

Cognitive Appraisals of Organizational Stressors and Coping Styles of Football Coaches and Players in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed how football coaches and players appraised and coped with stressors they experienced or encountered. Specifically, the study assessed the following: (1) stress appraisal mechanisms employed by coaches and players, (2) coping mechanisms adopted by coaches and players, and (3) association between stress appraisals and coping styles among coaches and players in the Ghana national football league. Employing the descriptive survey design, census sampling was used to select 424 footballers and 44 coaches who answered the Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM) and the Modified Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (MCOPE) inventories. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) and multivariate multiple regression were used to analyze the data. The findings showed that football coaches and players reportedly used more controllable-by-self and challenge appraisals and employed more problem-focused coping styles (increasing effort, active coping, and planning) than emotion-focused coping styles (seeking social support for emotional reasons, venting of emotions, and self-blame) during stressful situations. Further, those who used facilitative appraisal mechanisms adopted functional coping mechanisms and vice versa. Sport psychologists are encouraged to organize regular psychological training workshops on a variety of functional coping styles (e.g., cognitive restructuring, planning, increasing effort and active coping) to help football coaches and players deal with the demands associated with competitions to enhance their psychological well-being.

Keywords: Coaches, cognitive appraisal, coping styles, players, stress

INTRODUCTION

Globally, athletes and coaches who engage in professional sports experience many stressful situations (stressors) because of the demanding nature of the environment within which they operate [1-12]. These stressors encountered can lead to withdrawal from work, reduced self-confidence, poor performance in their sport, low work satisfaction, negative emotions and mental health disorders like depression and anxiety [13-17] if these sport performers fail to adopt functional coping mechanisms [18-19]. Even though, prior stress-related research conceptualised stress as a unitary construct and linked stressors to many detrimental effects on the individual, current stress literature suggests that individuals may react differently to demanding situations. Therefore, not all perceived stressful encounters cause stress among sport performers [2-3, 8].

The transactional conceptualization of stress and coping suggest that there are different ways individuals evaluate their environment relative to their personal goals, values and beliefs ([i.e., cognitive appraisal], [2, 19-20]). Cognitive appraisal plays a vital mediating role in the evaluation of a situation as either stressful or otherwise and further influences the coping mechanism utilized in any given situation.

Lazarus and Folkman [20] dichotomized cognitive appraisal into two dimensions, namely; primary appraisal referring to a person's evaluation of the relevance of her/his values, beliefs and goals in relation with the particular situation, which can be appraised as either stressful, benign-positive or irrelevant. An appraisal of irrelevance of a situation makes it non-threatening to the values, goals and/or beliefs of the person. Again, a benign-positive appraisal perceives a positive outcome to the wellbeing of the person. Therefore, the individual requires no coping effort to deal with an irrelevant or benign-positive situation. An individual evaluates a situation as stressful, based on the differences in vulnerability and sensitivity to specific situations [19-20]. A threatening situation is an expectation of loss or harm to the person in future. A challenge appraisal is an expectation of future gain or benefits to the individual whilst harm/loss appraisal is an expectation to damage that has already occurred to the person.

Secondary appraisal denotes an individual's evaluation of what can be done to deal with a stressor, which determines the level of control over the stressful situation by coping [21]. There's an indication that primary appraisal does not always occur first and cannot be autonomous of secondary appraisal. Thus, the variation in appraisals does not rely on timing but more on the appraisal content [19]. Peacock and Wong [21] developed and validated a survey instrument that focuses on three primary appraisal dimensions namely; challenge (feeling joyous and perceiving a gain in future), threat (perceiving a future harm) and centrality (perceiving a situation/s as important to one's wellbeing) and three secondary appraisal dimensions namely; controllable-by-self (an evaluation of control over a situation), controllable-by-others (an evaluation that help can come from others) and uncontrollable-by-anyone (an evaluation that help will come from no one to deal with the stressor/s).

Coping is defined as "continuously shifting cognitive and behavioural attempts to deal with explicit internal and/or external demands that are evaluated as taxing or draining the resources of the individual" [20] and is closely connected to cognitive appraisal. According to previous studies, athletes and coaches must use a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the pressures associated with the competitive sport setting. Thus, Lazarus and Folkman [20] distinguished between problem-focused coping (i.e., means to resolve or minimize the obstacle or stressor) and emotion-focused coping (i.e., means for reducing unpleasant emotions or suffering). While problem-focused coping is viewed as adaptive to performance and wellbeing of sport performers, emotion-focused coping is otherwise considered maladaptive and linked with a detrimental performance and wellbeing [2, 8].

Several researchers have studied different ways that coaches and athletes cognitively appraise and cope with stressors they encounter [8, 22]. For example, Dixon et al. [23] demonstrated that coaches benefited greatly from seeing stressors as challenges and reiterated that when individuals evaluated the resources available to them to be inadequate in a particular situation, they responded with maladaptive appraisal (i.e., threat). Alternately, if adequate resources are perceived to be available, responses then became adaptive (i.e., challenge), facilitating a drive

towards an achievement of goals. Gomes et al. [24] found among footballers who evaluated stressful encounters as challenging, felt more in control of the stressors. These players reported having more resources for coping, leading to pleasant feelings, while those who evaluated the stressors as threatening were more susceptible and experienced more unpleasant emotions. Again, following the experience of an acute source of stress, Turkish athletes' appraisal of self-confidence was inversely related to aggressive coping styles [25]. Generally, challenge appraisals are linked with problem-focused coping while threat appraisals are associated with the use of emotion-focused coping [8, 23].

Despite stress being extensively studied in Ghana, majority of these studies used non-sporting populations like security personnel [26-27], employees of other organizations [28-30] and health workers [31]. Only few studies [9-10] have studied the stressors experienced by football coaches and players [9] with a validation study [10]. To date, no study has investigated the cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms across any sporting sample in Ghana. Moreover, previous studies [4, 14, 32-34] stressed on the need to consider cultural differences in the evaluation of individuals' affect and stressful experiences. From a sociocultural standpoint, there could be many common values, norms, and social behaviours that underlie patterns of stressful reactions and appraisal mechanisms [35-36]. Consequently, coping mechanisms may also differ among cultures [37]. Rather, such strategies might be trapped in diverse cultures through learned experiences to manage encountered stressful situations [38]. As a follow-up to our previous study, Srem-Sai et al. [9] found selection, team and culture and goals and development as the predominant stressors encountered by football coaches and players in the national league. The current study examined the cognitive appraisals and coping mechanisms used by coaches and players who had experienced different organizational stressors. Specifically, the study assessed (1) the stress appraisal mechanisms adopted by the football coaches and players, (2) the coping mechanisms utilized and (3) the association between stress appraisals and coping mechanisms utilized. Knowledge about these experiences would assist sport psychologists to help design appropriate stress management interventions for coaches and players to promote their psychological wellbeing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants' Selection

The study used a cross-sectional survey design. Through census sampling, a total of 594 participants who participated in the 2020/2021 national football league season undertook the survey (i.e., 540 players and 54 coaches). However, only 424 players and 44 coaches officially completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 78.5 and 81.5%, respectively. The players' age ranged from 16 to 32 years ($M = 22.36$, $SD = 3.53$) while coaches' ages ranged from 31 to 70 years. Years of experience for players ranged from 1 to 15 years ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.82$) and 1 to 17 years for coaches. Majority of the participants reported years of experience below 5 years. The inclusion criteria required that players and coaches were officially registered by the Ghana Football Association who took part in the 2020/2021 Premier League season. Additionally, coaches surveyed should have obtained either a license A or B from the Confederation of African Football (CAF). In line with Swann's et al. [39] classification of elite athletes, surveyed players were regarded as elite because the Ghana premier League is considered to be the highest level of professional football in the country. Thus, reaching this level of competitiveness (premier level) was a great achievement in their professional career. Only 9 (2.12%) of the participants had diploma and degree certificates, while 143 (33.72%)

were secondary school certificate holders. Majority of the participants ($n = 272$, 64.16%) were either junior high or primary school graduates.

Instrumentation

The Stress Appraisal Measure [21]:

The 28-item SAM was used to measure six (6) appraisal dimensions [21] under primary and secondary cognitive appraisals. The appraisal dimensions involve; threat (e.g., Does this situation make me feel anxious?) challenge (e.g., How eager am I to tackle this problem?), and centrality (e.g., How much will I be affected by the outcome of this situation?). Secondary appraisal dimensions include controllable-by-others (e.g., Is there someone or some agency I can turn to for help if I need it?), controllable-by-self (e.g., Will I be able to overcome the problem?), and uncontrollable-by-anyone (e.g., Is the problem unresolvable by anyone?). After assessing primary and secondary appraisals, the overall perceived stress reported by participants were measured. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 D (Not at all), 2 D (Slightly), 3 D (Moderately) 4 D (Considerably) to 5 D (Extremely). Prior studies have shown adequate Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores for the SAM, ranging from 0.74 to 0.90 [21, 40]. The present study recorded Cronbach's alpha coefficient values of 0.76 and 0.85 for primary and secondary appraisals respectively.

Modified COPE (MCOPE; [41]):

Participants' coping ability was assessed using the MCOPE, a 48-item survey questionnaire with 12 sub-scales. Twenty-nine (29) items from seven coping sub-scales were employed for this study. This decision was taken in consultation with some elite coaches due to the length of the instrument and time availability of the teams. Under problem-focused coping, examples of items listed include planning ("I made a plan of action"), active coping ("I did what had to be done, one step at a time"), seeking social support for instrumental reasons ("I got support and understanding from someone"), increasing effort ("I put more effort into my coaching/playing performance"). Three other behaviours were identified as emotion-focused coping for the purposes of this study: self-blame ("I decided I was at fault for my performance"), seeking emotional support from others ("I talked about my feelings with someone"), and venting emotions ("I got upset and let my feelings out"). On a 5-point rating scale, participants were asked to identify how much they used each approach to deal with the stressors they experienced during competition 1 ("Not at all") 2 ("Used a little") 3 ("Used somewhat") 4 ("Used a lot") and 5 ("Used very much"). Arnold et al. [13] found Cronbach's alpha values of .72 and .68 for problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping respectively. In athletic populations using both dispositional and situational instructions for coping, the MCOPE has showed acceptable validity evidences of varied scores [42-44]. The reported Cronbach alpha scores for problem-focused and emotion-focused coping in this study were .841 and .752, respectively.

Data Collection Procedures

Before the data collection exercise, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Cape Coast, and the ethical clearance board gave approval with a reference number UCC/IRB/A/2016/794. A letter of introduction was acquired from the University of Cape Coast's Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (HPER) to assist the researcher in contacting coaches and players in the national football league. Prior to their involvement in the study, all participants were provided with information letters explaining the study's goals, importance, data collection methods, and ethical concerns such as confidentiality

and anonymity. An orientation was given to all club secretaries, assistant coaches, coaches and five (5) physical education teachers by the researchers on the questionnaires' administration, including all standard instructions across their various teams. This procedure was followed to ensure the accuracy of the data that was collected. The questionnaires were then sent to the 2020/2021 premier league football coaches and players who signed informed consent forms to participate in the study, to respond to and submit to the researchers based on a planned date. All COVID-19 safety guidelines were adhered to during the questionnaires' administration. Part of the data was collected from one club to the other at different times at their home grounds while the rest of the clubs sent their answered questionnaires in sealed brown envelopes by post. The duration for the collection of the entire data was within three (3) months.

Data Processing and Analysis

The variance-covariance matrix homogeneity, outliers, missing data, univariate and multivariate normality, and multicollinearity of the data were visually assessed as well as statistically tested. For both univariate and multivariate normality, Q-Q plots were used to assess if all of the data points were closer to the line. To verify for outliers and linearity assumptions, scatter plots were employed. The Box's M test of equality of covariance matrices was used to assess the homogeneity of variance-covariance assumptions, and multicollinearity assumptions were also examined to see how the dependent variables were connected [45]. A successful screening was followed by an analysis of the screened data using IBM SPSS statistics software version 22.

Means and standard deviations were used to analyze objectives one and two whilst multivariate multiple regression was used to analyze the third research objective.

RESULTS

Stress Appraisal Measures Adopted by Football Coaches and Players in the Premier League

This study assessed the stress appraisal mechanisms used by Ghana's football coaches and players. A higher mean score on a dimension denotes high utilisation of that particular stress appraisal mechanism. Specifically, values less than 2.5 signifies a low level of utilisation, scores between 2.5-3.4 showed a moderate level of utilisation, and values greater than 3.5 depicted high level of utilisation of the stress appraisal strategy based on the scoring criteria. Table 3 displays the specifics of the findings.

Table 1: Stress Appraisal Mechanisms Used by Football Coaches and Players

Stress Appraisal	Coache		Players	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Primary appraisal	2.97	.72	2.82	.62
Threat	2.78	.75	2.67	.73
Challenge	3.09	.87	3.02	.79
Centrality	3.05	1.05	2.77	.84
Secondary appraisal	3.02	.50	2.81	.59
Controllable-by-self	3.59	.74	3.12	.81
Controllable-by-others	3.06	.76	2.91	.85
Uncontrollable-by-anyone	2.39	.84	2.39	.82

Source: Field Survey [45]

Football coaches ($M=3.59$, $SD=.74$) and players ($M=3.12$, $SD=.81$) mostly employed the controllable-by-self stress appraisal mechanism, from Table 3's findings. Both coaches ($M=3.09$, $SD=.87$) and players ($M=3.02$, $SD=.79$) used the challenge appraisal mechanism in addition to the controllable-by-self appraisal. The controllable-by-others appraisal was ranked third among the appraisal mechanisms used by coaches ($M=3.06$, $SD=.76$) and players ($M=2.91$, $SD=.85$). Uncontrollable-by-anyone was the least adopted appraisal by coaches ($M=2.39$, $SD=.84$) and players ($M=2.39$, $SD=.82$).

Coping Styles Adopted by Football Coaches and Players in the Premier League

This objective examined the coping styles employed by football coaches and players in Ghana. On a scale of 1 to 5, responses from coaches and players were requested on the different coping mechanisms used. Some of the coping mechanisms were active coping, planning, increasing effort, seeking for social support for instrumental reasons, venting emotions, seeking for social support for emotional reasons, and self-blame. The higher the mean score, the more frequently the particular coping mechanism was used. Specifically, values less than 2.5 signify a low level of utilization, scores between 2.5-3.4 show a moderate level of utilization and values greater than 3.5 depict high level of utilisation of the coping style based on the scoring criteria. Table 4 displays the details of the analysis.

Table 2: Coping Styles Adopted by Football Coaches and Players

Coping Strategies	Coache		Players	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Problem-focused Coping	3.45	.78	3.28	.71
Active coping	3.50	.77	3.21	.90
Planning	3.40	1.05	3.26	.86
Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	3.09	.92	3.11	.85
Increasing effort	3.79	.94	3.54	.96
Emotion-focused coping	2.89	.75	2.80	.69
Seeking social support for emotional reasons	2.89	.929	2.76	.86
Venting emotions	2.86	1.06	2.78	.91
Self-blame	2.93	.89	2.86	.84

Source: Field Survey [45]

Both the coaches and players employed problem-focused coping techniques, as seen in Table 4. The increasing effort method was the mostly used coping technique among coaches ($M=3.78$, $SD=0.94$) and athletes ($M=3.54$, $SD=0.96$). The second most used coping style by coaches ($M=3.50$, $SD=.77$) was active coping and for players ($M=3.26$, $SD=.86$), planning. Whereas planning was the third most used coping style among the coaches ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.05$), players reported using active coping ($M=3.21$, $SD=.90$). Notably, the three most reportedly used coping styles were increasing efforts, active coping and planning by coaches and players.

Association between Stress Appraisals and Coping Styles among Football Coaches and Players in the Premier League

This analysis examined the association between stress appraisals and coping styles among football coaches and players in Ghana. Table 4 shows the regression results on the association between stress appraisals and coping styles of coaches.

Table 3: Association between Stress Appraisals and Coping Styles of Coaches

Dependent Variable	Parameter	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Active coping	Intercept	.383	.678	.565	.576
	Threat	.466	.220	2.118	.041
	Challenge	-.104	.123	-.845	.403
	Centrality	.058	.141	.415	.681
	Controllable-by-Self	.466	.155	3.008	.005*
	Controllable-by- Others	.095	.130	.726	.472
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	-.001	.142	-.009	.993
Planning	Intercept	-.967	.949	-1.019	.315
	Threat	.592	.308	1.922	.062
	Challenge	-.079	.172	-.462	.647
	Centrality	-.037	.197	-.186	.853
	Controllable-by-Self	.800	.217	3.687	.001*
	Controllable-by- Others	.166	.182	.912	.368
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	-.1	.199	-.632	.531
Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	Intercept	.196	.866	.227	.822
	Threat	.155	.281	.551	.585
	Challenge	-.032	.157	-.202	.841
	Centrality	.267	.180	1.484	.146
	Controllable-by-Self	.368	.198	1.860	.071
	Controllable-by- Others	.014	.167	.082	.935
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.161	.182	.884	.383
Increasing effort	Intercept	-.020	.840	-.024	.981
	Threat	.454	.273	1.665	.104
	Challenge	-.128	.152	-.839	.407
	Centrality	.137	.175	.782	.439
	Controllable-by-Self	.481	.192	2.506	.017
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.241	.162	1.493	.144
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.024	.176	.137	.892
Seeking social support for emotional reasons	Intercept	1.512	.961	1.573	.124
	Threat	-.408	.312	-1.307	.199
	Challenge	-.029	.174	-.167	.868
	Centrality	.407	.200	2.038	.049
	Controllable-by-Self	.266	.220	1.209	.234
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	-.085	.185	-.461	.648
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.281	.202	1.390	.173
Venting emotions	Intercept	.793	1.109	.715	.479
	Threat	-.178	.360	-.494	.624
	Challenge	.066	.201	.329	.744
	Centrality	.268	.231	1.163	.252
	Controllable-by-Self	.518	.253	2.045	.048
	Controllable by Others	-.181	.213	-.848	.402
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.097	.233	.417	.679
Self-blame	Intercept	1.754	.933	1.879	.068
	Threat	-.507	.303	-1.674	.103

	Challenge	.162	.169	.958	.344
	Centrality	.396	.194	2.041	.048
	Controllable-by-Self	.061	.213	.287	.776
	Controllable-by- Others	-.093	.180	-.520	.606
	Uncontrollable-by- anyone	.395	.196	2.014	.051

Source: Field Survey [45]

*Significant at $p < .007$

As shown in Table 4, only controllable-by-self was found to be associated with the coaches active coping, $b=.466$, $t=3.008$, $p=.005$ and planning; $b=.800$, $t=3.687$, $p=.001$. The rest of the variables under the stress appraisal mechanism (i.e., threat, challenge, centrality, controllable-by-others, uncontrollable-by-anyone) did not influence any of the coping styles of the football coaches.

Regression Results for Players on the Association between Stress Appraisals and Coping Styles

Table 5 presents results on the association between stress appraisals and coping styles of football players.

Table 4: Association between Stress Appraisals and Coping Styles of Football Players

Dependent Variable	Parameter	B	Std. Error	T	Sig.
Active coping	Intercept	1.162	.218	5.321	.000
	Threat	.101	.071	1.428	.154
	Challenge	.208	.060	3.462	.001*
	Centrality	-.011	.059	-.185	.854
	Controllable-by-Self	.291	.058	5.007	.000*
	Controllable-by-Others	.156	.052	2.989	.003*
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	-.080	.056	-1.442	.150
Planning	Intercept	1.157	.205	5.643	.000
	Threat	.017	.066	.259	.796
	Challenge	.169	.057	2.993	.003*
	Centrality	.042	.055	.752	.453
	Controllable-by-Self	.287	.055	5.257	.000*
	Controllable-by-Others	.175	.049	3.573	.000*
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	.008	.052	.161	.872
Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	Intercept	1.119	.211	5.315	.000
	Threat	.134	.068	1.970	.051
	Challenge	.061	.058	1.051	.294
	Centrality	.046	.057	.812	.417
	Controllable-by-Self	.152	.056	2.722	.007*
	Controllable-by-Others	.142	.050	2.824	.005*
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	.176	.054	3.289	.001*
Increasing effort	Intercept	1.640	.233	7.046	.000
	Threat	-.032	.075	-.426	.670
	Challenge	.265	.064	4.125	.000*
	Centrality	-.013	.063	-.207	.836

	Controllable-by-Self	.372	.062	6.014	.000*
	Controllable-by-Others	.072	.056	1.290	.198
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	-.064	.059	-1.089	.277
Seeking social support for emotional reasons	Intercept	.871	.211	4.129	.000
	Threat	.338	.068	4.944	.000*
	Challenge	.037	.058	.634	.526
	Centrality	-.037	.057	-.644	.520
	Controllable-by-Self	.027	.056	.485	.628
	Controllable-by-Others	.090	.050	1.785	.075
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	.264	.054	4.915	.000*
Venting emotions	Intercept	.747	.224	3.332	.001
	Threat	.216	.073	2.983	.003*
	Challenge	.006	.062	.101	.920
	Centrality	.038	.060	.622	.534
	Controllable-by-Self	.082	.060	1.374	.170
	Controllable-by-Others	.164	.054	3.065	.002*
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	.246	.057	4.312	.000*
Self-blame	Intercept	.877	.205	4.271	.000
	Threat	.272	.066	4.096	.000*
	Challenge	.101	.057	1.778	.076
	Centrality	-.027	.055	-.482	.630
	Controllable-by-Self	.060	.055	1.103	.271
	Controllable-by-Others	.113	.049	2.313	.021
	Uncontrollable-by- Anyone	.213	.052	4.072	.000*

Source: Field Survey [45]

*Significant at $p \leq .007$

As shown in Table 5, associations were drawn between the specific dimensions of stress appraisal measures and the coping styles of players. Among the results, challenge [$b=.208$, $t=3.462$, $p=.001$], controllable-by-self [$b=.291$, $t=5.007$, $p<.001$], and controllable-by-others [$b=.156$, $t=2.989$, $p=.003$] significantly influenced the active coping style of players. Again, challenge [$b=.169$, $t=2.993$, $p=.003$], controllable-by-self [$b=.287$, $t=5.257$, $p<.001$], and controllable-by-others [$b=.175$, $t=3.573$, $p<.001$] were also significantly associated with planning coping style of players.

The results also revealed that controllable-by-self [$b=.152$, $t=2.722$, $p=.007$], controllable-by-others [$b=.142$, $t=2.824$, $p=.005$], and uncontrollable-by-anyone [$b=.176$, $t=3.289$, $p=.001$] significantly influenced players' coping behaviours on seeking social support for instrumental reasons. Further, challenge [$b=.265$, $t=4.125$, $p<.001$] and controllable-by-self [$b=.372$, $t=6.014$, $p<.001$] significantly influenced players coping behaviours on increasing effort.

Threat [$b=.338$, $t=4.944$, $p<.001$] and uncontrollable-by-anyone [$b=.264$, $t=4.915$, $p<.001$] were significantly related to players' coping behaviours on seeking social support for emotional reasons. The results also revealed that threat [$b=.216$, $t=2.983$, $p<.001$], controllable-by-others [$b=.164$, $t=3.065$, $p=.002$] and uncontrollable-by-anyone [$b=.246$, $t=4.312$, $p<.001$] significantly influenced players' coping behaviours on venting emotions. Other results showed that threat

[$b=.272, t=4.096, p<.001$], and uncontrollable-by-anyone [$b=.213, t=4.072, p<.001$] significantly influenced players' coping behaviours on self-blame.

DISCUSSION

The study assessed the stress appraisal measures and coping styles adopted by football coaches and players in the 2020/2021 premier league in Ghana. The results showed that controllable-by-self appraisal mechanism was frequently employed by both the football coaches and players. This revelation suggests that coaches and players in this study felt that they had the ability to manage stressful situations they experienced while playing the league. This finding is similar to previous finding which revealed that individuals who felt they have effective mechanisms for coping, are more likely to perceive a sense of control. However, a perception of lack of adequate coping styles could lead to powerlessness over stressors [19, 22]. This sense of control, according to Frazier et al. [46], promotes the wellbeing of the individual. This present observation may have been influenced by individual differences like resilience, hardiness, mental toughness [47], self-confidence [25, 48] and perceived competence [49] of the players and coaches. Recently, mental toughness has also been shown to provide a significant buffering effect on perceived stress of athletes [50]. Supporting this idea, Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Hystad, and Laberg [51] provided evidence that hardiness suppresses the negative effect of stressful experiences. Besides the individual factors cited above as a justification of the high sense of self-control against stressors reported by coaches and players, other situational factors like social support networks and organisational culture cannot be ruled out in explaining the current observation. For instance, Hanton et al. [47] stressed that contextual elements (i.e., social support systems and organizational culture) are likely to affect the course that a stress pattern follows. This assertion supports Dixon and Turner's [52] study as some participants expressed their displeasure about how some club owners and managers interfered and insisted on strict conformity to club norms and practices. These players felt intimidated and out of control, which caused undue strain on the players [52]. Hence, it is likely that the coaches and players in the current research have some degree of autonomy and freedom to operate, feeling more in control than otherwise.

Both the coaches and players also reported the use of challenge appraisal mechanism quite often. Consistent with previous studies [15, 53-54], challenge appraisals have been linked with perceptions of control which also leads to the adoption of more positive coping behaviours like problem-focused coping by sport performers. Hence, coaches and players may view themselves as having the capacity to manage their stressful encounters [55]. Conversely, threat appraisals are linked with a lack of control and generally less adaptive coping mechanisms, such as emotion-focused coping. For instance, Dixon et al. [23] examined the relationship between football coaches' coaching behaviours and cognitive appraisals of threat and challenge. Findings showed that coaches gained lots of advantages if they evaluate stressors as challenges. Dixon et al. [23] reiterated that when people perceive that the resources available to them are inadequate and appraise situations as threatening, they often respond with a maladaptive stress and unpleasant behaviours. They also experience high levels of anxiety, subjective stress, and emotion-focused coping in an attempt to lessen the adverse feelings and ideas induced by the stressful circumstances. Alternately, a perception of adequate resources and challenge appraisals elicits adaptive responses, pleasant behaviours and positive emotions facilitating a drive towards an achievement of one's goal [23]. It is also possible that social networks and organisational culture may have influenced this finding [56]. However, this result contradicts

the findings of Hanton et al. [47] and Neil et al. [57]. These authors discovered that employees who rated stressful encounters negatively, also provided reports of difficulty. Moreover, the controllable-by-others was the third most used appraisal mechanism. This outcome implies that coaches and players evaluated their stressful encounters as those that could be controlled by other people through social support networks [58-60]. For instance, Mitchell et al. [59] looked at the significant stress-buffering advantages of social support in relation to injury stressors and psychological reactions in athletes and found that social support had a significant impact on stress-buffering. According to Mitchell and associates, subsequent to experiencing stress, some players and coaches confided in their significant others (e.g., mentors, senior colleagues, family) who provided assistance during their stressful experiences.

Coaches and players mostly adopted problem-focused coping mechanisms (increasing effort, active coping, and planning). This finding is consistent with earlier research [4, 61-64]. For instance, Goyen and Anshel [63] discovered that male athletes used problem-focused coping techniques when handling stressors, including injury, discomfort, and criticism. The gender of the respondents was cited as a contributing factor in the observed similarity. That is, this study only focused on male athletes which provides support that males usually prefer to face their stressors with minimal emotional expressions to avoid being labelled as soft or feminine in the face of others from a cross-cultural perspective. For instance, Hagan et al. [38] noted that, in most African cultures, men are expected to show toughness, resilience, and bravery in the face of adversity. Hence, males who openly display negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, distress) are touted as physically weak, not goal-oriented, cowards, and lack the desire to compete and succeed. These cultural attitudes may have contributed to the male football coaches' and players' reports of fortitude, aptitude, and willingness to face reported organizational difficulties. Kristiansen et al. [4] also reiterated that footballers' primary coping mechanism was problem-focused coping. According to the goodness-of-fit argument, anytime a stressor that is manageable is encountered, the problem-focused coping technique usually apply [20]. Reasonably, a plan intended to directly affect or mitigate the stressor will be most effective since the stressor is controllable. However, individuals could employ emotion-focused coping techniques when they are presented with an uncontrolled stressor since attempts to modify the stressor could fail because it is uncontrollable. Therefore, questions of control are crucial to the coping mechanism in sport and that athletes who perceive being in control of encounters that are stressful are more likely to be successful. This finding suggests that coaches and players can cope with the situation by confronting the problem with active or functional techniques as it persists as opposed to coping with it emotionally. According to some researchers [65-67], emotion-focused coping involves internal processes based on distraction that are intended to control or alleviate one's emotional response to the stressor. Comparatively, problem-focused coping reflects efforts to cope with stressful situations. In situations when players are under pressure to make the first team, for example, the only way to manage such pressure is to come up with techniques to deal with the situation head-on rather than displaying their emotions (e.g., crying or feeling upset) [1, 3, 5, 57].

Specifically, active coping and planning were cited by coaches and players as the most employed coping mechanisms. To avoid being overwhelmed with too many concerns, coaches typically focused on what had to be done one step at a time. This result further implies that coaches might have taken actions that could directly manage their stressful experiences, rendering the situation less demanding. Levy et al. [68] identified planning as a key coping

mechanism adopted by the coach. Accordingly, the coach utilized planning to think ahead, organize his time well, and compile data on the players' performance. For players, an awareness of the importance of planning helps in managing stressful situations. Supporting this argument, Nicholls and Polman, [69] observed that national athletes utilized greater planning to deal with stressors they encountered in their sporting environment [69]. Further, only controllable-by-self was linked to coaches' problem-focused coping (active coping and planning) skills. The rest of the variables under the stress appraisal mechanism (i.e., threat, challenge, centrality, controllable-by-others, uncontrollable-by-anyone) did not influence any of the coping styles of the football coaches. Previous studies [11-12, 15, 19-20, 54] have shown that a person considers the available resources (i.e., sense of being in control, knowledge, skills, and self-confidence) to cope with a demand when evaluating a situation as relevant or important. The finding implies that when coaches evaluate stressors as controlled-by-themselves, they are more likely to plan and take direct actions toward the identified stressors and vice versa. This link suggests that when a coping disposition is stable, it would facilitate a dynamic impact on the process of stress appraisal [70]. Conway and Terry [71] studied Australian university students and discovered that problem-focused coping was effective, adaptive, and used in circumstances that were perceived to be under their control while emotion-focused coping was used in circumstances that were more difficult to control [40].

Additionally, players' problem-focused coping behaviours on seeking social assistance for instrumental reasons correlated with controllable-by-self, controllable-by-others, and uncontrollable-by-anyone. Additionally, challenge and controllable-by-self significantly influenced players' problem-focused coping behaviours on increasing effort. Therefore, players who assessed their stressors as manageable are more likely to seek social assistance and initiate stress management techniques. Additionally, when players evaluate stressful situations as a challenge, they usually increase their effort in response to managing stressful events [4]. Threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone were found to be significantly associated with players' coping behaviours on seeking social support for emotional reasons. The results also revealed that threat, controllable-by-others and uncontrollable-by-anyone significantly influenced players' coping behaviours on venting emotions. Threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone significantly influenced players' coping behaviours on self-blame. These results are consistent with findings by Nicholls et al. [15] which showed that athletes who appraised their stressors as uncontrollable-by-anyone felt threatened and used more negative emotions, got distracted and adopted more disengagement-oriented coping. This result showed that participants are more likely to seek emotional support to assist them cope with stressful situations. More so, when players appraised stressful encounters as a threat, controllable-by-others and uncontrollable-by-anyone, they often showcased emotional reactions as a way of managing their stressful encounters [15].

LIMITATIONS

The study has some limitations. The findings of the present study are restricted to only coaches and players who were involved in 2020–2021 premier league season in Ghana. The retroactive nature of the data may mean that information gathered might not accurately reflect the stressful demands that players and coaches actually experienced. Further, because of the one snapshot and retrospectively self-reported nature of the data collected, there's no evidence to ascertain whether coaches and players were merely reporting their stress appraisals and coping mechanisms during stressful situations or these reports were the actual reflections of

their experiences. Future research should therefore use an intervention approach to test the effectiveness of these stress-related experiences in real life to guarantee its ecological validity. Another methodological flaw is the reduction of the sub-scales of the MCOPE because of the many items on the instrument.

Practical Implications

It could be inferred from the findings that when coaches and players encounter stressful situations, they are encouraged to positively assess the situation and utilize functional coping styles to deal with such situations, even while stressful situations have been seen as not only harmful to wellbeing [2-3]. An individual's performance, mental health, and overall wellbeing are impacted by failure or inability to appraise and deal with situations appropriately, which causes psychological, physiological, physical, and behavioural strain [3, 6, 13, 17, 72]. The findings suggest that psychological interventions that focus on commitment, control and challenge are required [73]. According to Fletcher and Scott [3], coaches need to acquire traits and skills that would help them to develop psychological resilience and gain a sense of control in situations that are demanding. Such interventions could target training that improves motivation and commitment among coaches and players. Designed interventions could focus on helping both coaches and players view stressors as challenges, but not hindrances. Hence, developing a general sense of autonomy and self-reliance might be seen as appropriate coping styles for stress management [19]. The relevance of significant others through social support networks in coping with organisational stressors by coaches and players could also be given a priority [56, 59]. It would also be beneficial along the stress continuum to promote team bonding through familiar and other social support networks, which are frequently characterized by the existence of team warmth, cohesiveness, structure, emotional support, positive attachment, and a strong relationship with the team [2, 74]. Further, experiencing stressors involved series of cognitive appraisals of situations as stressful. Hence, appraising stressors negatively may lead to a maladaptive coping and vice versa. Therefore, it is vital to design interventions that develop specific positive cognitive appraisals of football coaches and players in Ghana. Sport psychologists can help players become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours [75]. Establishing a solid foundation for developing discussion sessions would help extract the fundamental beliefs and needs of individuals who are affected. Practitioners could also use instructional sets as interventions to improve cognitive appraisals in conjunction with imagery [76], reappraisal [77], and appraisal training.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The present study has implications for further studies. First, future research could consider both genders (females and males) as well as multiple sport disciplines. Second, since stress is dynamic or transactional process, using ecological momentary assessments like the experience sampling method may unearth coaches and players dynamic image of their stressful experiences for appropriate coping intervention using a longitudinal design [38, 78]. Since psychological research in elite sport in Ghana is at the nascent stage, future efforts could target other important stress-related factors that were beyond the scope of the research. For instance, other personality traits like conscientiousness [79], neuroticism [79-80], extroversion [80], hardiness [81-82], and the resources of the environment (such as social support, [83] may have an impact on the stress appraisal process [84].

CONCLUSIONS

Football coaches and players in this study demonstrated similar stress appraisal mechanisms and viewed their stressful experiences as controllable and challenges that they could overcome. When they encountered stressful situations, they reportedly employed more problem-focused coping strategies (raising effort, active coping, and planning) than emotion-focused coping (seeking social support for emotional reasons, venting feelings, and self-blame). Additionally, the type of stress appraisals used directly predicted the type of coping styles used. Thus, coaches and players who used facilitative appraisal mechanisms adopted functional coping mechanisms and vice versa. Therefore, sport psychologists are encouraged to organise regular mental training workshops on stress management. Of more relevance would be specific interventions (e.g., cognitive restructuring, appraisal and reappraisal training through instructional sets) as coping styles to effectively help coaches and players control and appraise organizational stressors as challenges rather than threats. Further, sport psychologists ought to design and implement a variety of functional coping mechanisms (e.g., planning, increasing effort and active coping) through workshops and seminars to help football coaches and players deal with the pressures associated with competitions such as the national football league.

DECLARATIONS

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting this article will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

Ethics Statement

The study was reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast (IRB-UCC) with reference number UCC/IRB/A/2016/794. All participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author Contributions

MSS the idea. MSS performed the analysis. MSS prepared the initial draft of the manuscript and thoroughly read the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict Of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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