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To cite this article: Sara Francis-Bayman & Amy E. Whitehead (04 Nov 2024): Role conflict in the director of netball role within a netball super league franchise, Managing Sport and Leisure, DOI: [10.1080/23750472.2024.2420780](https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2024.2420780)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2024.2420780>



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Published online: 04 Nov 2024.



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Role conflict in the director of netball role within a netball super league franchise

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To investigate how elite netball in the UK is interpreting the Director of Netball Role and the levels of role conflict experienced by those role-holders.

Design: Six directors of netball took part in a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis of the interviews followed an inductive and then deductive approach, to interpret the complex, intertwined themes present.

Findings: Most participants were in dual, head coach and director of netball, roles. Key responsibilities were heterogeneous, regardless of individuals being single or dual role holders. Role overload, intra role, and inter role conflict, and threats to the role were also evident and presented.

Practical Implications: Separating the head coach and sporting director roles will minimise levels of role conflict and the associated negative consequences. A clear organisational strategy is essential to providing direction and clarity to staff, which would alleviate role conflict in most areas identified.

Research Contribution: Netball provides a unique context within the sporting director field of research, and an opportunity for further research in less resourced sports adopting dual role sporting directors.

Originality: This study provides an original contribution to the literature by investigating role conflict within a sporting director population, an area that has previously received no attention.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 January 2024

Accepted 21 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Word; netball; director; coach; conflict; dual-role

Introduction

Coaches play many roles within an elite sports team; everything from developing character, team management issues, teaching tactical and technical skills and building team culture falls within the remit of the job (Stone and Gray, 2010). Such a wide range of tasks and end-goals gives rise to intra-role conflict within the role (Capel et al., 2016). In response to increased pressure on football managers' ability to demonstrate effective leadership off the field (Morrow &

Howieson, 2014) and concern around the disproportionate organisational impact of coaches (Giambatista et al., 2005), football introduced the sporting director role to oversee football business (Nissen, 2014), act as a custodian of the club (Parnell et al., 2018) and address the employment instability within the sport (Gibson & Groom, 2018). Parnell et al. (2022) have identified how the sporting director role within football has had strategic benefits for the clubs, but issues such as role ambiguity,

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perceptions of the role, job description clarity, and communication, have been identified as problematic. Other sports are also adopting a sporting director role, with less wealthy sports such as netball and rugby often combining the head coach and sporting director roles (Coles, 2020). This dual role gives rise to a potential overload and inter-role conflict (Ha et al., 2011), yet no research has been conducted looking at sporting directors' experiences of such phenomenon.

To address the dearth of research regarding the sporting director role, the key objective of this study is to understand the role conflict experienced by directors of netball. Role conflict has been linked with stress, burnout, poor job performance and higher rates of resignations (Biddle, 1986; Capel et al., 2016; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Ha et al., 2011). Despite these potential negative consequences, little attention has been given to the value of distinguishing between different types of role conflict (Jackson & Schuler, 1985); largely due to the uni-dimensional manner in which the majority of research has been conducted (Richards & Templin, 2012). This study aims to answer the call for qualitative role conflict research (Ha et al., 2011) which can allow distinctions to be made between the types of role conflict experienced and therefore, how this may be mitigated.

The majority of role conflict research within sport has revolved around dual or multiple role holders acting as teacher-coaches (Ha et al., 2011; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2002; Richards & Templin, 2012). This research offers an opportunity to broaden the scope of role conflict research, providing a unique context from which to modernise the literature. It is anticipated that the ability to directly compare rich data from dual role holders and a single role holder will allow recommendations to be made on the director of netball role in relation to reducing role conflict and its associated negative consequences. Within role conflict, there are two distinct sources, inter-role and intra-role. Inter-role conflict occurs when an individual fills multiple roles that are incompatible due to

time restraints or conflicting expectations for behaviour (Richards & Templin, 2012). Within role conflict, the concept of role overload can occur. When people play more roles than they have time, energy or resources for, or responsibilities become too challenging, role overload arises (Hindin, 2007). This sits easily within the inter-role concept of someone fulfilling multiple roles and thus becoming overloaded, however role overload may sit within both inter-role and intra-role conflict rather than being a stand-alone source as originally suggested by Kahn et al. (1964). Intra-role conflict occurs when different groups or individuals expect incompatible behaviours from one role or a role which incorporates multiple functions (Katz & Kahn, 1966). For example, a sporting director may have to liaise with the board, manage the sport science department and produce a five-year strategy. One of the roles may require kindness, another assertion, resulting in conflict. Likewise, limited time and resources could preclude equal attention being given to all responsibilities (Turner, 2001) causing role overload.

Identified as one of five key roles for high performing teams (Slemen, 2020), sporting directors are becoming more commonplace within the UK sporting landscape, and the role is evolving rapidly (Parnell et al., 2018). Within football, the role varies from club to club (Parnell et al., 2019) and this is anticipated to be the case within netball also; a sport in the infancy of embedding the role. The responsibilities and content of the role will therefore be examined to provide context for the level and types of role conflict reported. Whilst helping to address the paucity of research on this emerging role (Parnell et al., 2019), it is hoped that findings will inform future decisions surrounding the scope, structure and recruitment of sporting directors, specifically within netball.

Perceived threats to an individual's role will be explored to establish an insider view on netball's integration of the sporting director role and potential risks to individuals excelling and/or remaining within the role. Theoretically, the

sporting director role is a stable custodian of a sporting organisation (Parnell et al., 2018) whilst the head coach position is notoriously insecure (Kelly, 2008). Filling these roles simultaneously presents an intriguing question of whether dual role holders perceive threats in the same way as a single role holder. Franchises within netball, and other sports, may use this information when contemplating the merits of employing a dual role director and measures that may be put in place to support and maintain individuals within the role.

Considering netball is experiencing all-time high participation levels and growing popularity (Sport England, 2016) and the sporting director movement is gaining momentum (Parnell & Widdop, 2017); this is a contemporary and intriguing context within which to explore role conflict and whether netball's adoption of the sporting director role is effective in the current environment.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role conflict experienced by directors of netball within the UK Superleague, assessing types of role conflict, the influence various responsibilities within the role have on this and individuals' perceived threats to remaining within the role.

Method

Philosophical position

A constructivist approach was adopted, deeming reality to be constructed inter-subjectively via social interactions. Affording a realist ontological status to socially constructed concepts is commitment to making statements about an external reality beyond the individual interpreting the subject, and is a pre-requisite for making knowledge claims that have relevance beyond a researcher's own mind-dependent reality (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). The constructivist realist approach is deeply theoretical and explanatory; interested in understanding the real reasons why events

and experiences come to be (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). The subjectivist grounding of constructivism means that diverse opinions and narratives are sought, that help to account for different social realities; allowing a new, richer understanding of social worlds and organisational realities. Realism allows these realities to be interpreted in relation to existing knowledge. As this research seeks a deeper understanding of the director of netball role by considering experiences and personal interactions in relation to role conflict, it is grounded in ontological realism and epistemological constructivism.

Participants

As the research question dictates, we have used Criterion-i purposive sampling to identify and select all individuals who meet the criteria of holding the position of Director of Netball/ Technical Director within a Superleague franchise (Palinkas et al., 2015). These participants have knowledge of the research setting and phenomena of interest (Smith & Caddick, 2012), which can provide a depth and breadth of information with which to meet the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The issue of sample size in qualitative research is ambiguous, with no clear rules. Whilst a small sample perpetuates the problem of findings not being generalisable, it allows researchers to understand people and society in complex ways (Smith & Caddick, 2012) and within time constraints. Saunders suggests a sample of between 4 and 12 participants for a homogenous group such as the directors of netball. Therefore, all 7 current (at the time of this study) directors were invited to participate in the study, 6 agreed to, all of whom were female. Participants' experience within a director of netball role was on average 3.2 (SD = 1.5) years with 10 years (SD = 7.9) experience as a head coach. All participants were previous netball players (2 international, 3 national and 1 regional level).

Data collection

Following ethical approval from the first authors institution, individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Despite the directors of netball being geographically spread across the UK and a global pandemic preventing travel, face-to-face interviews were possible via synchronous electronic interviews. The electronic interviews allowed participant and interviewer to interact visually, as well as both remain in their own familiar locations (Hanna, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the key themes whilst offering the flexibility required to gain understanding of the meanings and reasoning behind individuals' attitudes and opinions. A pre-planned interview guide directed the questions asked to each participant; these were based on the literature reviewed (Capel et al., 2016; Ha et al., 2011; Hindin, 2007; Nissen, 2016; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2002; Parnell et al., 2018; Parnell et al., 2019; Richards & Templin, 2012) and consultation with the second author (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Open-ended questions were utilised in order to encourage thick and rich descriptions (Smith & Caddick, 2012) and interviewees were probed to explain or build on answers, with the purpose of adding significance and depth to the data. As suggested by Patton (1990) and Saunders et al., the order and logic of the questions varied with the flow of discussion, allowing reaction to, and exploration of relevant topics at that moment. Interviews were recorded and transcribed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data analysis

A six-step process for Thematic Analysis was implemented, as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke and Braun (2013). Following an inductive process, the first step involved the researcher familiarising themselves with the data and identifying potential areas of interest. This was completed by transcribing the recorded

data and rereading all transcripts, making brief notes on any areas of interest that appeared and reminding ourselves of the research question. The second step is the generation of initial codes. Each transcript was reviewed in detail and the surface meaning or deeper underlying meaning of what was said by the participant was described. At this stage, 53 codes were generated. The third step was to begin to organise these codes to look for potential themes. From the initial inductive process, codes were grouped into inter and intra role conflict, and Kahn et al.'s (1964) role theory was used in a deductive way to allocate the initial inductive "role conflict" responses into these umbrella categories. The fourth and fifth step was to review the generated themes and define and name them. This allows for congruence between the initial codes and finalised themes to make sure that they are congruent to meanings given by the participants. The 53 codes were condensed into five main themes, which were, "responsibilities", "role overload", "inter-role conflict", "intra-role conflict" and "threats to the role". Author two acted as a critical friend to ensure data collection and analysis were plausible and defensible (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Although discussions took place surrounding the appropriateness of the themes that had been generated, no major changes occurred. However, the discussions and reflections highlighted the need to provide the reader with greater detail and insight into the interviews, due to the depth and richness of data produced. Therefore, the results were developed via an iterative process of theme generation, moving from five general themes to five with additional sub-themes (11 in total). Following this refining and naming of themes, the findings were produced (step 6) and are presented in the results section.

Credibility

Credibility is parallel to internal validity in aiming to ensure the representations of participants' realities match what the participants intended.

From a realist perspective, participants' interpretations are an important part of the reality the researcher is trying to understand (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The scope to explore meanings in semi-structured interviews, via probing responses and clarifying questions enhances the credibility of the data collected. Building trust, rapport and personal credibility with participants also improves the credibility of data. As an insider-interviewer, there was an existing level of trust and rapport with participants. Weinreb et al. (2018) found respondents expended more effort in answering questions posed by insider interviewers and lied less, resulting in superior data. During thematic analysis, themes are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). By employing a critical friend (who was an outsider) to explore different interpretations of the studied phenomenon (Smith & McGannon, 2018) reflexivity was encouraged by challenging my (first author) construction of knowledge (Cowan & Taylor, 2016).

Results

Five themes were generated from the data; Responsibilities, role overload, inter-role conflict, intra-role conflict, and threats to the role.

Within the data is clear that the Director role came with a multitude of responsibilities. Role overload was a strong discussion topic in 5 of the 6 interviews. This produced a sub-theme of directors splitting their roles. Intra-role conflict provided two sub-themes of Lack of Resources, and Conflicting on-court Goals. Similarly, Inter-role conflict produced two sub-themes of Directors Aiming to Please Multiple Stakeholders, and Directors having too much Power. Finally, the theme Threats to the Role included two sub-themes of Sustainability, and On-court vs Off-court performance. Participants also described their core responsibilities, which emphasised the heterogeneity of the role and provided a means to compare and contrast the role conflict experienced.

Responsibilities

Overall, the directors' roles were heterogenous. Recruitment was the only common responsibility amongst all participants, with head-coaching and pathway responsibility the next most prominent. Participants identified between four and seven core responsibilities, suggesting the size of the job varies.

Frequently reported responsibilities and those identified as highly important are shown in the table below (see Figure 1).

Head coach

All but one participant held a dual role as head coach and director of netball. Of these five, four had additional coaching within the franchise or university structure. Participant C explained, "So I am head coach of the university programme as well (as NSL) and directly coach their first and second team and oversee six teams in total."

Pathway responsibility

All those in a dual role also had responsibility for the franchise's pathway (U15, U17, U19, U21 age groups). The nature of these participants' involvement within the pathway fell into two broad camps; directly coaching and top-down management. For example, Participant F elaborated, "I don't coach regularly within the pathway, but I manage the pathway coach and make sure that messages are flowing down and they're producing the players that we need."

Recruitment and contracting

Recruitment was apparent in all participants as an important part of their role; there were discrepancies across the directors with every other responsibility. Whilst every director identified players for the franchise to sign (recruitment), two specifically avoided negotiating player contracts.

I've been really lucky this year because I always have (had to contract players), and I found that a real ball ache, and unnecessary. So, I wanted

Participant	Head Coach	Pathway Responsibility	Pathway Coach mentoring	Additional Coaching (Pathway or University)	Recruitment (ID)	Contracting (negotiation)	Strategic Planning	Head Coach support/mentoring
A	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
B					X	X	X	X
C	X	X		X	X	X		
D	X	X		X	X	X		
E	X	X	X	X	X			
F	X	X	X		X			

Figure 1. Reported responsibilities of the Netball Director.

to make sure that coming in here, I made it very clear to the board that I wanted nothing to do with the contracts. I wanted to know (what was going on) but I didn't want anything to do with it. (Participant E)

Additional responsibilities

The non-coaching director was, for obvious reasons, the only participant to include supporting the head coach as a key responsibility. Although alluded to by one other participant, they were also the only directors to highlight strategic planning as a core responsibility. Participant B explains the additional roles, "It (the Director Role) entails primarily strategic work and planning behind the scenes I'd say a lot of it is the planning, strategic side of things."

The similarities and differences between directors' roles are used to distinguish their responses to questions about role conflict and threats to their role.

Role conflict

Dual-role directors responsible for contracting reported sources of role conflict more strongly

than those without the responsibility. Such role conflict involved the multiple roles and "hats" that they felt were encompassed within their job. For example,

Yeah I guess (there are conflicts). There are instances where there'll be decisions being made or spoken about in an office setting that aren't going to be beneficial on court. And that's really tough because you almost have to wear both hats and see it from all sides. (Participant C)

All those in a dual role sighted more sources of role conflict than Participant B, the only single-role director. Participant B explained, "Erm, no I don't think so, there's nothing (that conflicts). I don't think so, not at this stage anyway."

Role overload

Four participants who had a dual role, identified role overload as problematic within their role. They ranged from being the directors with the least to the greatest number of responsibilities within their role.

Participant C commented:

Something's got to give somewhere for you to fit everything you've got to do in a day, done. So, do you skimp on your day-to-day work of running the franchise ... or do you skimp on your preparation time in terms of training, playing etc.?

Participant A identified the most responsibilities within her role and also reported the highest levels of role overload.

Splitting the roles

All participants who experienced role overload spoke about the need to separate the roles into parts of the year. Participant A explained:

So my role is really split into two parts of the season. So, the first part is what I should be doing now, which is more of the director of netball and setting things up. And then come the start of the season ... that's when I'll do less work from the director of netball side and the focus will be on the NSL side, just because of the amount of work, it's just difficult to do anything else at that time.

All dual-role directors would prefer one role (head coach or sporting director) over the other, as referred to here:

I think there definitely will be a time where I'll kind of step away from the head coach position and try and take more of a director of netball post but as I say, right now, it's not going to be feasible for us. (Participant F)

Participant B, who had a single-role position, did not suggest any role overload, or the need to split the role, suggesting overload may be a source of inter-role conflict.

Inter-role conflict

Two common sources of inter-role conflict were generated; the requirement to please multiple stakeholders, and directors having too much power.

Pleasing multiple stakeholders

An increased focus on commercial activity and the board dictating specific players to be

recruited were some of the examples given of the Directors receiving input from various stakeholders within the club. Participant D explained the conflict this caused:

You're trying to please the board, your CEO, the players, the community. You know I want to strive for higher and unfortunately, I can't do that with a team of players (the board wants) because they've shown that they're only getting tenth.

All directors who split their roles into pre-season and in-season, reported difficulty in balancing where to expend most effort due to their performance being judged on various measures.

In terms of importance for sustainability for the franchise, it's the commercial piece (that is most important), because that's what is most important for making sure that year on year we have a franchise to return to, but in terms of me and how I view the role, it would be the coaching side of things and the stuff where you can physically effect change on people or outcomes. (Participant F)

Directors with too much power

Two dual-role directors felt that their role exercised so much control over the franchise that they would be difficult to fire, if needed. One participant anticipated future conflict due to the breadth of their organisation-spanning role:

I think the conflict will be obviously from a performance perspective, if I'm needing to be moved out because I'm not doing a good enough job or anything else, how easy is it for my bosses to kind of come down on me? (Participant F)

Intra-role conflict

Two prominent sources of intra-role conflict were generated; lack of resources, and balancing conflicting on-court goals.

Lack of resources

The only role conflict the single-role director identified (Participant B), was a lack of resource.

"I suppose not having enough resource and not necessarily just financial, like quality people to deliver things that you know would make a difference."

This was echoed by four other participants, who reported the highest overall levels of role conflict.

I have to say for me it's around finance. You know what I want to do and what I'm allowed to do is very conflicting. Because you know you're tasked with getting results, but you can only do that to a certain level. (Participant A)

Conflicting on-court goals

Three participants identified a balance between developing the players they have within the club and winning.

It's looking at the players coming through the pathway, it's looking at performances and seeing if we can close those incremental gaps, and so yeah it's definitely not about the wins, even though most of my squad would say that it's about the wins. Everybody wants to win. (Participant D)

All participants sighted at least one source of role conflict. Dual-role directors reported from triple to six times the amount of the single-role holder. Yet, inter-role conflict was only referred to 5 times more than intra-role (14–9) highlighting most dual-role directors (3) experienced more intra-role conflict than the single-role holder, as well as inter-role.

Threats to the role

Two sub-themes were generated as perceived threats to the directors' roles; these were sustainability, and balancing on-court performance vs off-court performance.

Sustainability

Sustainability of the franchise was the most common threat cited by directors, explained here "If there's no franchise then there's no job. That's what it comes down to, and with COVID, who knows if everybody will still be

here or even if the league will be." (Participant C). All four who alluded to this also identified lack of resources as an area of role conflict.

A lack of personal support threatening the sustainability of the role was discussed by three participants. All three were dual-role directors. One participant explained the lack of sustainability could be seen via high staff turnover

I think that's probably why the turnover is quite high, in terms of like, people doing it for two or three years and then either moving to a different franchise or a different opportunity or changing altogether. Because it's not a lifestyle for everyone and it's certainly not sustainable. (Participant D)

On vs off-court performance

A decline in on-court performance was identified as a threat by four participants. Poor off-court performance was also mentioned by all the participants who viewed "Pleasing multiple Stakeholders" as a source of inter-role conflict. The dilemma of On-Court Vs Off-Court performance was highlighted by Participant A: "Again, we're a business, it's not about netball, it's about business. And so yeah, that's a small part of it. But being a successful business is about getting results as well."

Only three directors believed that their club structure was functioning effectively, they also reported the lowest levels of role conflict overall, and none of them were responsible for both coaching and contracting.

To conclude, all participants identified role conflict within their job to varying degrees. This reflects the heterogenous nature of the roles. All of those in a dual role identified significantly more role conflict than the participant in a single role and those responsible for contracting were the highest. Perceived threats to the role were often also sources of role conflict, although a perceived lack of support in the role did not correlate with higher role conflict.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine role conflict within the director of netball role in the UK Superleague. By adopting a qualitative approach, sources of role conflict were examined in-depth, providing a richer understanding of the lived experiences of sporting directors. Description of the responsibilities within individuals' roles highlighted the confusion around the purpose of a sporting director, and the relationship between role size and content and role conflict can inform the structure of the director of netball role in the future.

One major finding generated from this study is that most (4 out of 5) participants who filled a dual, head-coach and director of netball role experienced role overload, which was the most reported source of role conflict. This is consistent with Capel et al.'s (2016) findings in high school teacher-coaches, where role overload was the area ranked highest for role conflict. Participants alluded to playing more roles than they had time, energy, or resources for (Hindin, 2007). With head-coaching the only responsibility common to all those experiencing role overload, results suggest that the breadth of the dual role gives rise to role conflict and that role overload is a form of inter-role conflict.

The limited time and resources reported by dual role holders, could preclude equal attention being given to all responsibilities (Turner, 2001) or sacrificing performance in each role (Richards & Templin, 2012). All directors reporting role overload, described splitting the two roles across the year. The data supports the opinion that individuals may control role conflict by selecting one primary role (Massengale, 1981), whilst providing another layer of insight in showing that this prioritisation changes in relation to the playing season. Dual role holders are said to decide how to spend their time based on which role offers greatest recognition and reward (Millslagle & Morley, 2004). Separating roles into pre-season and season, as

opposed to consistently prioritising one role, may be due to directors being judged on multiple measures and therefore being unsure of which role is most important. All directors who reported role overload and splitting their roles, also identified having multiple stakeholders to please as a source of role conflict; consistent with findings amongst teacher-coaches (Konukman et al., 2010). The delicate balance of roles for coach-directors was emphasised by the same number identifying poor off-court performance as a threat to their role, as did on-court performance. High levels of role conflict are to be expected in this scenario when boundaries between roles are difficult to define (Parsons, 1966). Parnell et al. (2022) also identified issues around role ambiguity within football. To mitigate the confusion and conflict within the role, franchises should ensure roles and objectives are clearly defined and ranked for importance. This in-house, low-cost adjustment can contribute to employee health and prevent absence (Schmidt et al., 2014) and merits further investigation.

The aim of the present study was also to provide deeper insight into role conflict by determining not just the presence, but the types of role conflict experienced by directors of netball. As can be seen from the generated themes, role overload, inter-role conflict and intra-role conflict were all identified. Accepting role overload as a form of inter-role conflict, it follows that dual role holders reported higher overall levels of role conflict than single role holder. The theme of intra-role conflict allows a greater understanding of how these manifest within the coaching and sporting director roles. Lack of resources was a sporting director conflict, underlined by the fact that it was the sole source of role conflict identified by the single role director. All but one participant identified lack of human or financial resources as a cause of role conflict, suggesting that the financial saving made by franchises employing a dual-role director does not directly benefit that individual.

The performance-development trade-off (Conflicting On-Court Goals) was the other intra-role conflict sub-theme proffered by coach-directors. Whilst developing players may be a concern of the club, once players transition to the elite senior level, competition and elite-level performance should be the major focus (Mills et al., 2014). The conflict experienced by coach-directors may stem from them also having overall control for the pathway (academy) within the club and being judged on both performance and development criteria. Academy management is not usually within the remit of sporting directors (Parnell et al., 2018) and was not in the case of the single role holder. A comprehensive strategic plan could provide clarity to dual-role directors conflicted by how much they should be pursuing performance versus development, as a well-conceived strategy can lead to flawless implementation, organisational competitiveness, and effectiveness (Neluheni et al., 2014). However, writing one would also fall within a sporting director's remit (Parnell et al., 2018), despite only the single-role director including it within her key responsibilities. Ineffective organisational structure and a poor-quality strategy are major reasons for strategic plans failing (Neluheni et al., 2014) suggesting the dual role director may not possess the expertise or authority to solve their own problem.

Understanding that more intra-role conflict stems from coaching than a director setting can partly be explained by the amount of time spent with athletes, as the role of the coach is central to managing coach-athlete conflict effectively (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). The Conflicting On-Court Goals sub-theme also offers links to sources of inter-role conflict, where contradictory responsibilities (pathway and elite), targets (successful elite performance and player development) and potential solutions (write your own strategic plan) are interwoven into the fabric of the conflict. So, whilst this study separated, and offered a deeper insight into the types of role

conflict experienced, it is too complex a phenomenon to look at sources individually, rather than as part of an interconnected network; supporting the view of Richards and Templin (2012) that previous research has over-simplified role conflict.

Identifying signing targets was a responsibility within every participant's role. Dealing with the contracts of those players was in 3 of the 5 dual role holders' remits. This aligned with the three directors reporting the highest levels of role conflict. Role conflict is high in jobs requiring boundary-spanning activities (Miles, 1976). Occupants of these roles are subject to behavioural expectations from senders in separate social systems (Adams, 1976). Negotiating contracts is a boundary-spanning activity, susceptible to role conflict (Friedman & Podolny, 1992), yet the single role director had responsibility for contracting players, as is the norm for a sporting director (Parnell et al., 2018), and reported very low overall conflict. Whilst initially appearing to be a source of intra-role conflict, the inter-role conflict sub-theme of Pleasing Multiple Stakeholders, suggests that contracting players could mediate inter-role conflict for dual role holders.

The major sources of inter-role conflict go some way to explaining why only those in a dual role reported high role conflict, despite the sporting director role being boundary-spanning. Dual-role directors identified demands from the board as conflicting with performance goals. The troublesome boundary-spanning was therefore between the coaching aspect of the dual role and the board/other stakeholders, supporting the low levels of role conflict reported by the non-coaching director. The relationship between head coaches of football clubs and their directors are frequently marked by distrust and enmity (Kelly & Harris, 2010) and it may be that dual role holders reported conflict due to identifying more strongly with the head coach role than the sporting director role, within this setting. This

is problematic as the sporting director's role is to operate as a link between the board and the sporting departments (Relvas et al., 2010) and the results of this research suggest that this link breaks down more often when the head coach and sporting director are one and the same.

The breadth of control and influence provided by a dual role was evident in the inter-role conflict sub-theme of Directors with too much Power. Self-awareness was shown by directors who identified that their almost complete control of the club made them very difficult to fire if underperforming. Usually, coaches have to constantly forge alliances with contextual power brokers in a fight for longevity (Potrac & Jones, 2009) and even then, the decision to fire a head coach is often reduced to a desire to improve sporting performance (Nissen, 2014). It is necessary to clearly define the organisational structure and authority to avoid role conflict (Seegers & van Elderen, 1996). Within a sporting director model, the head coach should be fluent (Nissen, 2016), whilst the sporting director should remain stable, firing the coach when needed (Nissen, 2014). For a dual role holder, the ambiguity regarding line-management represents a clear role conflict; they are not going to fire themselves. The result is that the individual has disproportionate organisational impact, as seen in the traditional football manager role (Giambatista et al., 2005), resulting in instability should the individual leave. This is at odds with the "custodian" role a sporting director should occupy, setting a long-term culture and vision (Parnell et al., 2018).

Coaches may try to defend their territory from directors and owners by requiring total control (Kelly & Harris, 2010). However, the unanimous belief that netball franchises need to change their structure and split the roles of head coach and director suggests that participants were filling dual roles out of necessity rather than desire for power. The desire from dual-role directors to split the roles, plus the

unique responsibilities described by the single-role director, support Parnell et al.'s (2019) recommendations of what a sporting director role should entail. Participant B made exclusive mention of "strategic work and planning" as well as acknowledging the requirement to "influence people to get them to think that something is a good idea". These key responsibilities identified by Parnell et al. (2018, 2019) were not mentioned by any other participant, potentially due to coaching tasks taking higher priority, as they were found to be for dual-role teacher-coaches (Ryan, 2008).

The other unique aspect of the single-role director's job was "working with the head coach, supporting them and just making sure they have someone to run ideas by, just check and challenge what they're doing". For dual-role directors without anyone to turn to professionally, lack of support was deemed a stressor. This reinforces the argument that the two roles should be separate as the requirements grow along with the sport; as seen in football where the evolving structures within football clubs have placed increasing demands on managers (Morrow & Howieson, 2014), leading many clubs to employ a sporting director to sit between the manager and board (Parnell et al., 2018). Netball is growing and evolving rapidly and can take lessons from football in appointing a separate sporting director and coach to ease the load on an individual and provide long-term stability. The alternative is replicating the previous mistakes of football where employment has been characterised by limited tenure and employment instability (Gibson & Groom, 2018).

One participant believed the turnover of directors is already "quite high" due to the requirement to "give every part of you" to the job. The belief that the dual-role is placing an unsustainable load on individuals, supports Capel et al.'s (2016) findings that role conflict explained the most variance on all burnout scores. With dual-role directors experiencing

more role conflict, overload and a perceived lack of support; franchises should be aware that their organisational structure is not promoting long-term stability within the role, with inter-role conflict linked to lower job satisfaction and higher withdrawal cognitions (Hom & Kinicki, 2001). Whilst providing additional support to the dual-role director may be a lower-cost solution to reducing the stress experienced, Fong (2016) found that attempts to mitigate the overload-burnout relationship by amplifying the amount of support is unlikely to be effective. More encouragingly for the franchises, O'Connor and Macdonald (2002) found that the impact of the consequences of role conflict was lessened by a perceived positive and rewarding work environment; whilst female teacher-coaches accessed mentors to reduce stress and role conflict (Drake & Hebert, 2002). The effectiveness of increased support around a dual role director role in reducing role conflict and stress, warrants further investigation as a lower cost pit-stop on the way to stand-alone roles.

Role conflict is correlated with individuals having less confidence in the organisation (Kahn et al., 1964). The two dual-role directors who thought their franchise's organisational structure was fit for purpose, reported the lowest role conflict and were both heavily focussed on coaching and not responsible for contracting players. The single-role director who was responsible for contracting also identified an efficient organisational structure. Coaching and contracting appear to be the largest responsibilities which result in role conflict and stress. Directly linking to every sub-theme of role conflict, these two are the key responsibilities that need to be separated in order to manage role conflict and build confidence in the organisation. This aligns with the European football structure, where the sporting director leads on all business and operational aspects and the head coach looks after training (Bridgewater, 2010).

Limitations and conclusion

Every study is not without its limitations, and although this study is the first to bring to light netball director role conflict, it is a cross sectional design which has captured a one-time snapshot of the perceptions of these sporting directors. Future research may consider longitudinal approaches to following the lived experiences of sporting directors over a season to capture the nuanced and fluctuating role over time. This may provide a more informed representation, which can inform educational resources to support the Director within their role throughout the season. Regardless of this, however, it is clear from this study, that the Netball Directors role is one of many hats, and as a result, leads to a myriad of role conflict. This in turn may lead to Directors feeling unable to cope, and eventually may cause burnout. We urge sporting organisations that employ Directors to consider the practicalities of this role and the number of responsibilities that they incorporate into this role.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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