Understanding the Change Process: Valuing What it is That Coaches Do

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ABSTRACT
When coaching is viewed as a rational process it is often assumed that coaches can reflect upon and, where necessary, change their behaviour. In this commentary, it is contended that using a rational argument to change practice is limited if consideration is not given to the way coaches learn how to coach. Knowledgeability is a generative concept for understanding why it is difficult to change time-honoured practices or day-to-day conventions that have often become taken for granted. The aims of this article are to introduce the concept of 'knowledgeability' and associated 'practical consciousness', and to highlight the explanatory power of the latter for understanding the change process.

Key words: Duality of Structure, Knowledgeability, Practical Consciousness, Social Theory, Structuration Theory

INTRODUCTION

Numerous commentators have identified that a lack of clear terminology is an issue for the field of sports coaching [1, 2, 3]. Attempts to achieve a common understanding of the terms used in coaching have occurred through position statements and empirically informed arguments in articles and books [4, 5]. These attempts are based upon the assumptions that coaching is a rational process and it is easy for coaches to reflect upon and, where necessary, change their behaviour. I have engaged in such practices and have made these assumptions, but in the process of writing and gaining feedback on this article, I have been reminded that using a rational argument to change practice is limited if consideration is not given to the way coaches learn how to coach. Many coaches learn how to coach by being an apprentice to another coach, often someone they admire and as a consequence find it difficult to reflect upon, and possibly critique, taken-for-granted practices that have become integral to their sense of self [5]. When the influence of these taken-for-granted practices is not considered, or is underestimated, the merits of a rational argument can fail to change practice in the intended way. This is possibly one of the reasons why drivers of change are often left lamenting about the 'slippage' that occurred between the intended message and the message as it was received and enacted. For example, Norman [6] expressed regret that despite Sports Coach UK and the Women's Sport Foundation developing a 'Women into High Performance Coaching' initiative in 2000, a report released by Sport Coach UK seven years later showed that women were still under-represented in high-performance coaching positions. This

situation is not limited to the UK, as illustrated by Kilty [7] in her account of women coaches in the USA following the enactment of Title IX.

Socialisation is one explanatory framework that has been used in professional fields to explain the 'slippage'. When socialisation is viewed from a functionalist standpoint, the focus is on the social structures and institutions and their influence on behaviour as well as maintaining social order. Whereas, when a symbolic interactionist standpoint is adopted the emphasis is on individuals as active and creative beings, the focus being on beliefs, values and identities. However, neither standpoint acknowledges the dialectical relationship that exists between human action and social structure. A dialectical standpoint recognises that interactions occur between individuals, societal influences and institutions into which individuals are socialised. When adopting such a standpoint, it can be useful to draw upon Giddens' structuration theory [8]. In the sports coaching context the work of Giddens has been used sparingly and rarely has it explicitly drawn on Structuration theory (for an exception of the latter, see [9]).

Based on the assumption that taken-for-granted practices play a part in how coaches learn to become a coach, I argue here for the usefulness of a concept stemming from Structuration theory, namely 'knowledgeability' [10]. The concept of knowledgeability is generative because it helps explain the 'slippage' that occurs between intended messages of, for example, government-sponsored sports agencies, national sporting organisations and coach educators and the messages received by the sports coaches; and why it is difficult to change time-honoured practices or day-to-day conventions that have often become taken for granted. Not only do day-to-day practices and routines become taken for granted, they can also become venerated (as evidenced by the numerous references made to books about the practices of USA college basketball coach John Wooden). The aims of this article are to introduce the concept of 'knowledgeability' and associated 'practical consciousness', and to highlight the explanatory power of the latter for understanding the change process. I have previously used the concept of knowledgeability and practical consciousness to gain an understanding of student teachers' engagement with the content of a physical education teacher education course [8] and it is this work that informs the following section.

KNOWLEDGABILITY: AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK

Giddens [9] proposed that knowledgeability is comprised of three components; discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconscious motives/cognition. Due to space constraints, I only briefly introduce discursive and practical consciousness before discussing the explanatory power of practical consciousness. According to Giddens [12], if we are asked, we can, more often than not, describe why we behave the way we do. He described this as 'discursive consciousness'. Yet, Giddens went on to say, much of the knowledge we require to 'go on' in our daily lives is not consciously accessible to us; rather it is practical in character, a state he calls 'practical consciousness'. The explanatory power of practical consciousness is its ability to highlight how change will not occur on the basis of a rational argument alone. Giddens [12] proposed that practical consciousness is applied non-consciously (as to opposed to unconsciously) and has taken-for-granted qualities that enable us to simply 'do' things while concentrating on activities that require conscious effort. For example, once we have mastered driving a manual car, the practice of changing gears is done non-consciously, while attention is directed to more pressing matters like keeping the car on the correct side of the road and driving a safe distance from the other cars on the road. Coaches' practical consciousness, in other words the activities that they 'do', can be understood as the day-to-day routines and allied regimes associated with their specific

communities. A routine is a 'basic element of day-to-day social activity', which is done habitually and is vital to maintaining a sense of trust in the social activities; whereas regimes are practices in which we engage, partially to conform to social conventions, and partially to personal dispositions and inclinations [10, p. xxiii]. In their discussion of developing expertise in coaching, Schempp et al. [11] highlight the importance of beginning coaches establishing and mastering routines.

A community's view on whether a routine or regime is "appropriate or acceptable" is based on a "shared – but unproven and unprovable – framework of reality"; yet this shared reality is both fragile and robust" [12, p. 36]. By participating in ordinary day-to-day practices members of a community can strengthen a shared reality thereby keeping anxieties, which would surface if every activity were contestable, at bay. Therefore, practical consciousness and associated routines can be viewed as an emotional and cognitive 'anchor' that assists us to maintain a "sense of continuity and order in events", in other words to maintain our "ontological security" [12, p. 243]. It is important that in cultural settings like sports coaching, community members are able to have 'faith' in the consistency and structure of day-to-day life. Yet, Giddens goes on to say that "cognitive frames of meaning will not generate that faith without a corresponding level of emotional commitment" [12, p. 38]. This is illustrated by Norman [6] who, upon interviewing six female national coaches, found that despite there being a drive in the UK towards developing a leading coaching system there was a perception by the coaches that nothing had changed in how the governing bodies provided coach education. One participant suggested her governing body had failed to 'embrace alternative coaching philosophies' [6, p. 458], because it was still influenced by the dominant culture of professional sports coaching. In elaborating, the coach stated:

> *'[the governing body] see your performance as a coach in terms of scores on the board, whether you have won or lost. So you are a good coach if you have won and a bad coach if you have lost. I can't remember anytime anyone who has come in to quality assure my coaching…That for me is a fundamental flaw in the system…I am not convinced I have seen enough of what that continued professional development is going to look like. At the moment I think it is left to chance and I don't think the structures to quality assure and evaluate coach effectiveness are good enough'*. [6, p. 458]

The above reflections of an elite coach illustrate how despite the drive by the UK government and its agencies to improve coaching practice (a drive I suspect the governing body would be required to support – at least rhetorically), there does not appear to be any degree of emotional commitment by the governing body to adopt the 'alternative coaching philosophies' and associated practices, like continual professional development. One consequence of the governing body demonstrating a lack of faith in, and therefore emotional commitment to, the change process in coach education is that that the coach looses hope, as well as faith, in the change process and the *status quo* reigns. Herein lie the opportunities for, as well as limitations of, using knowledgeability as an explanatory framework to understand the change process.

One of the opportunities that can arise from engaging with the concept of knowledgeability, in the context of sports coaching, is that it enables the privileging of what it is that coaches 'do'. In any professional field, this has obvious advantages such as providing a rationale for the drivers of change to begin the process by focusing on the day-to-day routines and allied regimes of the practitioners. In the context of sports coaching, by

beginning the change process from within existing and shared realities it is possible that coaches and coach educators will maintain their ontological security, as well as their faith in the coherence of the practices, thereby developing an emotional commitment to the change process. Yet as Kelly [13] pointed out, a limitation of using knowledgeability as a generative framework is that it places importance on the notion of ontological security, thereby producing a "bias towards social reproduction" (p. 116). While it is important to keep this in mind, I believe that the concept of knowledgeability can still be generative in assisting us to gain insight into how routines and regimes of sports coaching communities can enable or constrain the change process.

CONCLUSION

Often when attempts are made to change a social endeavour, such as sports coaching, the driver of the change is "the modernist desire for certainty and for getting things 'right"' [8, p. 187]. However, it is worth being reminded, in this period of late modernity that aiming for 'certainty' is less of an option and the consequences of any action can never be accurately predicted [14]. I have written this article in the hope that it will stimulate discussion rather than any intention of providing certainty as to the way forward. While certainty may be desirable for some, aiming for such a state has the potential to close down discussion and experimentation. Once we accept that we cannot 'control social life completely' [14, p. 153], it becomes easier to experiment. In this period of late modernity, a willingness to experiment is a valuable trait because "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" [14, p. 38]. If we wish to initiate change in the sports coaching communities in ways that do not solely rely on the merits of a rational argument, while at the same time recognising what coaches do, then I suggest we focus our attention on gaining a better understanding of the fragile and robust regimes and routines of the specific coaching communities and how they can enable or constrain the change process.

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