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Research Article

Implementing the 3+1C model in dyadic relationships outside of the elite sport domain

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Running Title: Coach Athlete Relationship Beyond Elite Sport

Abstract

Developing a high-quality coach-athlete relationship (CAR) has been shown to impact athletes' performance, motivations, and satisfaction. However, there is limited evidence regarding the implementation of the CAR framework (3+1C model) in other dyadic relationships (e.g., boss-employee, trainer-client, leader-follower) outside the elite sport domain. Implementing the 3+1C framework outside the elite sport domain can help leaders and followers build high-quality relationships. This pilot study used the 3+1C model (i.e., closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation) to explore how current and future kinesiology and health-based leaders are currently or plan to develop high-quality relationships with their followers. Our sample included 15 participants (n = 9 females), divided into three focus groups. There were five categories and six themes that resulted from this work. Results showed that creating psychologically safe, caring environments, was a way leaders could enhance their relationship quality. Additionally, leaders believed that using effective communication strategies and transformational leadership also aided in developing high-quality relationships. In contrast, disengagement from the leader and perceptions of creating an ego-involving climate were seen as negative and detrimental to developing quality relationships between a leader and a follower. Our findings emphasize the significance of educating leaders (e.g., coaches, bosses, instructors, and teachers) and hosting organisational interventions based on teaching components of effective communication along with creating adaptive rather than maladaptive climates within a kinesiology and health setting. Educating leaders and promoting change in their leadership styles can impact a follower's motivation, performance, relationship with their leader, and well-being.

Keywords: caring climate, coach-athlete relationship, COMPASS model transformational leadership.

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been increased interest in the phenomenon known as the “coach-athlete relationship” (CAR; Davis & Jowett, 2014; Jowett, 2025; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). This relationship has been deemed central to effective coaching, while also being a fundamental precursor of athletes’ optimal functioning (Davis & Jowett, 2014). Scholars have been interested in discovering how one can nurture motivation in athletes to impact their experiences and performance (Jowett, 2025; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Pan & Sui, 2025). These studies have shown that although there are multiple different factors that affect the motivations of athletes, the CAR is one of the most important influencers on athletes’ motivation and performance (Jowett, 2025; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Pan & Sui, 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge that there are several types of dyadic relationships within sports and exercise (e.g., instructor-exerciser, assistant coach-head coach, and referee-athlete). One area explored is the parent-athlete-coach triangle (Santos et al., 2024; Tagliavini et al., 2023). For example, it was highlighted that parent-coach proximity helped to enhance the sporting experience within this triad (Tagliavini et al., 2023). Additionally, college athletes have expressed that increased levels of openness with their faculty members have helped improve their academic performance; thus, quality relationships are a vital component for success on and off the playing surface (Brouwer et al., 2022). However, it is thought that understanding the quality of these varying sports and non-sport relationships remains an untapped area within dyadic relationship research (Jowett, 2025; Snijders et al., 2018). While other models have conceptualized the CAR, such as LaVoi’s (2004) and Poczwadowski’s et al. (2002) conceptualized models, the most well-known and widely used model that has investigated the quality of the CAR is the 3+1C model, as it has shown success when applied to relationships in and outside sporting domains (Bates & McShan, 2025; Jowett, 2025; Jowett et al., 2023).

What is the Coach-Athlete Relationship?

The definition of the quality of CAR is a situation where a coach’s and an athlete’s cognitions, thoughts, and behaviours are mutually and causally interrelated (Jowett, 2025). Researchers often describe the CAR quality using terms such as commitment, cooperation, communication, bonds, respect, friendship, power, dependence, dislike, and distrust (Jowett, 2005; Poczwadowski et al., 2002). The relationship that a coach has with their athlete can be utilized by the coach as a foundation for the growth of an athlete, both socially and emotionally (Poczwadowski et al., 2002). The lack of a quality relationship can lead to disconnection, isolation, loneliness, and separation between a coach and an athlete. These outcomes are likely to affect accountability, responsibility, and ownership, all necessary characteristics for the growth and development for both the coach and the athlete (Jowett, 2025).

The responsibility of a coach has extended past the traditional playing field, as it is being discovered that the relationship between a coach and an athlete has the potential to guide an athlete's career development (Pan & Sui, 2025). It is also important to note that the coach is an important member of the sport-related social environment with the potential to positively impact outcomes of the psychological health of an athlete (McGee & DeFreese, 2019). Research has proven that the quality of this relationship is a vital contributing factor to the athletes' satisfaction, motivation, and performance, therefore highlighting the significance of developing a high-quality CAR (Jowett, 2025; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

The 3+1C Model

In the early 2000s, several frameworks were developed to attempt to explain the relationship between a coach and an athlete, including Wylleman's conceptual model (Wylleman, 2000) and Poczwadowski's conceptual model (Poczwadowski et al., 2002). However, Jowett et al.'s creation of the 3C and 3+1C conceptual models are perhaps the most notable models when it comes to dissecting the intricacy of the CAR (Jowett, 2005; McShan & Moore, 2023). The 3+1C model aims to describe the quality and content of the CAR (Jowett, 2007). It has been operationalized using the dimensions of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation (Jowett, 2007; Zhao & Jowett, 2022). Closeness refers to feeling emotionally close to one another in the CAR, encompassing trust, respect, liking and appreciation (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; McShan & Moore, 2023). Commitment describes the intention of both athletes and coaches to maximize and sustain their relationship over time (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Complementarity is synonymous with collaboration, which involves understanding expected roles within the relationship (Jowett, 2025; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). This dimension of the CAR can be thought of as friendliness, acceptance and responsiveness (Jowett, 2025; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Co-orientation represents the +1 of the model and refers to the common ground or shared knowledge and understanding between a coach and an athlete when it comes to each other's roles, beliefs, values, and aspirations (Jowett, 2007, pp. 64-65).

The Importance of High-Quality, Positive Relationships Outside of the CAR

While several studies reveal the benefits of a high-quality CAR using the 3+1C model, there is a gap in assessing relationships with this same model outside CAR, as well as between coaches and athletes at lower levels of competition (Jowett et al., 2023; McShan & Moore, 2023). Understanding the use of the 3+1C model in other non-elite sport settings is a warranted area of research because positive, high-quality relationships have been associated with one's overall well-being (Jowett, 2025). Bates and McShan (2025) conducted research on a population of high school student-athletes post-COVID-19

pandemic, and their findings highlight the value of high school coaches in creating caring, task-involving climates while also prioritizing the personal growth, autonomy, and overall well-being of student-athletes. Another study, conducted by Jowett et al. (2023), investigated the quality of the teacher-student relationship within an educational setting, adapting the coach-athlete relationship questionnaire (CART-Q; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) to create the teacher-student relationship quality questionnaire (TSRQ-Q). The study found that students in both mathematics and physical education settings who perceived their relationship with their teacher as characterized by the 3 C's (closeness, commitment, and complementarity) reported significant positive correlations, such as with positive affect, perceived competence, and enjoyment (Jowett et al., 2023). Other scholars have also used the 3+1C model and found that creating quality relationships with professors can enhance academic motivation for collegiate student-athletes (McShan & Smith, 2026). Researchers called for this framework to be used in other domains to discover how aspects of the 3+1C models help researchers and practitioners to understand how individuals plan to create quality relationships (Jowett, 2025; Jowett et al., 2023).

One such area that could warrant investigation into the legitimacy of using the 3+1C model is within the field of kinesiology and health sciences. Within the related fields, individuals pursue careers such as physical therapists, nurses, doctors, occupational therapists, chiropractors, and exercise physiologists. Past research has highlighted that being employed within these health, sport, and wellness careers requires the development of quality relationships, and when these relationships are absent, it can affect the quality of these relationships (Dinç & Gastmans, 2013; Hall et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2022). Similar to the use of the 3+1C model, relationship quality has been investigated using practitioners, patients, clients, coaches, and athletes already within their respective fields (McShan & Moore, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Therefore, an under-researched area is how kinesiology and health sciences early-career professionals or aspiring professionals plan to develop quality relationships with the patients, clients, and athletes that they may interact with.

The purpose of this investigation was to understand how early-career and future health science and kinesiology-based professionals plan to implement aspects of the 3+1C model outside elite sport. Additionally, the majority of work using the 3+1C model has been conducted in the sports setting with coaches and athletes. To expand the use of the 3+1C model, examining other contexts beyond coaches and athletes is warranted (Jowett, 2025; McShan & Moore, 2023; McShan & Smith, 2026). It is important to acknowledge the significance of leaders building positive, high-quality relationships with their followers. Achieving such may lead to positive experiences, higher levels of pleasure, and greater

engagement in an individual's sport or career (Jowett, 2025; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Pan & Sui, 2025).

Methods

Context, Recruitment, and Sample

Ethical approval for this study was provided by the authors' Institutional Review Board IRB-FY2026-69. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all participants' data were stored on a password-protected server accessible only to members of the research team. Additionally, all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The only identifiable data collected was individuals' email addresses used to schedule focus group times, which only members of the research team had access to. The study was a qualitative research investigation that used focus groups to examine the aspects of the 3+1C model. Researchers conducted three focus group sessions with 15 participants aged between 18 and 43 years. Focus group one consisted of seven participants, focus group two included five participants, and focus group three included three participants. The sample included 6 males and 9 females who have all participated in sports throughout their lives; 14 participants were affiliated with the research teams' home institution. Within the study, there were 11 different academic majors represented within the focus groups (e.g., physical education, biology, and nursing). Twelve of the participants noted that they are either current or future professionals in sport, exercise, and health. Three of the participants were not interested in becoming a future professional in sport, exercise, and health; Table 1 outlines full demographic information.

For this study, interviewers were asked to recruit participants from a convenience sample (Winton & Sabol, 2022). Along with emails being sent to students in the exercise science department at the researcher's home institution. Emails were also sent to professors, instructing them to ask their classes if they would like to participate. Social media was also used to promote the study, asking viewers of social media posts to join the study. All participants were recruited within a Midwestern state. Prior to the start of the interview process, all participants completed an informed consent and demographic survey. On the date of the interviews, a private room was reserved in the university classroom for the interviews to take place. Before each interview with the respective focus groups, researchers read the participants in a verbal interview schedule script, which allowed participants to understand the purpose and structure of the focus group interview. Once consent was given, audio recording began and the formal focus group interviews began, which lasted between 30-45 minutes. Participants were entered into a drawing for 1 of 25 \$15 gift cards as an incentive for participation in this study.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Participant Sex	Ethnicity	Home Country	Education Level	GPA	Focus Group
Ashton	21	M	White	USA	Senior	3.8	1
Adam	28	M	White	Unknown	RG ¹	N/A	1
Maria	21	F	White	Brazil	Senior	3.25	1
Eva	18	F	White	England	Freshman	3	1
Lilli	18	F	White	Germany	Freshman	3.5	1
Lana	20	F	White	USA	Sophomore	3.85	1
Brian	23	M	White	Unknown	RG ¹	N/A	1
Amber	23	F	White	Unknown	RG ²	N/A	2
Madison	22	F	White	USA	RG ¹	4.0	2
Jacob	43	M	White	USA	Unspecified	3.0	2
Zander	25	M	White	USA	Graduate Student	3.73	2
Mary	21	F	White	USA	Senior	3.86	2
Clint	21	M	White	USA	Graduate Student	3.86	3
Ellie	21	F	White	USA	Senior	3.87	3
Sophia	19	F	White	Brazil	Freshman	3.75	3

Note. M = male; F = female; RG = recent graduate; ¹ = 2025; ² = 2024; N/A = not applicable

Semi-Structured Focus Group Guide

This study was performed using a semi-structured focus group design. The design of the study was chosen for simplicity and adaptability for individual answers. The interviewers asked broad questions allowing for individual responses in order to extract opinions on how the 3+1C model could be used to foster quality relationships between participants and leaders in the fields of kinesiology and health sciences. The study team was divided into different roles for the interviews. There were two interviewers who were leading the discussion using an interview guide, including suggested questions. There were two individuals who were tasked with recording the interviews and getting a proper transcript of the entire interview from start to finish. And finally, there were two individuals who were tasked with taking notes on anything that they might have seen that needed to be noted during the interviews. With each of the researchers assigned to their own duty, interviews were conducted. Participants were able to respond in their own words by using open-ended questions in order for them to give their own input. Participants were guided using the following sample questions included:

- What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a really good relationship with someone?
- What first comes to mind when you think of a good quality relationship with a sports exercise or health leader or coach that you've had?

- c. Let's look back at a coach or exercise professional that you had a negative relationship with, tell us about that.
- d. How will you develop closeness as a professional in your field?

Reflexivity and Positionality

In our qualitative design, reflexivity was a vital element, as researchers acknowledged their own perspectives and potential biases throughout the study. With each of the members of the research team having a background in similar fields, we acknowledged the possibility of biases towards the information included in the study. Our group was constructed of six graduate students and one professor, four females and three males, all with differing student and career statuses. Each graduate student was pursuing a career in the kinesiology field, whether that be as a coach, instructor, or academic advisor. The research team included three graduate assistant coaches (i.e., strength and conditioning, tennis), a graduate assistant lab instructor in the kinesiology department, another intern with the strength and conditioning department, and finally an advisor with the athletic academic advisement staff, and one professor. With this information of the research teams' background, our participants were encouraged to recall their own lived experiences and were informed there are no right or wrong answers to our questions. All research members took part in a bracketed interview to test out interview procedures as well as to see any biases that individuals had related to the research question. Prior qualitative research has also used the procedure of conducting a bracketed interview to reflect on personal biases (McShan & Salem, 2026).

Data Analysis

The data collected from the three focus group sessions was analysed using a qualitative approach. Approximately 18 pages of transcripts from the interviews were placed into data analysis software (Dedoose v10.0.59, Sociocultural Research Consultants, LLC; CA USA). The analysis procedure followed past qualitative focus group procedures that used inductive procedures and thematic analysis to lead to creating initial themes and list of emerging codes (Bates & McShan, 2025; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using data from Dedoose, codes were created to analyse themes and patterns that may have occurred within the interviews. After responses were placed into unique codes, each page of the transcripts was analysed and placed into categories in which they fit into (i.e., the dimensions of the 3+1C model). Using the Dedoose report, we were able to find trends in which the participants answered their questions. This report also allowed us to organize statements from multiple participants that sounded or looked the same into similar themes. Next, using the software, we deleted and restructured our themes to the version that resulted in a high level of agreement

among the peer coders, by using a codebook to organize categories and themes. Finally, researchers extracted highlight/hero quotes to showcase how these quotes best represent the categories and themes.

Results

Results indicated that there were six themes within five categories that helped to explain the quality of how future and early career kinesiology-based and health sciences leaders plan to develop quality relationships with those that follow them. Table 2 summarises the associated themes with exemplary quotes included. Creating a safe and caring climate, and second, disengagement as a leader and an ego-involving climate represented the first two themes within the category of all the dimensions of the 3+1C model. The dimensions/categories of closeness, commitment, and complementarity each had distinct themes that participants described as important for developing this aspect of relationship quality. Co-orientation remained its own dimension/category with no themes associated within it. The themes of idealised influence and effective communication were identified within closeness. Intellectual stimulation was identified as a theme within commitment, and openness was identified as a theme within the dimension of complementarity.

Safe and Caring Climate

Many participants discussed the importance of making athletes feel welcome, safe, and supported. From focus group one, Ashton noted, *“being personable, like really trying to relate with them, even if there's like, a big age difference, like just trying to show them that you mean business, but in a relatable way...”* is a crucial step of building a caring climate. Participants not only focused on the importance of leaders creating a caring climate, but also the benefits of athletes supporting their fellow teammates. The importance of creating a safe place for athletes/participants was also established. Making sure all athletes feel as though they are important, and that genuine connection is established within the team dynamic. Many participants expressed that when a leader, or coach, would allow them to be authentic and have fun, it encouraged them to relax and feel safe.

Disengagement and an Ego-Involving Climate

Throughout our study, many positive traits and experiences were expressed in how emerging leaders best thought to develop quality relationships with followers. However, our next theme emphasises the repeated negative concept that continued to come up, which was that of disengagement from the leaders and leaders who create an ego-involving climate. Many participants expressed that one way to hurt the quality of the relationship with a follower was when the leader is disengaged during

competitions and practices. When a leader is disengaged, it leads to ineffective outcomes. Most of the participants agreed that it made them feel like the coach wasn't committed to them. One participant, Zander from focus group two, expressed, *"When I ran cross country, our coach was not interactive with us at all. [He would just be like] All right, here you go, here's what we're doing. Go do it. Won't critique anything. Just zero coaching there."* When a coach shows disengagement due to lack of leadership, chooses not to say something to help a struggling individual, it doesn't allow participants to grow as an athlete, but also as a person. One participant Zander from focus group two commented, *"Giving feedback quickly and not waiting to tell someone what they are doing wrong."* Most participants within Zander's focus group agreed that when the coach didn't disclose feedback back to them, they didn't feel like they were growing as athletes. One participant Ellie who was a part of focus group three, expressed, *"If a coach isn't giving you any critiques, they[ve] given up on you."* Therefore, a negative aspect that emerging and current leaders expressed within this study is that having a disengaged leader may lead to lower relationship quality with their followers.

Many participants expressed that they believed as a leader if you create an environment that followers have perceptions of being in an ego-involving climate led to less commitment from most athletes/followers and didn't feel safe in their environment. Part of an ego-involving climate involves a leader who punishes individuals for mistakes, instead of seeing mistakes as part of the learning process. When talking about the coach that yells/is negative all the time, Clint from focus group three expressed, *"I don't respond well, I don't like that, that's not positive."* Another participant, Mary from focus group two, expressed, *"I have had coaches who have made me afraid to fail, they push you away and say things like you are un-coachable, then give up on you."* Most of the participants would nod their head and agree that the ego-involving climate didn't contribute to quality relationships with the coach/leader of the team that they were on.

Closeness

Each of the three dimensions of the 3+1C model of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation are presented next. Within each of these dimensions, the associated themes are presented. Beginning with closeness, the themes of how the leaders plan to develop it were thought to be shaped by idealised influence and effective communication. Idealised influence participants expressed the importance of having someone to look up to as a role model within a kinesiology and health sciences setting. Ellie from focus group three discussed that, *"Sometimes people just aren't pleasant to be around. [It] just feels like everybody's mad at each other. [Leaders should]... just lead by example, you know... show they care for the people that you're around and working with."* A leader

that serves as a role model also known as providing idealised influence may help to develop closeness with participants/athletes and their leader.

It is important to note that many of the characteristics the focus groups deemed important went both ways, so within the second theme, within closeness, leaders must use effective communication strategies to develop quality relationships between leaders and followers in kinesiology and health environments. Ellie from focus group three went on to discuss that leaders and athletes should: *“Start small, break the ice with the athlete, get to know the person, then they are more willing to share with you the deeper things that are going on in their life”*. Which is what is important, them seeing themselves as a full person, unique person, not just a person that is there playing that sport.

One way coaches/leaders can show effective communication strategies is by relating to followers on a personal level. Allowing athletes/followers to see themselves as human beings who go through the same life experiences as the leaders do, leaders believed, helped their followers feel that they are not alone in what they are going through, which can improve closeness between athletes/followers and coach/leaders. As Ashton from focus group one said, *“Be personable, really try to relate with them, even if there’s a big age difference, relate to them, and understand what is happening in their lives outside of the sport.”* The theme of effective communication was thought to help current and emerging leaders develop the aspect of closeness within their leader-follower relationship.

Commitment

In the 3+1C model, commitment is the desire to maintain the relationship over time. It is an agreement to achieve a goal together, experience both ups, downs, wins and losses, yet still sticking together. The lone theme related to the commitment dimension was intellectual stimulation. In order for followers to be committed to leaders, kinesiology and health-based participants within this study believed that displaying intellectual stimulation with their leadership (e.g., challenging followers to think critically) helped improve commitment quality. This theme is highlighted by Jacob from focus group two, who said, *“Always [being] able to make somebody feel good about their failure. Yeah, what did you learn from that [failure]? How did you grow from that? Like, what are we going to do differently next time?”* Having followers be able to critically examine and grow as individuals is a key point of why intellectual stimulation may help to enhance commitment quality between leaders and followers in a kinesiology and health setting.

Complementarity

Participants expressed the importance of complementarity throughout the interview, expressing how collaborating and working together is crucial for success for leaders and followers within a kinesiology and health-based setting. The lone theme that was associated with complementarity was that of openness. One participant, Lana from focus group one, shared the following related to openness: *“As a personal trainer, I tell people all the time like, half my job is being their therapist. So feeling like they [the clients can] talk to me about anything, and they know I won't, you know, tell anyone else. Like it's safe with me, really helps me build super strong relationships and connections with these people. And it's just funny sometimes because I. I feel like these people don't have anyone else that they can talk to about this stuff, and so I just feel super like, just valued in a way, rather than just like, telling them, you know what exercises to do it like, gives me another purpose. And I feel like building those strong relationships.”* Displaying openness within a leader-follower relationship may help to develop high-quality relationships based on the complementarity dimension of the 3+1C model.

Co-orientation

Although our research interview guide did not specifically ask questions about co-orientation, our results showed that our participants believed the +1 of the 3+1C model was essential in creating relationship quality with their followers. For instance, Lana from focus group one commented, saying, *“Finding...the group...goal like that everyone can, agree upon and like feels that everyone needs...[to] push towards, is like, something that you can work for together, so it feels like it's a group thing.”* The emphasis on common goals is a central component of the co-orientation dimensions within the 3+1C model.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes.

Full Measure of the 3+1C Model		
Theme	Definition	Sample quotes
Creating a Safe and Caring Climate	Describing leaders who create interpersonally inviting, safe, supportive environments where they feel valued and respected.	"Making sure they're [athletes/followers] comfortable and like they feel welcomed...making sure there's things that make them feel like it's like their home, kind of creating that safe space and safe environment for them" - Lana from focus group one. "I think the moment that they realize that you're actually engaging with them and that you care, and you show that you care about them. You are going to start creating friendships/good relationships, quality relationships." – Maria from focus group one.
Disengagement and an Ego-Involving Climate	An environment where the leader is unengaged or a leader who has favorites and non-favorites, punishes mistakes, and promotes success only when achievement is made.	"My least favorite thing is when somebody, when you're having a conversation with someone, and you respond, and they just keep talking about what they were saying." -Ellie from focus group three "I feel like I've had coaches that have made me [you] afraid to fail, which I feel like is not something you want in your athletes. I feel like you want them to be able to have room to grow and be able to fail so they can learn from it." -Mary from focus group two.
Closeness		
Theme	Definition	Sample quotes
Idealized Influence	A leader who acts as a positive role model, gaining the followers' trust and respect	"[As a leader demonstrating] patience is something that is something good a coach can have. Not feel like you're going to be aggressive to an athlete if they come with you with a minor inconvenience, just like, okay, might not be able to come and practice understanding." -Zander from focus group two. "Not everything is always good...while you might be on a winning streak...the person sitting next to you could have just failed a test or something. So not everything might be great. So just making sure [as a leader] that...you're still checking in on those things. Yeah, hey, like, how was that test? I know you're stressed about it, making sure that they're heard, cared about." -Ellie from focus group three.
Effective Communication	Leaders who use proactive ways to relate and communicate with their followers	"Tell them [your athletes], like, communicate that they're doing a good job, but then also, like, not puff up their ego, like, remind them, like, yeah, you guys are winning, but remind them of, like, how hard it is to win. Like, it's there's a lot of work that goes into winning. The reason why you guys are winning is because you're putting the work every single day and just reminding them to keep on doing that and try to keep them on track." -Adam from focus group one.

		"I think most people want that kind of passionate, active, sympathetic ear, especially from their boss, but not everybody, and being able to identify the people who just want to be left alone and treat them, you know, well, but differently than the type A personalities...making people feel good about what they've done, and what they what they can do." -Jacob from focus group two.
Commitment		
Theme	Definition	Sample quotes
Inspirational Stimulation	A leader who challenges followers to think in an independent, critical, and creative manner	"[As a leader] you have to continue to remind them, like, in the middle of the season, if you're on like, [on] a five-game win streak, the job's not finished, even if your season's technically over, you just got to keep going. Like, you can't just give up because your season's over, but you're hot and you can't give up because you win X amount of games in a row, because typically like success is measured by what you said at the end of season. So if success is a championship, then you can't stop until that's what you get."- Ashton from focus group one. "Trying new things, like showing that you're like, willing to like, adjust and adapt to like the situation." – Lana from focus group one
Complementarity		
Theme	Definition	Sample quotes
Openness	The leader being willing to share information and maintain a good level of communication.	"People that you're working with, or [on] your team...in the planning of things... [As a leader] being open to their opinions also, because you know, just because you're maybe above them doesn't mean you know everything, and maybe they have some good ideas that you wouldn't have thought of." – Mary from focus group two "Giving feedback like, quickly, not waiting on something like, Oh, you did something a week ago. Now I'm gonna...give you advice to help you out. If you have you seen something that I'm doing wrong, inform me, tell me, immediately." – Zander from focus group two
Co-orientation		
Category	Definition	Sample quotes
Co-orientation	Cited in the introduction	"Make sure that they [the athletes] have, like, the buy-in, because, like, at the end, like you have that goal. I mean, for you guys in softball, it's like, you know, winning a championship. Make sure that everybody has that buy in, into those common goals." – Clint from focus group three. "I know for our team, we set goals at the beginning of our season, and then we hold each other accountable to it. So it's not just a 'Oh, hey, we're just going to do this workout today, but reminding ourselves what our goals are. So being goal-[oriented]. Allowing the team to set these standards and having a leader that inspires them to reach these goals." – Madison from focus group two.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how early-career and future kinesiology and health sciences professionals planned or are currently creating quality relationships with patients/clients/athletes they will or are interacting with, using criteria related to the 3+1C model. From the three focus groups, six themes emerged from the five categories of the 3+1C model as a full measure, closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation. The themes for the full measure of the 3+1C model were: creating a safe and caring climate, as well as limiting disengagement from the leader and creating an ego-involving climate. Two themes were linked to closeness, which were idealised influence and effective communication. The theme associated with commitment was intellectual stimulation. For complementarity, there was one lone theme of openness. Co-orientation had no associated theme, but it was still a key finding within our research.

Our present study adds two main contributions to the relationship quality literature. First, this research adds to the 3+1C framework by applying the idea to an array of different individuals, including university students, athletes, and professionals within the health sciences field. Our study examines the 3+1C model's applicability to relationships beyond the traditional CAR it is normally associated with (Jowett, 2025). Our work built on the work of the creation of the TSRQ-Q (Jowett et al., 2023). Specifically, where Jowett et al. (2023) showed that aspects of the 3+1C model could be applied quantitatively to a different dyadic relationship outside the CAR, our work confirmed these findings qualitatively by involving leaders from settings beyond traditional and elite sport. Second, the qualitative findings illustrate the connections among the individual dimensions of the 3+1C model, an area that has been noted to require more robust evidence (Jowett, 2025). As such, the study provides a better understanding of how the fundamental elements of the 3+1C model interact in various relationship scenarios.

The present findings have been linked to other core concepts within the field of sport and exercise psychology, such as psychological safety, the creation of more adaptive than maladaptive climates (Fry & Moore, 2019), transformational leadership, and the COMPASS Model (Rhind & Jowett, 2010, 2012). Psychological safety in sports has been positively associated with high-quality CARs (Gosai et al., 2023; Weng & Cheng, 2023). However, prior studies have quantitatively linked psychological safety to the quality of the CAR using the full measure and subscales of the CART-Q. Our work qualitatively links these findings. Therefore, our work helps confirm some well-established literature that, to support high-quality relationships, whether inside or outside a sporting domain, it is the leaders' responsibility to make their followers feel psychologically safe.

Motivational climate researchers have long advocated for environments such as within the classroom or in a sporting domain for leaders to create adaptive environments that focus on creating task-involving (e.g., leaders who see mistakes as part of the learning process, value personal effort and self-improvement) paired with a caring climate over a climate that is ego-involving (e.g., punishes participants for making mistakes, leaders who have favourites and is more performative in nature) (Breske et al., 2017; Fry & Moore, 2019; Hogue et al., 2019, 2021; Iwasaki & Fry, 2016). Perceptions of creating a task-involving and caring climate have been linked to greater sport enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and effort among athletes (Fry & Moore, 2019). Whereas perceptions of an ego-involving climate have been negatively associated with athlete enjoyment and athletes' competence (Fry & Moore, 2019). These findings are consistent with studies showing that both caring and task-involving climates enhance followers' well-being, moral behaviour, and intrinsic motivation (Fry et al., 2023). These findings correspond to the literature suggesting that negative forms of leadership lead to a decrease in athlete satisfaction and performance (Liu et al., 2025). While past research has highlighted the association between CAR quality and the task-involving and caring climate associated with the 3+1C model, this information remains limited, and more research is needed in this area (McShan & Moore, 2023; McShan & Salem, 2026; Olympiou et al., 2008). Thus, our work adds to the limited knowledge of the association between motivational climates and the use of the 3+1C model.

Numerous participants highlighted leaders who inspired, modelled the behaviours they valued, and created a vision to engage in shared goals; this aligns with how transformational leadership constructs have previously been articulated (Álvarez et al., 2019). In our study, two aspects of transformational leadership emerged as particularly strong: idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. Past research has reported mixed results regarding the 3+1Cs' association with intellectual stimulation, with the strongest association being with closeness (Gosai et al., 2023), whereas another study found that commitment had the strongest association with intellectual stimulation (Zhao & Jowett, 2022). In our study, we found only the theme of intellectual stimulation associated with the commitment dimension. Therefore, there may be a need to gain further insight into which dimension of the 3+1C model best aligns with providing intellectual stimulation. While research has highlighted links to the 3+1C model and aspects of transformational leadership, none of these studies have included idealized influence (Karayel et al., 2024; López de Subijana et al., 2021; Zhao & Jowett, 2022). Therefore, our study helps to add to the literature that, specifically for the dimension of closeness, as a leader, it may be advantageous to display aspects of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation to your followers in a kinesiology and health-based setting.

The use of communication strategies, such as effective communication and openness, was highlighted in our research as an important factor in how future kinesiology-based and health sciences workers could achieve high-quality closeness and complementarity within their leader-follower relationship. Within the 3+1C model literature, effective communication strategies to maintain quality relationships have been linked to the COMPASS model (Rhind & Jowett, 2010, 2011, 2012). The COMPASS model offers particular strategies that leaders can take to establish and maintain connections with their followers. The strategies of this model include conflict management, openness, motivational, preventative, assurance, support, and social networks. Therefore, our study is one of the first to link aspects of the COMPASS model to non-CAR dyadic partnerships. The COMPASS model provides clear and easy behavioural ways for leaders to enhance closeness, increase commitment, and build complementarity, which further evokes the applicability of the 3+1C framework to understand dyadic relationships outside of the CAR domain.

Jowett (2025) discussed the need to better understand the dimensions of co-orientation with scholars' work related to the 3+1C model. Several prior studies have looked at only the 3Cs of the 3+1C and have neglected examining the +1 of the model, which is co-orientation (McShan & Salem, 2026; McShan & Smith, 2026; Vella et al., 2013; Zhao & Jowett, 2022). Our work helps us start to achieve that goal, as it highlighted that the use of common goals, a key component of co-orientation between leaders and followers, was thought to enhance relationship quality. As scholars continue to advance the work of co-orientation in relation to the 3+1C model, other aspects of co-orientation should be explored, such as shared knowledge (Jowett, 2025).

Practical Implications

The results come with very important implications for the training of kinesiology and health science leaders. The future training of these leaders should focus on intentionally building a caring climate as a key condition for quality relationships with followers. By doing so, leaders may be able to create an environment that enhances followers' engagement by increasing perceived social support. Therefore, training should be focused on teaching how to provide emotional and social support that will foster a psychologically empowering environment that can sustain intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement (Li & Xing, 2025). By helping leaders be trained in how to create these effective climates, leaders may be less likely to create perceptions of an ego-involving climate or disconnectedness within the leader-follower relationship.

Future leaders within a kinesiology and health setting will want to learn to develop their leadership and communication skills. By cultivating leadership skills focused on being a positive role model and helping individuals think critically, these leaders may enhance the quality of closeness and commitment within their leader-follower relationships. As well as focusing on training that helps improve communication skills outlined by the COMPASS model, it may also help to enhance relationship quality with followers.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were limitations present within the investigation that are important to address. First, the sample size was limited due to inclement weather on the day of the focus group interviews. This impacted the amount of data we were able to collect. Best practices in focus group research call for there to be at least four focus groups and at least six members per focus group (Ahmed, 2025; Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). Additionally, this research was a part of a graduate sport and exercise psychology course requirement, thus researchers were limited to conducting and finishing this research during one academic semester. Future research should follow best practices and try to have at least four focus groups with at least six participants in each of the focus groups. Second, the lack of participants resulted in our focus group's insufficient representation of the "leader" (coaches, trainers) perspective of the research. Future research may include larger sample sizes with the inclusion of greater amounts of diverse individuals from different geographical areas and various leaders within different fields (e.g., fitness instructors, coaches, academic advisors) to confirm the wider applicability of these themes. Additionally, most of the researchers who conducted this study were graduate students who were novices in qualitative research. However, giving students who would not otherwise have engaged in the scholarly process an opportunity to conduct research was seen as a positive learning experience by most researchers within this study. Moreover, it will be necessary to conduct longitudinal studies that focus on relationship quality. Lastly, researchers could use dyadic methods, which measure both dyadic members' perspectives, thereby providing a complete picture of both the absolute and relative views of the relational quality.

Conclusion

This research offers qualitative results that the 3+1C model is a useful and applicable tool in the analysis of coach/leader-athlete/follower relationships within and outside of the sport and exercise domain. One can see that by following the 3+1C model, a leader can cultivate the necessary atmosphere to allow their followers the best chance to flourish. These outcomes gain strength when the followers engage and accept the coaching process. The willingness to cooperate allows the

relational pieces of the 3+1C model to take root. The results highlight the importance of creating a caring climate along with relations rooted in closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation. It is clear that shifting away from harmful coaching practices that emphasize creating an ego-involving climate is crucial to building a healthy bond between leaders and their followers. When leaders practice and apply these qualities, they gain the ability to impact the engagement, motivation, and overall positive experiences of their followers. Strengthening these factors clearly increases followers' success and enables a high-quality leader-follower relationship.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to data restrictions, namely survey responses containing information that could compromise the anonymity and privacy of research participants.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.