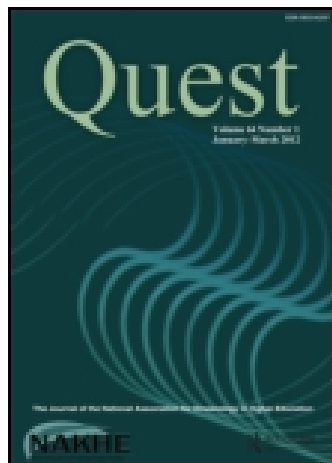


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Toward a Theory of Coaching Paradox

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Toward a Theory of Coaching Paradox

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Multiple tensions exist as part of the coaching process. How a coach responds to these tensions is a fundamental determinant of an athlete or team's fate. In today's highly competitive, socially demanding, and ever-changing sports environment, and as the expectations on coaches become more complex, the paradox becomes a critical lens to understand and assist contemporary coaches. This article defines the paradox based on a synthesis of existing literature and proposes an organizing framework for categorizing tensions relevant to coaching. This review draws distinctions between the paradox and other similar constructs, such as dilemmas and dialectics. In doing so, it is suggested that tensions are inherent and persistent to the coaching process and that purposeful management of paradoxical forces over time can lead to a tradition of success. Together, the review of literature and frameworks provide the foundations of a paradoxical perspective of coaching, offer clarity, provoke discussion, and fuel future research.

Keywords Coaching, sport, sport philosophy

Multiple tensions exist as part of the sport coaching process. Examples of tension include autocratic versus democratic coaching styles (Chelladurai, 1993), required versus actual versus preferred leadership behaviors (Crust & Lawrence, 2006), individual versus collective goal setting (Jones & Wallace, 2005), formal versus informal coaching education contexts (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), task versus ego orientations (Duda, 1996; Nicholls, 1992; Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007), coaching resources cost versus benefit (Lyle, 1999, 2002), and winning versus fun role frames (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). As athletic environments become more fast paced, high pressure, and competitive, and as the expectations on coaches become more complex, such contradictory tensions become increasingly relevant and persistent. Coaches' responses to these tensions may be a fundamental determinant of an athlete and/or sports team's fate.

In the past, contingency theory has offered one response to dealing with tensions. Assuming that coaches are most effective when they achieve alignment or fit among internal elements and the external environment (Horn, 2008), this contingency approach explores conditions for selecting among and between competing demands. Early contingency theories (i.e., Chelladurai, 1978, 1990; Cratty, 1970; Danielson, Zelhart, & Drake, 1975; Sage, 1973) of coaching inspired decades of research investigating how context influence the effectiveness of opposing alternatives. For example, contingency theory explores the conditions that drive choices, leading to the widely held view of coaching as a decision-making process (Cratty, 1967). Contingency theory was also instrumental in

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Chelladurai's (1978) conception of effective coaching as the alignment of required, actual, and preferred leadership behaviors.

However, some are beginning to question the utility of viewing the coaching process as a series of either/or decisions (Barnson, 2014). Instead, some scholars are embracing coaching as a paradox—a puzzle of contradictions yearning for a solution. This approach welcomes coaching as joy and sorrow; understanding and bewilderment; action and reflection; past, present, and future. Sports coaching researchers have steadily moved forward, describing the myriad of actions coaches undertake while performing their job. These behaviors include but are not limited to instructing (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004), motivating (Becker, 2009), goal-setting/talent development (Christensen, 2009; Christensen & Henriksen, 2013), and organizing/planning (Abraham, Collins, & Martindale, 2006). Yet, to appreciate the essence of sport coaches and the coaching process, we may need to embrace that coaching is not either teaching or motivating. Coaching is both teaching and motivating and managerial and many other behaviors simultaneously. Coaching is more than writing a practice plan or making sure the locker room is open for the visiting team. It is both of these things and many more.

Compared to contingency theories, paradox studies adopt a different approach to exploring tensions. The primary difference lies in how the study of paradox explores ways individuals can attend to competing demands simultaneously and over time. Although choosing between competing tensions might aid short-term performance, a paradox perspective argues that long-term achievement—a tradition of success—requires continuous efforts to meet multiple demands (Cameron, 1986; Lewis, 2000).

Despite the rise of research from a paradox perspective in other domains, such as organizational/business management (Griswell & Jennings, 2009; Smith & Lewis, 2011), education (Palmer, 2007; Rink, 1993), and medicine (Hofmann, 2001), researchers in the area of sports coaching have been less explicit in describing tensions from a paradoxical perspective. One reason for the lack of focus on paradox study may be due to fundamental debates about the nature and management of paradoxical tensions. What is, and is not, a paradox? Are forces that underlie a paradox inherent to the sport coaching process, or are they socially constructed? Can coaches resolve paradoxical tensions, or must they accept their persistence (Jones & Wallace, 2005)? And, most critical to practicing coaches, how do different strategies for approaching a paradox impact athletic outcomes?

The goal of this article is evolution not revolution; in essence, it is to build on the work of many others from a wide variety of disciplines to highlight the foundations of a paradox theory and, in the process, sharpen the focus of a paradoxical lens, thereby enabling sport coaching scholars to apply this paradox perspective to a myriad of athletic and coaching process tensions. To do so, this article has two main objectives. First, paradox is defined based on a review and synthesis of existing literature, and an organizing framework is proposed for categorizing paradoxical tensions relevant to sport coaching. The first section of the article will highlight the breadth and depth of fundamental debates as well as the richness of viewing the coaching process from a paradoxical perspective.

The second objective is to integrate existing literature and offer responses to the fundamental debates underscored in the first section. Distinctions between a paradox and other similar constructs, such as dilemmas and dialectics, are also offered. In doing so, it will be suggested that tensions are inherent and persistent to the coaching process, and purposeful management of paradoxical forces over time can lead to a tradition of success. Together, the review of literature and frameworks provide the foundations of a paradoxical perspective of coaching and offer clarity, provoke discussion, and fuel future research.

Defining the Paradox: Categorization and Debate

A paradox denotes contradictory yet inter-related elements, components that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing together (Lewis, 2000). Two elements are essential when defining paradox: (1) underlying tensions, that is, elements that seem reasonable individually but inconsistent and illogical when put together, and (2) responses that embrace tensions simultaneously and persist over time. Most often expressed as a pairing, paradoxes describe opposing forces. However, threesomes and pluralistic tensions—the mysteries inherent to theology or the complexities associated in a ménage-à-trois—can serve as paradoxical expressions as well (Proctor, 1998).

Categorizing Fundamental Coaching Paradoxes

This section outlines three fundamental paradoxes previously identified, both implicitly and explicitly, in the sport coaching literature. A framework was developed that situates these fundamental paradoxes and helps to describe the process of coaching from a paradoxical perspective (see Figure 1). Exemplars have been cited that help to identify tensions and illustrate each category. Taking the lead from Cushion (2001), the framework and categories may best be viewed as instruments of analysis rather than the object of analysis. In no way is it suggested that this review is a complete and sufficient grasp of all that is known about the coaching process. The frameworks developed in this article are most useful to researchers and practitioners in understanding the coaching process, as opposed to judging the quality of coaching.

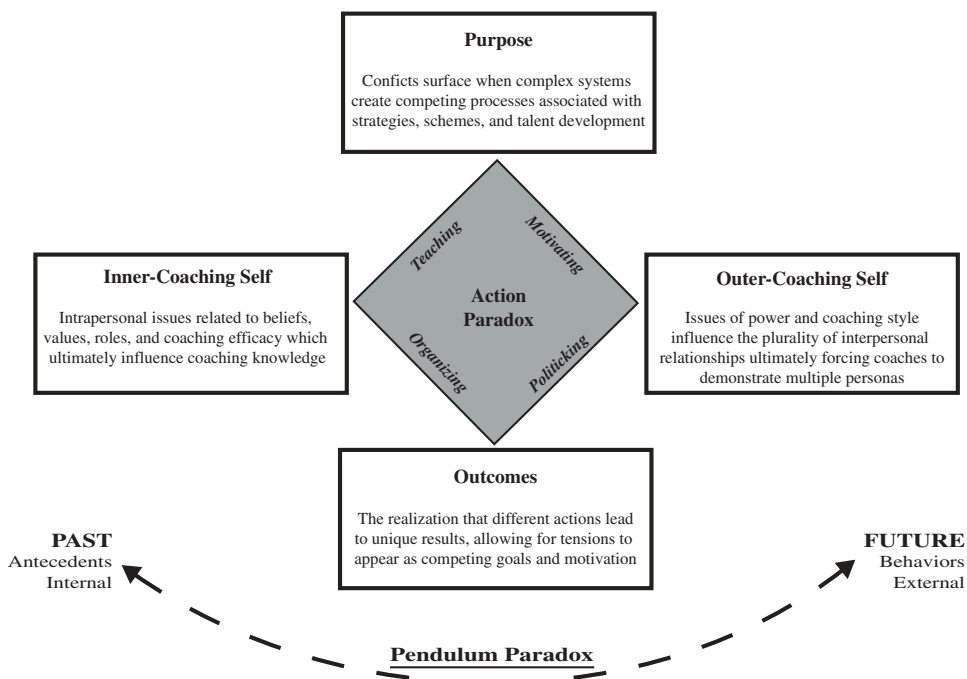


Figure 1. The Coaching Paradox Framework.

The key to the Coaching Paradox Framework (Figure 1) gives four categories that represent essential aspects of coaches and elements of the coaching process: *inner-coaching self*, *outer-coaching self*, *purpose*, and *outcomes*. At the heart of the framework is the category of *actions*; this category represents the observable acts of coaching and helps tie together the four core categories. Last, the *pendulum paradox* is a temporal category and helps to explain how coaches bridge the paradoxical tensions over time.

Paradoxes of the inner-coaching self affect intrapersonal issues related to beliefs (Barnson & Watson, 2009), values (Nash, Sproule, & Horton, 2008), roles (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004), and coaching efficacy (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). Tensions can occur within an element of the inner-coaching self or between this category and other categories. For example, coaches often feel the responsibility to fill multiple roles frames simultaneously, such as creating a fun learning environment while at the same time establishing a winning atmosphere (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). This internal conflict must be dealt with for successful outcomes to occur. Some difficulties of exploring tensions within this category include their tacit nature (Horn, 2008) and the fact that many inner-coaching elements are tied to a coach's past. Issues related to prior knowledge (Abraham et al., 2006), experience, and reflection (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) come to the forefront of this category.

Outer-coaching self paradoxes stem from the plurality of stakeholders and the fact that a coach must interact with other individuals. In doing so, coaches create an outward persona that influences interpersonal relationships. Some of the issues that fall within this category include power (Jones & Standage, 2006), mannerisms (d'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998), and coaching style (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Through their observable actions, coaches manipulate others' impressions to generate the necessary professional support, space, and time to carry out their programs and agendas (Potrac & Jones, 2009). Tensions occur when coaches are forced to wear multiple masks in multiple situations with multiple stakeholders.

Purpose paradoxes surface as complex systems that create competing processes. The purpose category deals with the "how" of coaching. Said another way, purpose is the means that ultimately lead to an end. Purpose paradoxes are associated with strategies, schemes, and tactics (Bloom, Crumpton, & Anderson, 1999; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004). Like the other categories, the purpose paradox involves conflicts from elements within this category and between other categories. For example, should a coach use a strategy that highlights collaboration or competition? Other examples include control versus flexibility (d'Arripe-Longueville, Saury, Fournier, & Durand, 2001), routineness versus innovation (Harvey, Cushion, & Massa-Gonzalez, 2010; Light, 2006), and empowerment versus direction (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Outcome paradoxes appear as competing goals, motivation, and results. Different behaviors produce different outcomes (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Within the coaching process, goals are inherently challenging, variables are many and dynamic, and intended outcomes can never be a foregone conclusion. Tensions occur, as coaches consider intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation (Smith, Cumming & Smoll, 2008), individual versus collective goals (Duda, 1995), and task versus ego orientations (Nicholls, 1992). If the purpose category is related to the means of coaching, then outcome paradoxes are closely related to the ends of coaching.

Turning attention now to the heart of the Coaching Paradox Framework (see Figure 1), the coaching action category represents the behaviors of coaching. The action paradox is characterized, at the most general level, by the behaviors of teaching, motivating, organizing, and politicking. These coaching actions were identified through a review of coaching

science literature, most notably research utilizing such observation systems as the Coach Behavior Assessment System (Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977; Smoll & Smith, 1989) and the Arizona State University Observation Instrument System (Lacy & Darst, 1989).

Within the context of coaching, teaching is defined as actions directed at helping players to become more skilled, more proficient, or more knowledgeable. Numerous studies have established that coaches at all levels (youth through elite) view teaching as one of their primary behaviors (Bloom et al., 1999; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Kwon, Pyun, & Kim, 2010).

Motivating behaviors include both verbal and nonverbal acts meant to create, maintain, or change the particular emotional state of players. Motivating actions include measures of praise and, on the opposite extreme of the continuum, scolding (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002). Just as the conductor of an orchestra uses different strategies to establish a common feel for a particular piece of music among his musicians, a coach will guide, direct, and influence the emotional state of his/her athletes.

It has also been well established that coaches at all levels involve themselves in acts of management (Lyle, 2002), scheduling, establishing a physical environment (Rink, 1996), and time management (Macquet, 2010). Collectively these actions fall under the organizing paradox. Organizing is defined as actions of planning, designing, and strategizing. Besides the aspects of organizing that are administrative in nature, actions that coaches consider as the Xs and Os of strategizing fit within this action as well.

Politicking action is defined as influencing, persuading, and governing non-team members. Being political is a necessary part of a coach's repertoire because a coach's effectiveness and longevity depends on his/her ability to gain the approval of contextual power brokers, such as fans, parents, other coaches, or owners (Jones, Wells, Peters, & Johnson, 1993; Pierson, 2011). Politicking occurs whenever two or more individuals are involved in some form of collective activity, in which case, tensions of power, control, conflict, and competition will occur (Potrac & Jones, 2009).

Finally, the Coaching Paradox Framework (see Figure 1) highlights a temporal category referred to as the pendulum paradox. First described in a grounded theory of sports coaching that investigated eight interscholastic coaches within six different sport context over a 6-month period (Barnson, 2014), the pendulum paradox explains how coaches maneuver through the coaching process in a paradoxical manner. Unlike the common conception of process—plodding along step by step, striving to reach the finish line of a long race—coaches appear to use the paradoxical energy of past versus future, inner versus outer, and beliefs versus action to swing back and forth, gaining speed and power with each oscillation.

Using the analogy of a swing, the pendulum paradox captures the idea that no single action or event will propel a coach to ultimate success. Coaches achieve a sense of accomplishment through a compounding process, swing by swing, decision by decision, action by action. For example, by employing different actions, coaches simultaneously push athletes to see future possibilities while also re-setting the environment to re-teach past learned skills. Said in the language of coaches, “repping” prepares athletes for future contest by a continual repeating of previously learned behaviors. The oscillation of the pendulum paradox, in this case between teaching and motivating as well as between purpose and outcome, creates a sense of momentum over time.

Tensions operate within as well as between all of these categories. For example, coaches often have to deal with conflicts between their intrapersonal beliefs regarding the measure of success and pressure from an outside agent (i.e., parent, administrator, player, etc.) to produce specific results. Another inter-category tension studied by numerous

scholars is related to Chelladurai's (1978, 1990, 1993) notion of required, actual, and preferred coaching behaviors.

Viewing Chelladurai's work and other research based on the Multidimensional Model of Leadership, from a paradoxical perspective, it becomes apparent that the fundamental tension his model addressed is concerned with needs versus wants. Chelladurai (1990) explained that coaching effectiveness is a function of interacting aspects of leadership. In essence, the situational context determines the required behaviors (needs), which directly influence the actual actions the coach exhibits as well as the behaviors the athletes prefer (wants) to see exhibited. For example, a coach may decide to teach a player to use his/her left foot to kick a soccer ball because it is more efficient for a given situation (need), despite his/her natural tendency to use the right foot (want).

Considerations in Paradox Research

The studies reviewed in this article highlight the richness and scope of a paradox perspective. The point is no less true despite the fact that many of the studies failed to identify explicitly the tensions they were investigating as a paradox. The exemplar studies cited in this article can and should guide future paradox research. Yet, because of the disparity of language used to describe the paradoxical nature of coaching, gaps that thwart a cohesive understanding of paradoxes, and a unified community of paradox researchers should be addressed. To be specific, debates swirl around the conceptualization of paradoxes, the nature of paradoxical tensions, and strategies that respond to these tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The lack of conceptual clarity is seen in the varying language used to describe tensions, including "paradox," "dilemma," "conflict," "dialectic," "problem," "clash," and "opposition." Moreover, a number of theorists utilizing a contingency perspective refer to simultaneously occurring yet contradictory tensions without using the term paradox. Rare or inconsistent use of the term paradox to describe tensions is seen in research related to teaching sport and life skills (Gould, Chung, Smith, & White, 2006), work and life balance (Schenewark & Dixon, 2012), and formal and informal coaching education (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009). Greater conceptual clarity could enable fruitful and provocative discussion across these and other paradox contexts.

A second challenge of working from a paradoxical perspective stems from an ontological debate that differentiates tensions as an inherent feature of the coaching process (Jones & Wallace, 2005) or as social constructions that emerge from individuals' cognition and rhetoric (Light, 2006). Clegg (2002) described the differences between these views as material—inherent in the external world—or representations—social constructions of individuals lived experiences. Material tensions are understood as complex human systems, which are defined by boundaries between self and other, individuality and collaboration, and in-group and out-group. In contrast, representational paradoxes are constructed tensions situated within a particular time or space or cognitive frame expressed through dialog as mixed messages. Unless researchers expressly explain these ontological disparities, the field runs the risk of fracturing the literature leading to implications for developing strategies to manage paradox.

Another important consideration for researchers working from a paradox perspective is the explicit description of how a paradox is managed within their theory development. At a general level, methods for managing paradoxes diverge between acceptance and resolution strategies (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Poole and Van de Ven (1989) identified four specific strategies: (1) assimilation, keeping tensions separate and appreciating their differences;

(2) spatial separation, tensions are situated at different levels or locations in the social world; (3) temporal separation, separating the poles of a tension(s) at different points in time; (4) production, synthesizing tensions into a new perspective or eliminating a conceptual flaw in past theory. Working with an assimilation strategy focuses attention on acceptance by constructing new assumptions or describing a novel perspective for the tensions in question, whereas the other three strategies seek to resolve the underlying tensions by separating the opposing elements and specifying how one tension influences the others.

Assimilation encourages actors within a theory to embrace or “live with” the paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Living with the paradox implies that actors shift their expectations for rationality and linearity to accept paradoxes as persistent and unsolvable puzzles. An example of this strategy can be seen in John Lyle’s coaching process diagram (2002). Lyle (1999, 2002) set out to identify a model of coaching that embraced the wholeness of the process. He actively decided to include complexity in his model after criticizing others for viewing coaching through very limited perspectives. Lyle (1999) argued that others were paying too much attention to the instructional role of coaches, and he thought researchers should “embrace the entirety of the coaching process” (p. 14). In his attempt to rectify the problem, Lyle created a model of coaching that included over 40 distinctive elements, describing 15 of the elements as essential “building blocks or starter concepts” (Lyle, 1999, p. 20). His model acknowledged external constraints and recognized the coaching process as a cyclical series of interpersonal relationships that are subject to contextual factors. However, the sheer size of Lyle’s schematic, in terms of elements and the number of relationships between elements, have caused some to question the usefulness of the model (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2006; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004).

Without debating the merits of Lyle’s schematic, it is important to recognize that he attempted to work with a paradox by actively assimilating it into his theory (Lyle, 1999). The first tension he discussed was the cost versus benefit tension that coaches must balance while doing their job. Lyle (1999) said, “given the sheer volume of data management implied by systematic practice, the coach has to weigh up the cost-benefit of very detailed regulation of the process against time spent on other direct intervention strategies” (p. 21). In essence, he acknowledged the paradox coaches face when deciding on which coaching action to focus their attention. Lyle’s solution to this and other paradoxes is to describe the coaching process as a self-regulating system (1999).

By taking this particular stance, Lyle furthers the assimilation paradigm by implying that the coaching process itself assimilates the paradox (1999). Yet failing to describe explicitly how or why the process assimilates paradoxical tensions has left some readers with more questions than answers (Cushion et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2004). Others, however, stress that assimilation is a powerful and proactive strategy. Assimilation can further theory development and does not mean complexity is necessarily ignored. Assimilation can stimulate understanding, debate, and/or theory justification (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Through explicit assimilation of paradox, researchers make us aware of inconsistencies and allow others to study the forces between the opposing tensions.

In contrast, other strategies to a paradox seek resolution. In this case, resolution does not imply elimination. Rather, strategies of paradox resolution attempt to find a means of meeting competing demands or considering divergent ideas simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Examples of this type of strategy include the multidimensional model of leadership (Chelladurai, 1990), the process of reflection (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), the course of action model (d’Arripe-Longueville et al., 2001), the orchestration theory (Jones

& Wallace, 2005), socially skilled leadership (Kellett, 1999), and structured improvisation (Cushion, 2001; Cushion et al., 2006). In their boldness, strategies attempting to bring resolution to a paradox carry with them unknown and uncertain entailments.

The work by Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2009) demonstrated that boldness by providing an alternative view of coaching, away from the traditional bio-scientific and product-orientated discourse, and toward a view that accounts for the social, cultural, and pedagogical aspects of coaching. Approaching paradoxes from a spatial, temporal, or production perspective can add to the synthesis of ideas and go a long way to further the field. Yet it is important to remember that if there is limited elaboration or insufficient empirical follow through, recognition of the new interpretation will face a dangerous and difficult path. Presenting a partially produced explanation will only lead to a further divide between theory and practice.

Conceptual Clarity: Toward a Common Language of Paradox

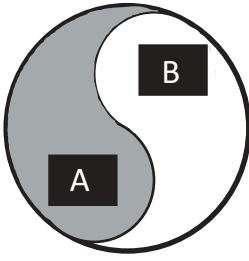
Attempting to build upon the foundation of an integrative model of a paradox, attention shifts to establishing a common language of paradoxes. To do this, similarities and differences between paradoxical tensions and those labeled as dilemmas or dialectics will be identified. Figure 2 illustrates the distinction between these three terms. It is important to note that much of this discussion mirrors the evolution of a paradoxical perspective seen over the past two decades in the field of organizational management (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

A paradox has been defined thus far as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Such elements often appear logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent, and even absurd when juxtaposed (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). The notion of paradox has long been illustrated by the Taoist symbol of yin yang. Paradoxes denote elements that are oppositional to one another but are also synergistic and interrelated within a larger system (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In Figure 2, these dualities are represented as A and B.

Each element of a paradox has distinct boundaries that help to highlight their uniqueness. Often these distinctions are reinforced by formal logic that can encourage either/or thinking and accentuate differences—night or day. The external boundary (in the case of the yin yang, the outside edge) integrates the overall system and emphasizes the quality of synergy. This external boundary also binds the dualities together, creating a dynamic relationship between elements, ensuring their continued paradoxical nature over time—night into day *and* day into night.

Core characteristics of a paradox can be exposed by distinguishing paradoxical tensions from other tensions, such as dilemmas and dialectics. According to McGrath (1982), a dilemma denotes a tension such that each competing alternative poses clear advantages and disadvantages. Resolving the dilemma involves weighing the pros and cons. For example, Lyle (2002) described a coach's dilemma between the time costs of preparing extremely detailed practice plans versus the benefit of utilizing that time to directly influence/instruct player development. Another example of a dilemma that all coaches must face on a regular basis is, "Do I play Johnny or Joey?" Dilemmas are competing choices, each with benefits and drawbacks.

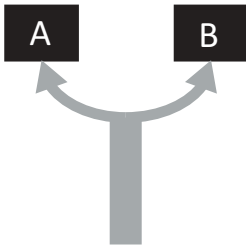
In contrast, dialectic denotes an ongoing process of resolving tensions through integration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). As Figure 2 shows, A and B are contradictory (thesis and antithesis) elements and resolvable through their merger into a combined synthesis. However, as often the case with dialectics, a new tension surfaces as the resulting synthesis

**Paradox**

Contradictory yet interrelated tensions (dualities) that exist *both* simultaneously *and* persist over time. Elements that seem logical in isolation, but irrational or absurd when together.

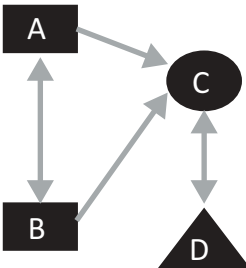
Dualities (A and B)

- * opposites that exist within a unified whole
- * internal boundary creates distinction
- * external boundary encourages synergy

**Dilemma**

Competing choices, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Are paradoxical when elements are contradictory and interrelated such that resolution is temporary and tensions resurface over time.

**Dialectic**

Contradictory tensions (thesis and antithesis) resolved through synthesis, which over time, must confront new contradictory elements.

Are paradoxical when similarities between elements highlight the temporary integration of tensions, certain qualities persist such that a gradual favoring of one element over the other occurs over time.

Figure 2. Distinguishing tensions.

becomes a new thesis, C, and eventually is faced with a new antithesis, D. An example of the dialectic tension can be seen in Gilbert and Trudel's (2004) conception of a coach's role frame. The pressure a coach feels to focus on providing a fun or winning atmosphere can lead to a hybrid atmosphere that is both sociable and competitive. However, as players become comfortable with this new hybrid environment, the coach may start to feel a new pressure to incorporate a sense of safety into their practice routines. New tensions will surface as the coach struggles between providing a safe and pleasurable atmosphere.

Conceptual confusion emerges as dilemmas, dialectics, and paradoxes overlap. Remember, one thing that distinguishes a paradox from these other concepts is persistent tensions over time. For instance, a dilemma may prove to be paradoxical when a choice between A and B results in an only temporary resolution. Over time, the contradictions reappear, suggesting their interrelatedness and persistence (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). Coaches often impose an either/or mentality toward dilemmas when a

paradoxical approach that incorporates a both/and perspective would prove more advantageous. Researchers have found that pushing coaches to explore dilemmas often makes their paradoxical nature surface (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Kellett, 1999).

Similarly, dialectics can prove paradoxical when the interconnected relationship between thesis and antithesis persists over time. Often during the synthesis phase of the dialectic process similarities between elements are emphasized—taking the good and throwing out the bad. However, by overlooking valued differences, this integration may be short-lived (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Because the elements possess unique qualities, it is possible that the synthesis will gradually favor one element over the other. An example of this kind of dialectic issue emerges in a coach's leadership behaviors (Becker, 2009). Great coaches appear to synthesize a number of conflicting actions (i.e., teaching, motivating, preparing, and evaluating), whereas coaches not identified as great seem to be unable to maintain a stable interaction within and between all of the coaching dimensions. Further research is needed, but it appears that what separates great coaches from their peers is an inauthentic emphasis on a single coaching action.

Recent research into the coaching process has viewed dialectics from more of a paradoxical lens, stressing that overall coaching success depends on a simultaneous focus on tensions within different coaching actions (Barnson, 2014). For example, evidence is pointing toward how the act of motivating begins with the coach recognizing an imbalance between an athlete's sense of confidence and his/her sense of fear. Coaches then use a multitude of means (i.e., praise, scolding, silence, etc.) simultaneously in an authentic manner to rectify the imbalance. The elements of confidence and fear reinforce one another through their interwoven support of a proper athletic affect. In essence, some coaches recognize that effective athletic experiences require athletes to have both a sense of fear and confidence. Approaching the dialectic of confidence and fear from a paradoxical perspective allows coaches to support these contradictory tensions simultaneously and persistently.

Discussion

Embracing the Paradox

Over the past two decades, scholars have advocated paradox as a provocative and powerful lens for understanding different tensions (Lewis, 2000; Palmer, 2007; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Nonetheless, as more researchers turn to the paradox as an analytical tool, its definitions, focus, and uses appear increasingly eclectic (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Hoping to unleash the inherent power of paradox for both theory and practice, the purpose of this article was to review existing literature, establish a common language among researchers, and integrate insights as part of a framework of fundamental paradoxical tensions found within the coaching process. The review of literature highlights varied empirical and conceptual exemplars that may both guide future investigations and spur key debates within the field.

Comparing paradox with contingency theory highlights the potential for creating a paradoxical perspective. Like contingency theory, a theory of coaching paradox offers an approach to tensions that span the coaching process. The Coaching Paradox Framework presented in this article allows for future theory development by providing common definitions, assumptions, mechanisms, outcomes, and language. At its core, a paradox theory presumes that tensions are central to complex systems and that sustainability within the system depends on attending to contradictory yet interconnected demands simultaneously.

Why is a theory of coaching paradox needed? Foremost, such a theory can unify the extensive but varied research across the field. Using a paradoxical lens allows studies investigating simultaneously occurring opposites to coexist across theoretical and phenomenological domains. However, some have used the divergence of perspectives in coaching science to argue that coaching is composed of such a range of behaviors and processes that generalized definitions have become implausible (Lyle & Vergeer, 2013). Others have gone so far as to describe the process of coaching as a “hydra-headed monster” (LeUnes, 2007), giving the impression that coaching is a series of trial-and-error endeavors incapable of ever being fully understood and, thus, beyond the ability to be tamed.

Nevertheless, providing a unifying platform can stimulate continued theoretical debate and guide future empirical investigations. Without viable and intuitively appealing frameworks, the field of coaching science is not likely to emerge with appropriate theories and principles in the future. Without a unifying perspective of sports coaching, the field may well become a hodge-podge of theoretical camps that only foster the divide between researchers and, more troubling, between theorist and practicing coaches.

A theory of coaching paradox not only offers a response to material and representational tensions of the coaching process, it also encourages active searching for those tensions to assist practicing coaches. Researchers can ask several questions to begin opening the paradoxical lens. (1) What tensions are embedded within the coaching process, and how/why are these tensions experienced by coaches? (2) How do coaches manage material (inherent) tensions found in the coaching process? (3) What are the outcomes of successfully managing these tensions? (4) To what extent do coaches view their job through a paradoxical lens? (5) What would it mean to teach coaches about different types of tension (i.e., paradox, dilemmas, and dialectics)?

Conclusion

The future of paradox theory is bright. Throughout this article, numerous research opportunities were highlighted. In today’s highly competitive, socially demanding, and ever-changing sports environment, the paradox becomes a critical lens to understand and assist contemporary coaches. It may seem obvious to say that coaching is a paradox—a puzzle of contradictions yearning for a solution. After all, coaching is a collaboration of joy and sorrow, understanding and bewilderment, action and reflection, past glories and future dreams. To borrow a line from the educational scholar Parker Palmer (2007), “in certain circumstances, truth is found not by splitting the world into either-or but by embracing it as *both-and*” (p. 65, italics original). The experience of coaching, and how researchers theoretically describe that experience, appears to be one of those circumstances.

The goal is evolution not revolution. The conceptual frameworks presented in this article have in no way re-defined a paradox; rather, the hope is this work has renewed the concept as a viable perspective. Illuminating the process of coaching in a manner that brings clarity and cohesiveness to the field has eluded scholars for years (Cushion et al., 2006). Cushion and colleagues (2006) may have explained this conundrum best when stating that the task for the coaching theorist is “to better illustrate the coaching process in terms of remaining true to its dynamic, complex, messy reality, while presenting it in an accessible format so that coaches know where and how such information can fit into what they do” (Cushion et al., 2006, p. 84). To paint a fuller picture of coaching, researchers must connect the elements of the coaching process into a wholeness of action, going beyond the rhetoric and truly embracing coaching as a paradox.

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