

# Studies in Sports Coaching



# Studies in Sports Coaching

By

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To my parents; and, as always, to T and S<sup>3</sup>; my eternal travel companions.

The book is also dedicated to the many students, colleagues, coaches and players who willingly engaged with my thoughts and theories.

A sincere ‘thank you’.



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## **PART ONE**

### **FRAMING THE TEXT**

# CHAPTER 1

## AN INTRODUCTION

According to the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011), one can only ever start with a set of ideas, before spending time working them out in finer detail, thinking through the implications and revising earlier claims as inconsistencies come to light. Through this process, concepts are further developed and somewhat transformed. Such has been the case with this book. The ideas collected here, and what they represent, make a good part of the scholarship and criticism I wrote in the 20 years between 1998 and 2018. They reflect a desire to expose and clarify both theoretical and practical assumptions about sports coaching and, in particular, to consolidate the activity's position as a social, relational endeavour. Such a view directly challenged the dominant positivist paradigm which characterised coaching as atomistic in nature, with given structures being unrelated in any authentic sense to each other. Although in my early career I also somewhat followed the set agenda, I came to consider such literalism a deceit.

In terming the work a pretence, I have to be reflexive about my discontent surrounding it. After all, such study (or most of it) didn't explicitly claim to be critical scholarship. My dissatisfaction stemmed from the belief that representation matters; it has consequences (Madison, 2005). How people, processes and things are portrayed is how they are treated (Hall, 1997). In this respect, whatever the claims made for value-neutral, functional findings or not, producing text is an act of interpretation in itself. There is no view from nowhere. Such productions then "do not just describe things, they do things", in that they have social and political implications (Potter & Wetherall, 1987, p. 6). Borrowing from Madison (2005), the point here is to illustrate what's at stake when, as researchers (and as coaches), "we stand as transmitters of information" (p. 4). This is because "whether an account must be condensed to a paragraph or fill a 300 page monograph, we must still be accountable for the consequences of our representations and the implications of our message - because they matter" (p. 5). Similarly, as I've argued elsewhere (e.g., Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016) how can something acknowledged as being messy, not take account of that

messiness? It appeared that in attempts to make the world clean and neat, coaching scholars had actively repressed (and to some extent continue to repress) the very possibility of understanding the reality they claimed to study! They preferred to hide the evident complexity under a veil of homogeneity and generalisation. As a practicing coach, the produced linear decontextualized picture bore me or my practice no resemblance.

However, I did not explicitly set out to devise a particular 'position'. Rather, a general stance seemed to evolve and take shape. As stated, I currently disagree with a portion of what I wrote along the way. I believe this can be explained by an evolving sensibility. I now see the world differently. I didn't know at the time, but I was following Ely et al's (1997, p. 7) claim that "writing leads to an intensified discovery and representation". Although I'm often considered a critical sociologist, I was always more interested in the people and what took place between them within coaching than any particular label. Consequently, a principal premise which runs through this text is more to do with (coaches') creative survival than a slavish attendance to complexity theory, micro-politics, coaching as orchestration, classical sociology, or any such conceptualisation. Having said that, I do claim the existence of enduring themes, arguments and commitments in my writings; themes dominated by social and relational considerations. Considerations that stretch from the ethico-political qualities of relationships, to how coaches seemingly move with great skill within social worlds they did not particularly design (Lawler, 2017). I also believe that a trajectory of thought can be traced from earlier writings to those produced later. Nevertheless, what I was most interested in was examining coaching as a local order phenomenon, where concerted coherent practices appeared vital for the organisation of affairs on the ground (Lieberman, 2013). I wanted to go beneath surface appearances and taken-for-granted assumptions, to "name what was intuitively felt" (Madison, 2005, p. 13). I wanted to unsettle the unproblematic layer of complicity and acceptance that existed within sports coaching research; to critique a perspective that had caused scholarly blindness to context, experience and feeling (Flyvberg, 2001). In essence, I wanted to grasp the qualitative features of the real (Gardiner, 2000), and not keep the relationships that contrived the activity in some far or middle distance (Geertz, 1973). The quest then, was to put personal and others' knowing into a form of knowledge.

From 2013, I increasingly had occasion to revisit my earlier work, more to ensure the necessity of progression and continuity than anything else. Whilst re-reading, although I was struck by the abiding relevance and organic development of many of the ideas, others were clearly in need of

clarification. This was not so much in terms of revising or reappraising the concepts used and developed, but more in terms of converging the variety of writings into a sense-making whole; to bring together and make explicit the interlocking elements of the total work project. This desire to further illuminate the social and complex nature of coaching in its totality, or at least in its wider sense, lies at the core of this book. The cross-referencing evident, particularly in the penultimate section, marks an explicit attempt to realise this intention.

Most of the studies alluded to here originated as fieldwork. Those that didn't served as theoretical groundwork for empiricism. This is not to say that I blindly followed the fallacy of 'evidence based' practice in terms of providing secure testimony of 'what works'. Coaching can never be so clear-cut. Despite the insistence of some, we cannot deduce unproblematic patterns from any number of cases to create a kind of systematic improvement over time. Rather, in giving the required credence to ground-level research, I believed (and continue to believe) in a more nuanced 'evidence-informed' or 'evidence aware' practice (Biesta, 2007); that is, being practice-referenced as opposed to practice-driven. Here then, lies an acknowledgement for judicious contextual thinking in relation to the 'evidence' provided. Consequently, the work I have produced is to think with, not to replicate.

The book contains edited extracts from my (and my co-authors') writings on sports coaches and coaching over the last two decades or so. However, the text does not focus on the quantity of the material produced, thus is not representative of everything written. Rather, content has been carefully selected to be part of an extensively constructed coaching mosaic related to both the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of sports coaching. Hence, much like Seale (2004), I've tried to be discerning in terms of what each chapter contains; cutting out 'diversionary material' allowing the focus to be on the important things. Of more significance, is that the chapters are clustered into larger units or lines of work. In this way, the 'sub-projects' are articulated both in relation to each other as well as the larger research programme, realising the progressive convergence alluded to earlier. Other chapters, meanwhile, have been developed from previously unpublished conference presentations, tentative lines of new inquiry, and lecture notes primarily taken from the Doctorate of Sports Coaching degree at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Such chapters, although novel in one sense, can be seen as extensions of the previous. Here, separate studies have been drawn into the mainstream project, which have also helped create the direction and future content of that project. Although each chapter can be read as a single entity, I believe that engaging with the book as a whole

holds the potential to cohere into a rich portrayal and theorisation of coaching and coaching selves. Not unnaturally, I've also tried to eliminate repetition within the text where necessary, focussing much less on the research methods employed within the studies cited, and more on the 'essential findings'. It is why the section (Part 2) immediately following this Introduction frames the volume in terms of ontology, epistemology and methods, considerations which are not revisited in any depth elsewhere.

## **The Value of the Book**

To deduce the value of this book, it is necessary to examine personal beliefs and epistemologies; to ask yourself "how do you, and others you know, work in the world as it is?" (Lemert, 1997, p. xli). If you believe coaching to be unproblematic, information sources clean, clear and trustworthy, and messages linearly received as intended, then this book is probably not for you. If, on the contrary, you're concerned about influence over others, you're aware of the hectic nature of everyday life, you can't quite put your finger on why things aren't working as they should, you're regularly dragged from your train of thought "by an interruption that requires attention to another's world" (Lemert, 1997, p. xli); if you believe coaching to be relational, problematic and shot through with power mediated intrusions, then this book is for you. This is not to say that rules and norms are obsolete or ignored. Quite the contrary. As I've repeatedly argued elsewhere, such rules can and do (to an extent) facilitate local orderliness. However, a key theme within my writings and, hence, this book, is that such orderliness takes precedence over rules, thus making coaching an emerging public event as opposed to planned personal action.

As opposed to some 'Reader' volumes, this text is more than an introductory primer; a subject summary from a range of related scholars. Rather, it both reinforces and expands upon a particular epistemic portrayal of sports coaching as an interpretive, relative and subjective activity. In terms of the former, it brings together under one convenient cover a collection of papers which helped form the foundations and development of coaching's recognition as a social practice. It also builds on such writings through additional discussion, comment and clarification in relation to recent debates. It is this combination of foundational works, through more developed studies, to newer, relatively raw pieces, that makes this volume somewhat unique. In this respect, through offering an assembly of studied locations and relations that make up sports coaching, it provides *a* rigorously constructed map of the unfolding territory. Acknowledging that presenting this journey as a qualified chronology risks violating the

investigative and scholarly spirit that brought it about, I nevertheless believe such thematising can somewhat clarify current and novel tenancies in sports coaching research.

In addition to the strengths listed, many would also consider weakness in such a focussed 'Reader' from a single author, not least of which is that it can only portray a particular view of the world. Here, I do not claim an absence of 'blind spots', not to have biographically induced biases, or to produce a volume constitutive of a wide variety of so-called coaching research. Breadth, however, is not the objective here. Rather, the purpose lies in providing a carefully crafted case from over 25 years of writing about, and close to 40 years of actually doing, coaching as to its unique nature and how it can possibly be done better. Subsequently, borrowing from ethnomethodology, the book is deliberately titled 'Studies in' as opposed to 'Studies about' or 'Studies on' sports coaching. In doing so, I position myself as 'vulgarly competent' (Garfinkel & Wieder, 1992) in the local production of what I was actually investigating. During my four decades of practice, I've certainly 'felt' coaching in many of its guises; from schools and summer camps, through semi professional and professional football clubs, to being a Regional Director for a national sporting federation. Having said that, without revisiting the nature of insider-outsider debates and the danger of 'going native', I've tried to ensure the trustworthiness of my interpretations through recourse to reflexivity. Not in terms of some 'benign' self-examination or simply that of a particular methodological act, but of sincere meaning making. This involved being explicit about the link between knowledge claims, personal experiences, and the social context; that is, reflexivity as discursive deconstruction and social critique, in addition to personal positional analysis (Findlay, 2002). Accepting the caveat that reflexivity is not intrinsically radical in itself (Lynch, 1985), my actions here were to do with uncompromisingly following through on certain critical epistemological commitments, where paradox was not factored out in the quest for logical compulsion and certainty, but embraced as an inextricable element of the phenomenon under study. In this respect, my natural ubiquitous scepticism was applied, not only to the work of others, but also to my own claims.

Criticism could be (and indeed has been) aimed at the scholarship itself. For example, that earlier works read as excitable, exaggerated and even insecure. So insecure, in fact, that I had to 'tool' them up with 'intellectual muscle' (Sparkes, 1996) or convenient theorising, whilst the clarity to see the wood from the trees may not always have been apparent. I like to think that later writings don't reflect this ambiguity; and that, borrowing from Liberman (2013), I now not only know how to better handle challenges (in

coaching as well as writing), but have also increasingly become something of a renegade; a bit more comfortable and clear in my personal theorising. Nevertheless (or perhaps not surprisingly), it is a stance which has led to conflict with (more than a few) others who continue to desperately cling to the security of clear-cut distinctions; of seemingly painless ways to do hard things. Although never enjoyable, it was a position from which I could not retreat, as to do otherwise would be a disservice to myself, to other coaches, and to students of coaching. As I've pointed out elsewhere, a withdrawal into common sense superficiality may make us feel better in the short term, but "it is false comfort" (Stones, 1998, p. 5).

Finally, the book holds significance in terms of consolidating the case as to what sports coaching is really about. That it is not to do with atomistic 'decision making' or naïve notions of athlete motivation or empowerment, or some abstract foundationalist approach uncontaminated by social values, interests and politics (Seidman & Alexander, 2001). Here then, I loosely invoke Habermas's (1984, p. 10) notion of 'communicative rationality' ("the consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech"), thus giving credence to the idea that the 'better argument will carry the day'; hopefully the argument presented in this book. This is not to say that I obediently agree with the idea of an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas, 1984). I'm certainly not ignorant of power, inequality, or to entrenched interests; far from it (see Jones, 2011). Indeed, getting my critical work noticed and published in the early days was much more to do with the politics of activism and struggle than any rational acceptance of enlightened discourse. Rather, it is to believe in the persuasive power of the body of work produced from the cases studied; work that is captured here in a single text for the first time. That the material presented also contains areas of overlap (e.g., in terms of power, structure and agency, pedagogy and relationality) gives further strength to the assertion(s) made. Whilst never wanting to present coaching as a homogenous totality devoid of contextual dynamism, a principal purpose of the book is to produce something of a regulative conception, a consensual framework for coaching. The overlap inherent within it, is a means towards this end. If the case made is persuasive enough, of course, remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen if this 'socio-pedagogic' critical turn is reflective of a paradigm shift in coaching, or merely the abandoning of a 'dying' intellectual wave for a growing other (Flyvbjerg, 2001). An incidence of fashion not of evolution (Flyvbjerg, 2001). I sincerely hope not. But this is something for future scholars of the field to engage with. At least they'll now know where the critical interpretive agenda came from and perhaps where they can take it.

## Structure of the Book

The book contains seven separate sections or parts, each of which is contextually introduced within the wider work project. The first is the shortest, consisting only of this chapter (Chapter 1), which locates, outlines and makes the case for what is to follow. The second part discusses the interpretive paradigm within which my conceptualisation of coaching is based (Chapters 2 and 3), and some of the methods used to make sense of it (Chapter 4). The purpose of section three, which comprises four readings (Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8) is to present coaching as a social, relational endeavour, and advance the discussion begun in section two. Here are located some of the earliest writings, after which the text follows a quasi-chronological order. The following two parts, four and five, form the core of the book, and include an initial deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of sports coaching.

**A deconstruction (part four).** Being critical of the rush to prescription which has so blighted the professional and academic development of the activity, the initial phase of my writings reflected a desire to better understand coaching, in all its multifaceted aspects. Hence, I embarked on a ‘knowledge for understanding’ project which focussed on deconstructing practical actions though a sincere reflexivity upon previously considered boundaries; that is, a repudiation of a given ‘coaching fallacy’ through a rigorous examination of the frames of its own analysis. I asked the question ‘what is it the people involved in coaching actually do to carry it out without recourse to precise regulation and instruction?’ That is, ‘what is it that makes coaching work?’ What drove my curiosity was the coaching context, which included attention to the time, the speaker, the hearer, and the preceding discourse. Developing a subsequent appreciation of the social beyond the interactional, my definition of context evolved to a more relational one; between actions and their surroundings, between actions themselves, between actions and their histories and politics, and between actions and the actors who act them out. Coaching then, for me, came to be viewed as being dependent on, whilst interacting with, context. This part of the text represents a ‘downward shift’ in coaching research and theorizing; one that could be interpreted (retrospectively) as having a phenomenological lineage, or at the very least a phenomenological hue; an adherence which enabled assignation with the “inherent liveliness of (coaching) life and its time signatures” (Back, 2015, p. 821).

Engagement with social scholars such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Blau and particularly Goffman, greatly assisted in this deconstructive activity, where (unsurprisingly) notions related to power, capital, habitus, exchange, and



impression management came to the fore. Here, I was no doubt influenced by the ‘interaction order’ (Goffman, 1983). Why? Simply because I found the work relatable; within it, I could easily read myself. In turn, I was led to other sense making perspectives (e.g., the work of Hochschild and Luhmann), although never in terms of forcing professional concepts onto worldly activities. Hence, although I found social theory absorbing and beguiling, every effort was made not to allow such work to dominate interpretations; of making my coaching observations more concept-centred than they really were (Lieberman, 2013). Nevertheless, such writings provided me with many fascinating lines of direction into the everyday world of coaches and coaching. This diversity, however, has been criticised by some as light-touch ‘tinsel’ theorising; that I should have more definitively nailed my colours to a particular mast and remained there. Alternatively, like coaching itself, I allowed for emergence, for ‘nomadic’ intellectual activity, for a broader advancement. Although itinerant in one sense, the studies I embarked upon also comprised a consistency; one related to coaches’ ordinary lives and everyday practical work. They are about how coaches produce and maintain meaning, orderliness, and coherent contextual understandings. They are also developmental in nature, amending and re-specifying the course of analysis in fruitful ways. The task has been to better uncover, articulate and engage with the ‘constitutive rules’ of coaching practice, thus, to a degree, limiting the “field of possible constructions” (Ricoeur, 1971, p. 550). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, in borrowing from Smith (1987), the work has not only helped explain coaches actions to ‘experts’, but also explained social systems to coaches so they can understand the powers in which their working lives are embedded (Frank, 2001). Particular chapters here include coaching as micropolitics (Chapters 9, 10 and 11), as complex practice at ‘the edge of chaos’ (Chapters 12 and 13), as an exchange (Chapter 14), as power (Chapter 15 and 16), as a ‘field of struggle’ (Bourdieu, 1977) (Chapters 17 and 18), as ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959) (Chapters 19, 20 and 21), as ‘decision making’ (Chapter 22) and as a humorous endeavour (Chapter 23).

**A related reconstruction (part five).** Acknowledging the on-going nature of the deconstructive project, I became increasingly aware of the need to offer an alternative; in essence, a reconstructive lead. Although an ‘upwards shift’ to a more macro perspective could be interpreted, it is important to note at the outset that such work didn’t and doesn’t extend to a gold standard of coaching. Indeed, what is alluded to here is a situation or activity not easily amenable to modelling or rational analysis without “ruining the intricacy that *is* the local achievement” (Lieberman, 2013, p. 20).

The inherent apparent disorder is not particularly responsive to quick remedy and, in any case, is probably necessary for coaching to be done at all. It is one where indigenously determined practices are more important than given rules; and “even where regulations seem to be more important”, it is probable that the local practices are still doing “the heavy lifting” (Lieberman, 2013, p. 12). Hence, there can be no one precise phenomenal coaching field, but rather several heterogenous fields reflecting the perspectives of those involved (e.g., those coaching and those being coached) albeit tied by general intentions.

Taking such considerations into account, the reconstruction undertaken entailed a conscious examination of coaching as a foundation for action. The purpose, however, was not a simple construction without recourse to the deconstruction, but to deduce from the earlier work something of the character of coaching that could be generalised. Consequently, the reconstruction project involved both a clarification of the practical dilemmas related to coaching’s complexity, and subsequent tentative recommendations for dealing with them. The goal was (and is) to provide compelling examples of strong conceptual contributions. Doing so, acknowledges the existence of a consensus or paradigmatic inter-subjectivity regarding coaching; an understanding that goes beyond just being ‘context dependent’ to one that is socio cultural in nature (Fetzer & Akman, 2002; Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016). This is where personal construction bears a ‘family resemblance’ to that of others, and where ‘social rules’ are normally experienced as background limits on what appears as both possible and worth doing. Additionally, the reconstruction project is aimed at creating clear concepts related to the ‘living, breathing world in question’ (Blumer, 1969), thus developing in coaches (and coaching scholars) abilities to “displace, negotiate and create alternative discourses” (Trowler, 2001, p. 183). Not surprisingly, such concepts have not emerged overnight, but have developed slowly from the empiricism I interpreted through my own and others’ experiences.

Providing and accepting such common ground has enabled coaching scholars to better talk to, as opposed to past, one another (Jones, 2012; Jones et al., 2016); something the field was much (and to some degree remains) in need of. Acknowledging that the inherently dynamic phenomenon of coaching doesn’t proceed smoothly or unproblematically, but is more often characterised by non-linearity and turbulence, the point here is to provide suggested structures to personal action. Naturally, such structures are presented to think with as opposed to firm directives, therefore privileging the quality of communicative interaction over any exactness of instruction (Pineau, 1994). Nevertheless, the reconstructive project comprises a

'knowledge for action' agenda, and forms the fifth part of this book. Specific chapters within this section include; coaching as a culturally mediated activity (Chapter 24), as scaffolded practice (Chapter 25), as orchestration (Chapter 26, 27, 28 and 29), as phronesis (Chapter 30), as caring (Chapter 31 and 32), as culture building (Chapter 33), and as 'the person' of the coach (Chapter 34). The reconstruction project, however, is intended to do more than simply suggest lines of 'likely' good practice. Rather, primacy is given to individual theorising in relation to such suggestions, where considerable space is built for agency resulting in a belief that 'we are what we make of ourselves' (Giddens, 1991). Such creative actions are manifest in those who critically evaluate and experiment to improve in personally meaningful ways.

The penultimate and sixth part of the book can be considered the most novel and innovative, as, drawing from the previously presented work, a tentative theorisation of sports coaching is offered. Through bringing together common considerations in and about coaching, it goes further than the reconstructive agenda outlined above, as it marks an attempt to theorise coaching from its own frame of reference. The purpose, however, is not to provide a grand theory but a 'general theoretical orientation' (Becker, 1982). It is an attempt to clear some of the conceptual fog that remains and to claim back for coaching some of the definitional rights conceded to other disciplines. Here, increasingly allowing the search for essence to guide my thinking, I offer the notions of coaching as a 'quality of mind' (Chapter 35), as the work of repair (Chapter 36) and as a multi-faceted trajectory (Chapter 37) to better conceptualise the activity. Finally, a seventh part comprising a short, general conclusion (Chapter 38) completes the book.

## **In Summary**

A principal purpose of deconstructing coaching was to uncover the deep concrete details in which the essence of such a social phenomenon is often expressed; a core or crux I came to understand as inherently tied to power and relations. The goal was to present an adequate critique that held the possibility for transgression (Flyvbjerg, 2001); to unmask implicit institutional workings, so one can take issue with them. It is a stance that leaves much work for those reading and interpreting related texts; that is, armed with knowledge of the more shadowy workings of coaching to carefully decide which path to follow in relation to contextual norms. Here, I relied on the power of the good example; of producing 'relatable' research (Bassey, 1981) inclusive of thick description where findings could be extrapolated to similar 'people-events-situations'. The subsequent

reconstructive project was to go further, both in terms of tentatively suggesting ways to better conceptualise coaching practice and, equally importantly, to develop the quality of mind for creatively engaging with it.

This is not to say that there was some clean linear development here, (as cited) there are many overlapping areas between the three principal sections of the book (i.e., sections 4, 5 and 6); I certainly didn't complete one before I began the other(s). Similarly, again as stated earlier, the purpose of the reconstruction and theorisation (parts 5 and 6) was, and is, not to create utopian action where contestation, negotiation and conflict are suppressed or ignored. There is no rush to ideal here. How can there be with the previous deconstructive phase (section 4) being so grounded in *realpolitik*? On the contrary, the goal of these latter sections was to help coaches and scholars of coaching make contextually sensitive judgements in relation to the uncovered knowledge. This is an important point to make, as such institutional developments are by no means meant to be context independent. The deconstructive part of the book then, is about substantive micro political and relational practice, whereas the reconstructive concerns communal social action. Neither is prescriptive. Precise actions have to be defined by the participants (that is, the coaches), hopefully in relation to judicious thinking. In this sense, I concur that "there are rules, and there is the particular" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 49). Consequently, this book not only contains the means to examine coaching but also a tentative agenda through which to better construct it.

In closing this introduction, although I somewhat claim that phenomenology has guided my thinking (often subconsciously) in both de- and reconstructive phases, it is a claim that needs qualification. No doubt, my thoughts are not my own. They were fashioned and formed in dialogue with others; with other people, with other concepts, with other contexts. In this sense, they are socially co-constructed considerations. Hence, I am heavily indebted to those pioneering theorists that went before; to those colleagues willing to give time and energies to talk, challenge and write about coaching; to the football players who 'willingly' tried out some of my thinking in practice; and, of course, to those students who demand I follow them into new and novel areas of study and development. My hope then is that this book serves not as any closing but as a beginning; a catalyst for current and future scholars of coaching to advance the critical interpretive tradition. Borrowing from Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram (2012), they should do so through actively identifying and taking issue with dubious conduct (be it policy, coach education or research), undermining it through considerate problematisation, before carefully helping to develop new and better practice.

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