their perceptions of conflict and subsequent outcomes. For example, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found that more effective groups of musicians viewed conflict as positive and utilised the various views of team members in their performances whereas the less successful groups tended to avoid conflict. This may indicate that the psycho-behavioural skills of high performers shape their perception of a concept, more typically perceived as maladaptive. For example, Smith et al. (2020) found differential performance outcomes based on performer’s perceptions of stress. This offers an interesting perspective in understanding conflict, as an individual’s perception of conflict is likely to influence how it is experienced and managed which can influence the outcomes of conflict for those operating at the upper echelons of HP sport.

Contextual Differences

Given the inconsistencies across the literature, there is a need to consider the context

in which conflict occurs and understand how different contextual factors moderate conflict outcomes (Bradley et al., 2015). Disagreements do not occur in a vacuum, with conflict behaviour shaped both by individuals and their environment (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2017). Specifically, the HP sports milieu has been characterised as ruthless, fast-paced, results-focused (Eubank et al., 2014), pressurised and volatile (Westerbeek & Hahn, 2013). While some organisational contexts may share similar characteristics, few, if any, require individuals to perform in front of the world's media, be intensely scrutinised for their performances in the public domain, and ultimately have their career trajectories shaped, sometimes decisively by their performance on a particular day. As such, HP sport presents differences to non-elite recreational sport and the organisational setting. A result of this distinction is a concern regarding the application of theories and practices across contexts, without considering the nuances of the HP sport milieu. Thus, for interpersonal concepts such as conflict to offer practical utility, contextually critical application is necessary (Taylor et al., 2022a). This is especially the case, as similar to the organisational context, in practice there seems to be a bias towards concepts purported to offer universally positive outcomes across contexts (Pfeffer, 2015). Further, within the milieu of HP sport the socio-cultural context, and group norms, of different sports and teams need consideration. Despite the lack of evidence that HP sporting contexts moderate conflict, if conflict is influenced by the socio-cultural context (Wachsmuth et al., 2017), it seems plausible to suggest that careful consideration of the unique context is necessary to guide practitioners in navigating inevitable conflict within the HP environment.

Socio-cultural Norms

This lack of homogeneity will also be reflected in the cultural milieu of a context. Culture can be defined as the “shared beliefs, expectations, and practices across the members and generations of a defined group” (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p. 6). Within a given

context, for example a HP sports team, there are implicitly or explicitly agreed standards of behaviour called social norms which exist at both group and individual levels (Gelfand, 2018; Gelfand & Jackson, 2016). A lack of compliance with these group social norms can be a source of conflict within teams as it disrupts shared expectations and undermines a collective team identity (Smith et al., 2023). Noncompliance signals to other team members that the norm violator does not share the same priorities or social identity, which can elicit negative cognitive, affective and behavioural responses among teammates and, in turn can lead to conflict. To this end, group social norms influence the way conflict is approached and experienced, by the individual and across a team. Therefore, practitioners need to consider the impact of cultural norms on how conflict is perceived, expressed and managed. For example, groups with more individualist norms will be characterised by a greater emphasis on personal priorities and goals (Tjosvold et al., 2003). In contrast, groups with collectivist norms tend to be more concerned for other team members, prefer collaboration, placing greater value and emphasis on overall rather than individual goals (DeChurch et al., 2013).

Previous organisational literature has used the individualist-collectivist frame to investigate the most beneficial conflict management strategies. Collectivist approaches (i.e., collaboration) have been considered as offering a productive means of discussing divergent views, when compared to individualist approaches based on avoidance or dominance (O'Neill & McLarnon, 2018). This may contrast with previous literature which has suggested a preference of some coaches towards dominance and athletes' avoidance (Mellalieu et al., 2013) except in circumstances when the conflict related to an athlete's health, for example managing injuries and their personal lives (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). A possible explanation for these approaches to conflict management is the multi-level power dynamics that exist in HP sport, whereby coaches/management have considerable influence over selection decisions and the career opportunities of athletes creating a high-stake hierarchy (Chelladurai, 2007).

This dynamic may lead to athletes adopting an avoidant approach to conflict (Mellalieu, et al., 2013) as challenging leadership may pose risks to their career (Purdy et al., 2008). Similarly, performance support staff may also avoid conflict with coaches/management on a range of issues (e.g., athlete welfare concerns, training load) fearing their own job insecurity (Wachsmuth et al., 2018b). Further, this power dynamic is also replicated at the organisational level, whereby coaches/managers positions are inherently precarious in certain HP contexts since their own job security is often tied to the team's performances (Bentzen et al., 2020). This may result in those with leadership positions adopting a dominant conflict management style (Mellalieu et al., 2013). The degree to which such hierarchies are accepted or challenged may vary across cultures, for example, in high power distance contexts (i.e., cultures that consider unequal power relations as normative), compliance and therefore avoidance of conflict is more likely, conversely lower power distance contexts may encourage a more collaborative and open approach to conflict (Hofstede, 2001).

Exemplifying the uniqueness of HP sport, whilst cultural differences might be expressed across different international contexts, they will also be variable across sports and teams. For example, even though team sports have overall team performance goals, individual goals may be mis-aligned with the team and with one another. Consequently, athletes and staff may be competing both externally with other teams and internally with teammates (e.g., playing time). There are also sports where athletes compete as individuals but may train alongside other athletes and are considered part of an overall team (e.g., boxing, tennis, and golf). However, their performances for the most part, are independent. With this in mind, when exploring interpersonal conflict, it is important to acknowledge a lack of homogeneity across specific contexts, even within the same sport and nation (Fransen et al., 2020).

Adaptive, or Maladaptive Conflict Outcomes

Regardless of conceptualisation, negative emotional disruption seems fundamental to conflict. Conflict, whilst considered emotionally disruptive was often followed by adaptive outcomes, including perceived growth, greater perspective and a view that adversity was part of the journey as an elite athlete (Tamminen et al., 2013). As such, normative perceptions of negative affect being maladaptive need to be re-examined. A parallel can be seen in the reciprocal relationship between stress and emotion, where it is notable that the lay discourse perceives stress in similarly maladaptive terms (Lazarus, 1999). This is set against growing evidence that stressful experiences have the potential to enhance health, well-being, and performance (Crum et al., 2013). Taylor and Collins (2020) posited that experiences of positive and negative affect promote differential patterns of cognition and therefore offer the potential for differential adaptation. A differential impact on reflective patterns concomitant with positive and negative affective states has been found (Gasper & Clore, 2002; Taylor & Collins, 2020), with positive affect, seeming to promote greater self-efficacy and motivation, and negative affect promoting more detail-oriented reflection. In turn, this suggests that whilst the negative affect associated with conflict may temporarily dampen performance, its persistence over time may be more concerning, as prolonged negative affect can have detrimental effects on health and wellbeing (Guidi et al., 2021). Further, the magnitude of conflict influences the intensity of negative affect (Barki & Hartwick, 2004) determining an optimal adaptive threshold. Conflict characterised by low magnitude results in negative affect promoting adaptive outcomes (Ashford et al., 2023; Collins et al., 2020). However, when the magnitude of conflict exceeds this optimal threshold, the consequential escalated levels of negative affect can lead to maladaptive outcomes (Guidi et al., 2021; Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). As such, the utility of conflict orchestration on performance outcomes is contingent on careful consideration of the biopsychosocial factors influencing conflict outcomes as well as ensuring negative affect does not exceed the optimal threshold.

Maladaptive outcomes of conflict include lower mood, performance, impaired motivation, and focus (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). Further, unresolved conflict has been shown to lead to rumination, distraction, and physical and mental fatigue (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). Conflict outcomes relating to positional competition (Harenberg et al. 2021) and conflict with athletes during competition can significantly impair performance (Gould et al., 2002). As such, the timing of conflict seems to be a key contextual factor with the temporal dimensions of conflict seeming critical. Conflict at major Games and Championships appears to have a moderate to negative influence on performance during these competitions (Mellalieu et al., 2013). Similarly, athletes failing to meet performance targets reflected on the maladaptive outcome of interpersonal and inter-coach conflict on performance at an Olympic Games (Greenleaf et al., 2001).

In a similar vein, Wachsmuth et al. (2018a) found significant inter-individual differences in response to conflict, increasing motivation for some, whilst others perceiving it to be distracting and draining. In the same research, adaptive outcomes included athletes and coaches seeking opportunities to collaborate which were perceived to support performance, personal development and interpersonal relationships. Some athletes reported that conflict enhanced their work ethic and commitment, and that the exchange of information generated from conflict supported task clarity and problem-solving. These findings have been mirrored elsewhere, with conflict perceived to increase motivation and problem-solving among athletes, coaches and support staff, and over time actually enhance relationships (Mellalieu et al., 2013).

An additional adaptive outcome of conflict appears to be its facilitative role for teams exploring ideas and approaches (Pelled, 1996; Schweiger et al., 1989), avoiding consensus without debate (Jehn, 1995). As an example, the notion of constructive conflict has consistently been cited as a key feature of effective team functioning and a necessary feature

of building shared mental models (Ashford et al., 2023; Van den Bossche et al., 2011). Shared mental models are conceptualised by Van den Bossche et al. (2011, p. 289) as “team members overlapping mental representation of key elements of the team’s task environment”. The uncomfortable debate and critique associated with conflict have the potential to enable co-creation and foster buy-in, leading to enhanced shared mental models as an adaptive outcome (Ashford et al., 2023). This is not to suggest a simplistic, outcome focused view, rather shared mental models may also shape how conflict is perceived and managed. In turn, conflict experiences can influence the development of shared mental models, creating a bi-directional relationship that may facilitate adaptive outcomes.

Applied Implications - Orchestrating Adaptive Outcomes

If conflict is a biopsychosocial phenomenon, these individual, group and broader contextual and cultural factors at play are likely to moderate the outcomes of conflict. The extant literature highlights the complexity of interpersonal conflict. In this critical review, we have suggested that interpersonal conflict is an emergent phenomenon driven by a dynamic interaction of biopsychosocial factors irreducible to individual ‘components’. These include, but are not limited to, individual differences and the sociocultural milieu surrounding a conflict episode. The central practical implication being that rather than conflict itself, it is the outcomes of conflict that are adaptive, or maladaptive. This should put the HP sport practitioner’s focus on the antecedents and outcomes from conflict episodes, rather than conflict itself.

Notwithstanding initial investigations, the concept of conflict remains underexplored in HP sport despite recognition of its prevalence and the potential performance benefits. Whilst the organisational psychology literature and initial investigations in sport offer preliminary insights into how conflict may be approached, there remain a range of

unexplored questions regarding group, individual and contextual factors, all with significant practical implications. As such, there is currently a lack of clarity as to when conflict should be prevented and when it should be leveraged to enhance performance. Thus, there is a need to better understand the desirable antecedents of conflict and means of orchestration. In this regard, we feel that we can make the following tentative suggestions:

There has been a negative perception narrative surrounding interpersonal conflict in research and practice. Cautiously, it can be posited that the outcomes of conflict, rather than something to be avoided, may indeed, be adaptive for performance (Lüdemann & Kleinert, 2023; O'Neill & McLarnon, 2018). In addition, if the emotional disruption of conflict mirrors stress more broadly, perceptions of conflict could influence how it is experienced (cf. Crum et al., 2013) and subsequent performance outcomes (DeChurch et al., 2013). Therefore, we suggest there is a need for practitioners to challenge their own individual and cultural perceptions of conflict to facilitate adaptive outcomes, rather than avoid and mitigate conflict.

Conflict Management

Conflict management strategies are processes employed to minimise maladaptive outcomes of conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2017). Unlike conflict resolution, the goal of conflict management is not necessarily to limit or conclude conflict (Rahim, 2003). In managing conflict, teams with pervasive individualist values tended to be more open and direct in addressing conflict (Tjosvold et al., 2003) whereas teams with pervasive collectivist values tended to be less open and direct in engaging in conflict to preserve the harmony of the team (Leung, 1997). However, Tjosvold et al. (2003) argue that the teams with pervasive collectivist values have stronger relationships and do not avoid conflict to maintain harmony. Rather, they are more likely to engage in constructive discussions around divergent views. In essence, exhibiting strong constructive confrontation norms (DeChurch et al., 2013)

characterised by an openness of expression and disagreement (Kellermanns et al., 2008), and an endeavour to avoid personal grievances developing, in a parallel manner to the voice-based dimensions of psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In this sense, weak norms for constructive confrontation have a reduced moderating effect for adaptive conflict (Kellermanns et al., 2008).

One approach to understanding individual differences and cultural norms has been to group people based on shared characteristics into team conflict profiles (O'Neill & McLarnon 2018). In doing so, distinguishing between the level of task, relational and process conflict to implement interventions depending on an assigned conflict profile. Yet practically, given the complexity of conflict this type of profiling may lead to oversimplification, failing to take account of the lack of stability imbued by biopsychosocial interactions (Collins & Cruickshank, 2017). The concept of conflict profiles may face similar critique for being overly reductive, a common limitation of psychometrics (Collins & Cruickshank, 2017). Consequently, it is important to consider how individual differences interact with both context and group norms. This necessitates critically informed use of research when applied to the dynamics of groups. For example, research suggests that collectivist conflict norms improve team performance and affective outcomes compared with individualist norms (DeChurch et al., 2013). However, such findings must be interpreted conditionally and in light of contextual and individual differences. For example, it was perceived that the exercise of dominance as an individualist approach was most appropriate during competition. However, the same expressions of dominance were not considered an effective long-term strategy due to the maladaptive impact on interpersonal dynamics. Thus, rather than adopting a single strategy as 'best' practice, there is a need to understand the nature and circumstances of conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a). In this sense, whilst the management of conflict may suggest a level of control and organisation of a conflict episode, orchestration perhaps offers

a better frame for the purposeful use of conflict to facilitate learning and development. Orchestration being coordinated activity to instigate, plan, organise, monitor and respond to evolving circumstances (Jones & Wallace, 2005). In essence, different parties navigating their way through conflict episodes perceiving a level of “perpetual ambiguity” (Jones & Wallace, 2006, p. 51). This orchestration should be conducted with careful consideration of nuances presented by individual, group, and contextual antecedents (see Table 1). As such, it may be the case that active conflict prevention strategies are appropriate when desirable conditions are absent.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

What Conditions do we Need to Account for?

Despite acknowledgement that current research offers “barely any recommendations for practice” and uncertainty remains on “whether and when intragroup conflict should be prevented or could be used to advantage” (Lüdemann & Kleinert, 2023, p. 33-34), practitioners still need to make decisions on how to navigate conflict amid this complexity. As such, we make tentative suggestions based on our critical reading of the literature of the conditions that could inform the practitioner seeking to orchestrate conflict.

Psychological Safety

Across the literature there is growing interest in psychological safety, defined as “a belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences of interpersonal risks, like asking for help or admitting a failure, will be punitive. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake or ask for help, others will not react badly” (Edmondson, 2018, p. 15). Taking the concept and applying it to athletes has led to a variety of new definitions and subsequent applications in the sport literature, often challenged by the nature of the HP sport context (Cooke et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2022a). For example, Vella et al.

(2024) defined psychological safety as “the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm in sport” (p. 24). Aligned to more recent definitions in the organisational domain that have emphasised the voice dimensions, just as the ability to speak up, rather than performance dimensions (Bransby et al., 2024), a growing body of literature supports the necessity of psychological safety as supportive of enhanced staff problem solving based on potentially conflicting disciplinary domains (Burns et al., 2023; King et al., 2024). Disciplinary domains include specific areas of expertise (e.g., nutrition, strength and conditioning or physiotherapy), and the distinct professional and educational backgrounds of coaches and the sport science and sport medicine practitioners working in HP sport (King et al., 2024; Reid et al., 2004). In this sense, without evidence to the contrary in sport, it is likely that groups with greater psychological safety are more likely to respond adaptively to conflict (Bradley et al., 2012). We suggest that working to enhance the voice-based dimensions of psychological safety within teams is likely to be a proactive step. In addition, that the extent of voice safety should inform the extent to which conflict can be generated and the speed at which it is used.

Leaders in HP Sport

Leaders within a team or sports organisation play a crucial role in shaping group cultural norms (Lundqvist et al., 2025). Whilst members of a team may have individual preferences, conflict management norms are strongly influenced by leader conflict behaviours, resulting in the development of conflict cultures i.e., how conflict is expressed and managed across a team (Gelfand et al., 2012). Therefore, leaders in HP sport should not only consider their role in actively creating desirable conflict cultures but also recognise the opportunity for them to carefully plan for the orchestration of adaptive conflict throughout the season as part of their learning and development strategy each season.

492 ***Timing***

493 The temporal aspect of conflict appears to be a significant factor in facilitating
494 adaptive outcomes of conflict. The HP practitioner must consider that adaptive outcomes may
495 not be possible in times of heightened stress and competitive demands, and indeed, at certain
496 times, may require active prevention. This is somewhat unsurprising given the organisational
497 psychology literature suggests conflict is only beneficial to team performance during
498 planning and development, rather than execution (O'Neill et al., 2013). In sport, conflict
499 during competition, or periods of peak stress and pressure i.e., in the run up to and at major
500 Games and Championships may not be adaptive. Conflict at other times, offer opportunities
501 for performance enhancement. Similarly to chronic stress, persistent conflict is likely to be
502 maladaptive for performance, and more importantly, may have deleterious impacts on health
503 and wellbeing (Guidi et al., 2021). Therefore, careful consideration must be given to existing
504 stressors within the performance environment, the availability of time post conflict to allow
505 for learning and development, and the proximity to major competitions before orchestration.
506 Crucially, when orchestrating conflict, it needs to be purposeful with a pre-determined end
507 point. Further, the practitioner needs to be aware that frequent conflict is unlikely to generate
508 adaptive outcomes, and may lead to maladaptive outcomes.

509 ***Post Conflict Debrief***

510 Orchestrating opportunities for learning and development as a potential adaptive
511 outcome of conflict may be facilitated through carefully planned routine post conflict
512 debriefing. Debriefing facilitates in depth discussion, reflection, and critical analysis of an
513 experience, examining successes and identifying areas for improvement to enhance future
514 outcomes (Gardner, 2013; Lederman, 1992). Debriefing may support processing of
515 emotionally disruptive experiences (Kaplan et al., 2001) such as conflict. The debriefing

process may be significant in facilitating adaptive outcomes of conflict and can be led by team leaders and/or team psychologists post conflict. The intensity of the conflict experience may dictate the need for external facilitation of the post conflict debrief.

Conclusion

Assuming that conflict is inevitable, necessary and indeed desirable in high performance sports teams, there is a need for the sport literature to move beyond early organisational conceptualisations which tended to associate negative affect with maladaptive outcomes. Acknowledging the potential for adaptive conflict outcomes, we also advise significant caution when ‘inserting’ conflict without careful consideration of nuances. As is suggested across literature, growth from challenge is complex and should not be assumed (Dorfman et al., 2022). Whilst there remains the need for greater exploration of interpersonal conflict in HP sport settings, building on conflict research to date, we have proposed ways in which adaptive outcomes can be generated from conflict.

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813 **Table 1**

814 *Potential Moderators of Conflict Outcomes*

Factor	Individual	Group	Contextual
	Individual differences within the team	Conflict social norms	Situational circumstances
	Leadership orchestration		Timing
	Perceptions of conflict		Length of conflict
Example	Conflict behaviours		Historic/existing conflict
	Psychological safety		
	Conflict expression	Conflict management strategies	Conflict importance
	Emotional regulation		

815