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Locating the coaching process in practice: models 'for' and 'of' coaching

Christopher J. Cushion[a]*, Kathleen M. Armour[b] and Robyn L. Jones[c]
[a]*Brunel University, UK;* [b]*Loughborough University, UK;* [c]*University of Wales Institute, UK*

Background: Despite an increasing recognition of the existence of a process of coaching, and a resulting increase in research activity, there remains a lack of a clear conceptual base for sports coaching. This situation has left coaching without a clear set of concepts and principles that reflect coaching practice.
Purpose: The aim of this paper is to critically examine current conceptualisations of the coaching process, principally in terms of how they have been generated and their contribution to coaching knowledge. By exploring models for (idealistic representations) and of (empirically based) the coaching process, this paper examines the model's nature and conceptual underpinnings, in an attempt to position them within a broader framework of understanding coaching and the coaching process.
Conclusions: The analysis suggests that the current set of models result in a representation of the coaching process that is often reduced in complexity and scale, and the essential social and cultural elements of the process are often underplayed. This is particularly illustrated through examining in-situ models of coaching practice, which identify coaching as a complex, interrelated and inter-dependent process that is firmly embedded within specific social and cultural contexts.
Contribution of Research: Because of the inherent complexity of the coaching process, it is argued that the contextual purpose, particularities, and subjectivities of coaching must be examined before guidelines of recommended practice can be made.

Keywords: *Coaching process; Coaching models; Models for; Models of*

Despite considerable investigation from a number of theoretical and empirical perspectives (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004), it is arguable that sports coaching continues to

*Corresponding author. School of Sport and Education, Brunel University, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK. Email: Christopher.Cushion@Brunel.ac.uk

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lack a sound conceptual base. This is perhaps unsurprising, as no clear consensus about the nature of coaching itself currently exists (Cross, 1995; Lyle, 2002). It is a situation which has led to an absence of a definitive set of concepts and principles reflective of the coaching process and effective practice within it (Gould *et al.*, 1990). Consequently, many coaches work without any reference to a coaching process model and, alternatively, base their practice on feelings, intuitions, events and previous experience (Cross, 1995; Saury & Durand, 1998; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2004). However, it does not necessarily follow that because coaches do not (or cannot) position their practice within existing definitions of the coaching process, they do not operate within, or with reference to, such a process. The problem appears to be one of access and perception with regard to not understanding the relevancy of research findings and theorising in terms of exactly how they can benefit coaches' practice. The task for coaching scholars then 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. Indeed, further clarifying this multifaceted integrated process would appear to be a very necessary step before establishing the realistic guidelines for good practice that practitioners undoubtedly crave (Mathers, 1997; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Lyle, 2002).

The aim of this paper is firstly to critically examine current conceptualisations of the coaching process, principally in terms of how they have been generated and their contribution to coaching knowledge. Specifically, models *for* (idealistic representations of the process) and *of* coaching (based on empirical research) as developed by various scholars are discussed. Following this critique, the case is made from recent findings for a more realistic, empirically grounded representation of coaching in order to better inform practice (Saury & Durand, 1998; Jones *et al.*, 2004). Such work has highlighted the complex issues and tensions that underpin the activity, thus exposing substantial gaps in our existing knowledge base. Following a discussion about the implications this amended stance has for future coach education, a formal conclusion summarises the main points made.

Research approaches

Existing coaching research has, by and large, embraced the methods and assumptions of the positivist paradigm (Brustad, 1997; Kahan, 1999; Lyle, 1999). Hence, the theories, perspectives and designs employed have been underpinned and guided by a certain ontology and epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Macdonald *et al.*, 2002). That such a paradigm was so adopted can be attributed to the dominance of behavioural psychology as the subject's traditional disciplinary guide. A core concept of the positivistic paradigm is reductionism, which is an attempt to understand the functioning of the whole through an analysis of its individual parts (Brustad, 1997). By its nature, this approach provides a mechanistic guide to understanding, viewing human behaviour as measurable, causally derived and thus predictable and controllable (Smith, 1989). In addition, the positivist paradigm structures the types of questions asked

in order to establish causal relationships (Brustad, 1997), in this case, between effective coaching and performer learning. The ultimate aim, of course, is to develop generalised conceptual models of the process under study. Arguably, this has resulted in the complexity of both coaching practice and the coaching process being greatly reduced by the simplifying nature of efficient research design, thus stifling a more holistic understanding. Indeed, according to Kahan (1999, p. 42), due to its nomothetic pursuit, the positivist approach appears to be of limited use in the coaching context, as it is 'incongruous with, and insensitive to, the peculiarities of coaching and the unique conditions under which coaches act'. It is a position with which Lyle (1999, p. 30) agrees in stating that 'too many studies have adopted a quantitative survey approach [where] the need for the control of variables and reliable operationalisation of constructs has militated against a more insightful and interpretive investigation of values, behaviors and context'.

Perhaps it is as a consequence of this simplified approach to complex social interactions that scholars have increasingly claimed there to be a dearth of useful research into the conceptual development of the coaching process (e.g. Cushion, 2001; Jones *et al.*, 2002). Instead, what is reflected in the literature is a tendency to focus on, and make claims about, the superiority of one aspect of the coaching process over others. For example, Fuoss and Troppman (1981), Carreiro da Costa and Pieron (1992) and Jones (1997) identify *communication* as *the* key ingredient of effective coaching. Furthermore, Carreiro da Costa and Pieron (1992) contend that within the area of communication, it is the quality of *feedback* which is central to coach effectiveness, a view shared by several authors (Horn, 1984, 1992; Mancini & Wuest, 1987; Stewart & Corbin, 1988; Solomon *et al.*, 1996). Tinning (1982) however, considers *instruction* to be the most significant aspect of the coach's role, while Fischman and Oxendine (1993, p. 11) argue that, 'at the core of successful coaching is an understanding of the *motor learning process*'. The work of Chelladurai (1993) meanwhile has focused upon coach-athlete interaction and *decision-making styles*, reflecting a belief that coaching is, 'in essence, the art and science of decision making' (p. 99).

From a practitioner's perspective, the impact of this competition of importances has been confusion and, not unsurprisingly, an ultimate perception of the work as being irrelevant; of not being linked to the real world (Jones *et al.*, 2004). The general fragmented approach has undoubtedly underestimated the complexity of the coaching process, thus serving practitioners badly as they struggle to implement simplistic and disjointed theories into their coaching practice (Jones & Wallace, 2005). The following section goes on to examine the results of this fragmentation through an analysis of research carried out on the coaching process and the resultant models *for* and *of* coaching.

The coaching process

Much existing research has attempted to describe, characterise and model the coaching process. For example, Borrie and Knowles (2003) define the process as a series of stages that the coach has to go through to help the player/athlete learn and improve a particular skill. This definition would appear to position the parameters of the

coaching process around the coaching session. However, the coach, to be effective, has to manipulate a wide range of variables, which occur within and beyond the actual session (Launder, 1991; Lyle, 1992, 2002). Consequently, Borrie and Knowles' definition may be too narrow to capture the true complexity inherent here, requiring a definition beyond the confines of the coaching session. Despite acknowledgement of the coaching's complexity, many have tried to capture the coaching process through the development of models. The desire to do so is arguably based on Cross and Ellice's (1997) assertion that the ability to identify, analyse and control variables that affect athlete performance is central to effective coaching. This rather sequential view of coaching is supported by Lyle (1986, 1991, 1996), who suggests that improved performance is attained through a planned, coordinated and progressive process.

Before examining conceptual models *of* and *for* the coaching process in detail, it is worth considering the work of Lyle (1999, 2002) who, as an advocate of such structures, proposes a number of definitional considerations that can be helpful when assessing them. He contends that models should represent the structure and function of the process, including an identification of its dimensions in terms of assumptions and boundaries, and how these interact in practice. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, he distinguishes between two types of model: models *for* and *of* the coaching process. Models *of* the process are based on empirical research investigating expert and/or successful coaching practice, whereas models *for* the coaching process are idealistic representations that arise from the identification of a set of assumptions about the process (Lyle, 1999). The coaching process models discussed below are now considered in light of this distinction.

Coaching process models *for* coaching

In the existing literature there are four commonly cited models *for* the coaching process: Fairs (1987); Franks *et al.* (1986); Sherman *et al.* (1997); and Lyle (2002). Each will be considered in turn. The work of Fairs (1987) acknowledged the need for a systematic approach, and contends that coaching should involve a series of orderly and interrelated steps. Hence he proposed four identifying characteristics of the coaching process: that is, it should be dynamic, organised, systematic and deliberate. His subsequent model called for coaches to recognise, analyse and modify their behaviours to meet the needs of athletes and match performance goals. This could be done through five interrelated steps: data collection; diagnosis; action planning; implementation of the plan; and evaluation. This approach depicts the coaching process as a continuous cyclical pathway, allowing procedures and outcomes to be constantly assessed and revised.

Despite its initial widespread use, the Fairs (1987) model takes a positivistic or reductionist approach to the coaching process, with its boundaries limiting the focus to episodic delivery. Similarly, the assumptions upon which the model is based signal a subdivided approach to coaching, reflecting it as a short-term cycle. Indeed, it appears difficult to envisage how the model can be used for any long

term planning (Lyle, 1999). Not surprisingly, therefore, whilst appearing logical and interrelated, the model has been criticised for being simplistic on a number of levels (Lyle, 1996, 1999; Cross & Ellice, 1997; Mathers, 1997). Firstly, it fails to recognise the complexity of performance; secondly, and importantly, it does not acknowledge the dynamic interpersonal nature of coaching relationships; thirdly, it fails to give the coaching process any context and, finally, it does not adequately describe how the coaching process might operate in practice (Lyle, 1999; Cushion, 2001). However, it is easy to criticise Fairs' (1987) work for things that it perhaps was never intended to do. Its utility lies in giving a systematic, if simplistic, 'guide' to the structuring and delivery of specific coaching sessions, and perhaps as a means for reflecting on, and in, action (Schön, 1983).

The second model considered here is that proposed by Franks *et al.* (1986), and was derived from their original paper on coach effectiveness. It has one central assumption, namely that coaching is primarily conceptualised as a teaching 'episode'. Thus, it can be categorised as an instructional, as opposed to a coaching model (Lyle, 1999). Additionally, the model attempts to measure player progress and hence coach effectiveness through analyses of performance, while being developed largely in tandem with a computer-based system for depicting coach behaviour (Johnson & Franks, 1991; More *et al.*, 1996). In the same vein, Sherman *et al.* (1997), whilst acknowledging the difficulty of conceptualising and modelling the coaching process, attempted to re-conceptualise it as a sports instruction model. However, the work of both Franks *et al.* (1986) and Sherman *et al.* (1997) has been subject to similar criticisms as those aimed at Fairs (1987) for oversimplifying and limiting understanding of the coaching process through the adoption of a teaching episode approach (Lyle, 1999). It could also be argued that these models fail to distinguish between performance and participation coaching (Lyle, 1999, 2002) and, once again, largely ignore the interpersonal relationships that comprise the coaching process. Despite making valuable contributions then, such models can be criticised for reducing the coaching process in to what is plainly only one aspect of it, however, they remain useful as a starting point when trying to conceptualise the exact nature of the complexities of the coaching process.

One of the strongest advocates for a re-conceptualisation of the coaching process has been John Lyle. Building on earlier work (Lyle, 1996, 1998), he attempted to model the coaching process in a way that represents the activity as a holistic, interdependent and interrelated enterprise. The model is a cyclical one, constructed around a set of building blocks including 'information base', 'knowledge and skills of the coach', 'athletes' capabilities', 'performance analysis', 'the competition programme' and 'the preparation programme' among others. Importantly, the model acknowledges external constraints and recognises the coaching process as a set of interpersonal relationships that are subject to contextual factors and exist within a cultural dimension. However, despite the attempt to ground the model in coaching experience (Lyle, 1999) and, in part, research on coach behaviour (Lyle, 1992), it is not founded on actual coaching practice. Consequently, the assumptions made concerning the coaching process remain at the level of supposition, with the model being very

much one *for* as opposed to *of* the coaching process. Furthermore it also appears systematic to the point of being mechanical, and it would indeed be interesting to see it tested in the messy, complex reality of practice.

With the possible exception of the untested model of Lyle (2002), the existing models for the coaching process can be criticised for being too simplistic and failing to encompass essential elements of effective practice (Lyle, 1996; Cross & Ellice, 1997; Mathers, 1997). However, the enormity of the task to 'model' the complexity of the coaching process must be acknowledged. In summary, it could be said that the contribution made by these models to our understanding of the coaching process has been useful, but limited. Arguably, insufficient attention has been paid to fundamental social dimensions of coaching (Cushion, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2004) and to empirical work which has consistently highlighted that effectiveness in this context is heavily dependent not upon a sequential process but 'on the quality of the interaction between the player and the coach' (Borrie, 1996, p. 245).

Coaching process models *of* coaching

Recently, models *of* the coaching process have been developed based on an analysis of expert coaches' practice. Here, coaching has been examined in a range of competition and practice settings with the specific objective of examining practitioners' knowledge and strategies, and the efficacy of coach-athlete interaction (Côté *et al.*, 1995a, 1995b; d'Arrippe-Longueville *et al.*, 1998; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). Although using qualitative methodologies, usually in-depth interviews, to facilitate coach recall, much of this research remains informed by the positivist tradition. Consequently, while developing a more comprehensive and holistic outline of coaching practice through recognising the existence of a comprehensive and definitive coaching process, the work goes on to position this process as largely implicit and uncontested. That is, coaches go through the process in a systematic and unproblematic way, while performers merely receive the coaching. While this approach acknowledges that no single element can represent the coaching process, viewing coaching so unproblematically limits our understanding of it.

Three examples of the models *of* coaching include the coaching performance model proposed by McClean and Chelladurai (1995), the coaching practice model proposed by Côté *et al.* (1995b) and d'Arripue-Longueville *et al.*'s (1998) conceptualization of coach-athlete interaction. Côté *et al.* (1995b), through their collection of empirical data, recognise the complexity of the coaching process and its context, but then do not refer to this complexity in sufficient detail in the findings. What is subsequently produced is a schematic representation of the overall task of the coach, described as organisational, training and competition considerations. Hence, it can still be criticised for not adequately dealing with, or conceptualising, the operational dimensions and dynamic or adaptive aspects of the process (Saury & Durand, 1998). The authors do appear aware of this shortcoming however, and qualify their findings by stating that much more detail is contained in the coaches' responses than is presented in their paper. In further empirical research, Bloom and Salmela (2000) and Moraes and

Salmela (2001) applied Côté *et al.*'s (1995b) model and found the coaches' tasks applied well, but the nature of the microstructure of the coaching process, particularly for coach-athlete interaction, was extremely complex (Salmela & Moraes, 2003). Indeed, Salmela and Moraes (2003, p. 277) highlight a 'formidable interpersonal component', with characteristics of coach and athlete mixed with a strong cultural component, as influential upon the coaching process.

In a further example of a model *of* coaching, McClean and Chelladurai's (1995) coaching performance model assumes an occupational and organisational approach to coaching that proposes useful constructs to describe direct and indirect coach behaviour. Whilst acknowledging the occupational context of the coach, the model does not examine the detail of the coaching process which surrounds it and, consequently, makes unproblematic assumptions about its existence (Lyle, 2002). Finally, d'Arrippe-Longueville *et al.*'s (1998) work, which, while strictly being an analysis of coach-athlete interaction, promises to go beyond this and place such interaction within the coaching process. It also undertakes to consider this process in terms of the complex athletic setting and related contextual dynamics (d'Arrippe-Longueville *et al.*, 1998). Disappointingly however, the analysis descends into a consideration of leadership styles, while using Côté *et al.*'s (1995b) model to analyse data, the authors focus on a more detailed understanding of coach and athletes' personal characteristics and interactions within a given sporting culture. Hence, a very partial view of the coaching process is presented.

This empirical research is undoubtedly creating a body of work that has the potential to grasp a more sophisticated view of coaching practice and the coaching process. Although not a panacea to all methodological ills in this respect, the adoption of more qualitative methodologies is revealing some of the complexity inherent within coaching practice and the coaching process. The next section examines some other emerging work which is further engaging with this dynamism and thus, it is argued, holds substantive potential for future coach education programmes.

Further models *of* the coaching process: the value of *in situ* studies

The premise that identifying what successful coaches do provides a sufficient knowledge base for developing 'good practice' models appears to be based on the flawed assumption that expertise can be created through duplication and the mere acquisition of technical skills (Rink, 1993). Similarly, existing analysis of coaching and its environments has tended to have been undertaken from the coaches' perspective. Needless to say, the coaching context is more than an individually dominated setting and a place for learners to simply 'acquire' sport skills. It also often doubles as an interactive workplace, is consequently racked with competing egos, hierarchies, constraints and opportunities and is, in its own right, an intricate, multifaceted and wide-ranging social system (Jones *et al.*, 2004; Jones & Wallace, 2005). This may be why the largely fragmented nature of coaching research and the subsequent prevailing models approach has revealed only a small part of the complexity of coaching practice and,

hence, have not been well received by practitioners (Saury & Durand, 1998; Jones *et al.*, 2002; Cushion, 2004).

The appeal of attempting to model the coaching process, or components thereof, is that it can then be presumed to have a quantitative capacity. This suggests that the study and development of it is a straightforward matter; a matter of simply measuring and comparing. In practice, as has been argued, and as research is beginning to demonstrate, things are much less straightforward. Indeed, recent empirical work has attempted to position the coaching process as something that is not merely delivered, but as a dynamic social activity that vigorously engages athlete and coach (Jones, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2002; Cushion, 2004). This suggests a need to further investigate the contextual and elaborate relationship between coach, athlete and environment in order to more fully grasp the complexity of the process (Potrac *et al.*, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2002; Cushion, 2004; Jones & Wallace, 2005). Despite a limited amount of such work having so far emerged, we believe that it has the potential to provide a more sophisticated and realistic view of what is actually involved when 'coaching' takes place.

This approach to analysing coaching and the coaching process is based on the belief that studies on *in situ* coaching practice can present a contextually informed picture of the activity; a picture that provides rich opportunities to inform coach education (Cushion, 2004). The three studies considered in this case are illustrative of the type of knowledge that can be generated. In the first example, Saury and Durand (1998) conducted observations and interviews with the French Olympic sailing team. While this project was primarily concerned with investigating expert coaches' practical knowledge, the coaching process as a framework for this knowledge is also discussed and conceptualised. The authors proposed the task activity model (Rasmussen, 1986) as the tool for analysis, as they believed it able to elicit the constraints of the coaching process, while highlighting the coaches' knowledge as they engaged in an adaptive activity. This model suggests that activities such as coaching can be analysed as a set of constraints with respect to the goals and sub-goals of the individual and in terms of the physical and social resources available to reach those goals (Rasmussen, 1986; Saury & Durand, 1998). Saury and Durand (1998) identified three key contextual themes underpinning coaching practice, namely training efficiency, the temporal situation and uncertainty. The authors used the work of Schön (1983) in portraying the coaching domain as one characterised by complex, uncertain, dynamic, singular and conflicting values (Saury & Durand, 1998). Subsequently, their findings illustrated that the 'actions of coaches were full of context based, opportunist improvisations and extensive management of uncertainty and contradictions' (p. 268).

In the context of the current paper, Saury and Durand (1998, p. 269) argue against the current rationalistic 'models of coaching', as the coaching process they encountered was neither reason-based nor planned. Indeed, they argue that the coaching process is neither systematic nor cyclical and cannot be reduced to the application of rules imparted during formal coach education workshops (Saury & Durand, 1998). Alternatively, they considered coaching as akin to a 'cognitive alchemy',

itself consisting of flexible rules applied using deeply *integrated* past experiences to resolve, although not totally, contradictions and dilemmas (Saury & Durand, 1998). Unsurprisingly, they believe their results 'provide an incentive for reinterpreting the coaching process' as it has been presently portrayed (p. 269).

The second example, by Poczwardowski, Barott and Henschen (2002) was an *in situ* coaching study conducted in what can be broadly described as an interpretive paradigm. It is an approach increasingly acknowledged as having considerable potential to further our understanding of the intricate human element of coaching and those who partake in it (Côté *et al.*, 1995a, 1995b; Bloom *et al.*, 1997; Strean, 1998; Lyle, 1999; Potrac *et al.*, 2000; Cushion, 2001). This is not to suggest that it is the only type of research now needed in the area, rather its value lies in complementing the positivistic work already undertaken, providing a more complete picture of the activity.

Poczwardowski *et al.* (2002) utilised a phenomenological approach to better understand the athlete-coach relationship and coaching practice as a holistic phenomenon. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were employed to collect data on six athletes and three coaches from an NCAA Division 1 Collegiate gymnastics programme in both practice and competition settings over a four-month season. As with the earlier work of Saury and Durand (1998), Poczwardowski *et al.* (2002) supported the notion that the coaching process, rather than being a simplistic cyclical one, comprises a set of reciprocal interactions between the athlete, coach and context. Themes identified from the resulting data included 'task', 'interpretation', 'meaning' and 'negotiation', which confirmed the process and the interactions which comprise it as being dynamic, multifaceted and interpersonal. More importantly perhaps, Poczwardowski *et al.* (2002) demonstrated that coaches and players both inherit and personally author their own coaching contexts highlighting the problematic and individualistic nature of the relationships involved.

The use of qualitative research methods, and a theoretically eclectic approach to analysis, enabled the researchers to look beyond the instructional component shallows of the coaching process in to the activity's deeper waters. This was demonstrated through the study's examination of variables associated with both athlete and coach, describing the interaction of these variables holistically, and exploring them in their primary context (Poczwardowski *et al.*, 2002). For example, the data presented within the theme 'task' suggested that the coaching process was centred around specific tasks and was often defined by those tasks (Poczwardowski *et al.*, 2002). The subsequent relationship between the social actors took on different content and dynamics depending on the nature of the task. Consequently, through their day-to-day dealings, 'athletes and coaches were actively creating [and re-creating] meanings about their relationships in an ongoing process of social interaction' (Poczwardowski *et al.*, 2002, p. 132). This was further illustrated in the theme of 'negotiation', which showed how the roles of the coach and athlete were not strictly defined but were achieved through constant dealings within the framework of a team dynamic. Another theme identified by Poczwardowski was that of 'communication'. Different attributes within it (for example, 'frequency', 'content'

and 'outcome') were analysed, again highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships. It was thus deduced that the relationship some athletes have with their coaches shapes their entire sport experience and, in turn, has a profound impact on the quality of both practice and performance during competition (Poczwardowski *et al.*, 2002).

The final example relating to recent research *of* the coaching process is considered in greater detail. This is because the study in question was specifically directed at understanding the coaching process in practice, unlike the previous examples, which tended to examine the nature of the coaching process as a by-product. Cushion (2001) conducted a ten-month season-long ethnography of a youth academy of a professional football club in order to examine the complexity of the coach-player-club environment interface and how they interacted to construct a coaching process. The methods of the study involved participant observation and interviews with young professional footballers aged between 16 and 19 years old, and the club's five full-time coaches. These data were then added to with a further nine interviews with age-equivalent coaches working at other professional clubs. The overall aim was to explore the coaching process and practical coaching context as played out in the day-to-day experiences of coaches and youth team players.

Utilising a grounded-theory approach, key themes were developed from the data through which an understanding of the coaching process was drawn. The purpose of the analysis, therefore, was not to 'model' the process and be limited to a structural, two-dimensional representation, but to utilise a more organic, thematic approach, capturing the dynamic yet subtle functioning of practice. Throughout the analysis, the data from each source not only connected strongly together but also connected to aspects of the literature. This led to both a deeper understanding of the complexity and inconsistency in the practice observed, and also to coherence with an emerging understanding of the coaching process as portrayed in some earlier work. Consequently, it also gave an insight into the difficulty inherent in representing a holistic, interactive and interrelated coaching process. In the final phase of the inductive analysis, the key themes from the data were organised under a series of headings: 'the club', 'sessions and games', 'players and coaches', 'relationships' and 'attitude'. For example, within 'the club' the academy structure was described as being rigidly hierarchical with clear differentiation between the coaches and players, the coaches themselves and between, first-, second- and third-year players. In addition, there was a strong organisational culture that impacted directly and indirectly upon the working practices of both coaches and players. The excerpt below demonstrates the impact of the power structure that was evident upon the coaching practice. Within it, a player young enough to be involved in the academy is not being allowed to partake in the practice, as one of the coaches explains while watching the activity;

> See that kid at the back just sitting down, what's that doing for him? He's 19, the club have just bought him, but he's fuckin' useless if you ask me. I've asked if he can join in with us, coz he needs the practice. The manager says no though, 'keep your nose out he's a pro, he's one of mine'. (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 127)

Paying attention to the detail of coaching practice and to the forces and interconnections that shape it and the wider process revealed much about the construction and complexity evident within both. For example, 'sessions and games' were dominated by local, immediate objectives, such as winning, which was often seen as vital to the standing and position of both individuals and the organisation; '... you don't want to lose the game, no coach here wants to lose the game. The results are important for the team's credibility, the coach's credibility, the group's credibility' (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 133). Furthermore, the relationship between the players, coaches and club was a dialectic one, with the players having to structure their behaviour around a range of coach- and club-defined explicit and implicit dictates. Against this backdrop, both players and coaches sought to improve their position within the culture, often at the expense of one another, as a player suggests; 'It's dog eat dog really, you've got to look after yourself' (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 179). The coaching process in this case was underpinned by a strongly authoritarian regime, which manifested itself through a combination of violent and abusive language, direct personal castigation and physical exercise and associated threats.

The dynamism within and between the themes evident in the study's findings was illustrated in the ways that each could facilitate, constrain or even prevent effective practice and the operation of the coaching process. For example, the authoritarian coach behaviour led to a fear of failure within players, who subsequently engaged in a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959) with the coaches. Such impressions were reflected in the players presenting themselves 'as submissive and compliant workers' (Cushion, 2001, p. 170). However, once in 'safe spaces' the players 'often and instantly engaged in both physical and verbal forms of peer group resistance' against the culture (Cushion, 2001, p. 170). Like instances of output restriction observed in the wider industrial sphere (Collinson, 1992; Parker, 1996), for example, player defiance was a means by which collective opposition could be expressed towards the top-down control of the coaching process. In turn, this sub-culture influenced the work of coaches, sometimes making it easier; sometimes making it harder. This was illustrated when certain groups of players were viewed by the staff as more or less coachable, as this excerpt of a coach interview illustrates; 'When a 16 year old comes in he's very coachable, very motivated and wants to do anything the coach says. A year or so later when he's been exposed to the peer group he is the complete opposite I would say, so you've got to treat him differently' (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 171).

The player sub-culture was also perceived by coaches as impacting on the functional coaching programme; that is, what was actually taught to the players and how as one coach said; 'you've got to get the players ready to work hard first, before you even think about what you'll do in that session' (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 171). Although evidence emerged that the players' attitudes and behaviour impacted on the delivery and effectiveness of the coaching process, the practice of the coaches within the prevailing club culture undoubtedly contributed toward the creation and maintenance of this sub-culture of resistance (Guilianotti, 1999). One of the coaches agreed with this supposition; 'I think the players' sub-culture, the peer group is strong because, well it's almost the fear factor, fear of the coaches, of making mistakes, so the players unite.

The staff do set the tone, a lot of negative stuff and that makes the players band together because they are on the receiving end of it' (cited in Cushion, 2001, p. 172). The complex, interrelational hierarchical culture of coaching, and how it influences the actions of its main protagonists, thus becomes somewhat apparent. The research also highlighted the interdependent constructed relationships *between* the coach, the athlete and the club environment as key in understanding the coaching process. This interdependency is an important point as neither element has the capacity to unilaterally determine action.

Making the connections: the contribution of research and implication for coach education

From an examination of the contextualised analyses of practice contained in the studies conducted by Saury and Durand (1998), Cushion (2001) and Poczwardowski *et al.* (2002), it can be argued that a need exists to question existing conceptions of the coaching process (e.g., Fairs, 1987) and develop evidence for others (e.g., Lyle, 2002). In particular, and in conflict with currently recognised models of coaching and coach education, it seems unlikely that coaching practice and the coaching process can be reduced to the application of generic rules because their functioning is neither entirely reason-based nor planned (Saury & Durand, 1998; Cushion 2001; Jones *et al.*, 2004). To claim that reality is the same within every coaching environment, as in other learning environments, would be to ignore the obvious multiple realities, context-specific interactions and the situated nature of decision-making (Rink, 1993). Indeed, from this recent work, coaching could be better characterised as 'regulated improvisation' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79).

However, as with all learning environments, not every situation is unique (Rink, 1993). Similarly within coaching, to suggest unique situations ignores the shared realities of sessions and their participants. To suggest that one cannot know anything because one cannot know everything condemns the field to a perspective of total relativism (Rink, 1993). Indeed, although no two coaches will be exactly the same, it is likely that they will echo common themes and concerns in relation to the given demands of an established coaching programme (Jardine, 1992; Rampazi, 1996; Erben, 1998). Consequently, it might be appropriate to consider research into the coaching process that is founded in terms of the notion of '*moderatum* generalisation' (Williams & May, 1996). As Rink (1993, p. 312) points out, 'there is a sameness amongst our uniqueness' and a way forward here could be one that acknowledges the potential contribution of understanding individual contexts while recognising the commonalities within each.

Despite considering coaching as a very personal process then, in considering the evidence from the latter studies presented, it is possible to begin to develop a wider conceptualisation of the coaching process as having the following key features:

1. The coaching process is not necessarily cyclical but is continuous and interdependent.
2. The process (and the practice it engenders) is continually constrained by a range of 'objectives' that derive from the club, the coach and the athletes involved.

3. The process is a constantly dynamic set of intra- and inter-group interpersonal relationships. These relationships are locally dialectical between and amongst agents (coach, player) and structure (club, culture).
4. The coaching process is embedded within external constraints, only some of which are controllable (see Jones & Wallace, 2005 *inter alia* for a further discussion).
5. A pervasive cultural dimension infuses the coaching process through the coach, club and athletes, and their interaction.

However, it is not our intention to seek simplistic closure on this issue nor, as Smith (1997, p. 373) suggests, to 'square the philosophical circle'. Rather, it is to highlight some common themes from recent empirical work allowing coaches to read themselves (and their contexts) in to them. We believe that the type of knowledge, generated by more sophisticated analyses of practice, is fundamental to enhancing our understanding of how to improve coaching and, hence, coach education (Côté & Salmela, 1996; Lyle, 1999). Indeed, without studies specifically oriented toward describing and interpreting the complexity inherent in coaching, our knowledge of it is likely to remain imprecise and speculative (Saury & Durand, 1998). However, despite the obvious advantages of such work, a paradox exists. That is, as our knowledge of the coaching process becomes increasingly sophisticated, the development can be viewed as both 'exhilarating and daunting' (Armour, 2004, p. 109): exhilarating in respect of its undoubted insights, but problematic for coach education as the increased complexity makes straightforward 'guides for practice' very difficult to produce. Yet, as Armour states, in order that coaching be considered a profession, that complexity must be faced not ignored, and ways of grasping it must be found.

While we acknowledge that it is problematic to generalise from a small number of cases, the empirical research presented in the final section of this paper is certainly evidence *of* a coaching process in all its messy practice. While not claiming to be conclusive, we believe the research offers evidence of the complex nature of the activity and hence highlights the overly simplistic picture painted by some existing models. The implications for coach education are clear. In addition to giving due consideration to how coaches' knowledge is constructed and transmitted, we also need to take account of the contextual purpose, particularities and subjectivities of coaching before providing any guidelines of recommended practice. Put simply, coach education and research need to extend their thinking into practice by going there, by researching how knowledge and skills are refined, by learning about how, and why, situationally meaningful judgements and decisions are made, and by better understanding the pragmatic constraints of coaching contexts (Cushion *et al.*, 2003). This suggests that the nature and structure of coach education should be less concerned with generic guidelines and mimicking the practice of observed others, and more attention should be paid to developing a model of critical thinking which would allow coaches to develop their own processual expert toolbox (Cassidy *et al.*, 2004). This would ensure that the choices made within the coaching process would be conscious and intentional rather than being based on 'tradition and uncritical inertia' (Fernandez-Balboa, 1997, p. 128; Cushion *et al.*, 2003).

Conclusion

Recent research detailing the complex reality that coaches construct, and within which they work, is beginning to highlight the key role of context in our understanding of the coaching process. It also illustrates that coaching in practice is often, as Schön (1987) describes, swamp like; that it is a process that should never be viewed as absolute but rather 'like shifting sands constantly shaped by competing and complementary elements' (Rossi & Cassidy, 1999, p. 195). It has also raised awareness of the 'issues, myths and silences' (Fernandez-Balboa, 1997, p. 132) implicit in the coaching process, and possibly shone some light into the activity's previously unexplored foggy practicalities. Not surprisingly, the findings from such work questions existing rationalistic coaching models, as practice just does not seem to reflect the rather sequential principles espoused within them. Bourdieu (1997) contends that by assuming the point of view of impartial spectator, attempting to stand above the world rather than being immersed in and preoccupied by it, systematic distortions in conceptions of knowledge and understanding are created. In this case, rather than play down the complexity of the coaching process, research should wade in and through Schön's (1987) swamp so as to better illustrate its parameters and nature. Undoubtedly, there remains much to be learned about coaching practice (good and bad), particularly when related to performance (Lyle, 1999; Cushion & Jones, 2001). However, we believe that by adopting interpretive research approaches to capture its essence *in situ*, the potential exists to further broaden our understanding *of* the activity.

Finally, if future coach education programmes are to improve in terms of individualising the coaching process to the situation, then social contextual factors that influence and impinge upon the lives of the coach and athlete, and the relationship that exists between them, must be taken into account (Potrac & Jones, 1999; Jones, 2000). The existing evidence suggests that there are too many important blank spaces in our current knowledge of coaching. The dynamic, social, interpersonal and situational nature of the coaching process is worthy of more attention.

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