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Coaches' experiences of formal coach education: a critical sociological investigation

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According to recent academic reviews, formal coach education courses are rarely considered important or useful events in a broader coach learning process. At present, there is insufficient research to define the nature and extent of this problem which is likely to become more important under the prevailing governing rationalities of modernisation and professional accreditation. The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to explore coaches' experiences of formal coach education to determine the extent to which they are considered useless and to describe their nature. Neo-Foucauldian concepts, specifically 'governmentality' and 'power/knowledge', were drawn on to interpret data from semi-structured interviews with 12 coaches from a range of sports. The findings suggest that, where courses were governed by prescriptive and rigid rationalities, coaches found them useless; whereas, open and discursive courses, though in the minority, were considered more useful.

Keywords: *Coach education; Sports governing bodies; Governmentality; Foucault; Power; Closed circles*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the relatively unexplored phenomenon of formal coach education in the UK. More specifically, the paper has two central aims: first, to critically engage with the hypothesis that formal coach education courses are 'indoctrinating' learners; and second, to explore the mechanisms through which compliance to prescribed coaching ideas and practices is secured. In doing so, the paper draws on neo-Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and power/knowledge in an attempt to understand the ways in which governing bodies attempt to shape the conduct of sport coaches. Given this interest in the governance of pedagogical practices, it is useful to first locate coach education as one of many diverse responsibilities of sports governing bodies in a political context of increasing modernisation and professionalisation. It is also necessary to preface the study with some general insights and organising principles derived from the literature on coach education and learning.

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Sports policy under 'advanced liberalism'

In the recent literature on sports policy in the UK, a number of authors have discussed the imposition of an extensive programme of modernisation on national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) (Green & Houlihan, 2006; Green, 2007; Bloyce *et al*., 2008). Marking a significant departure from the socialist strategies of large-scale public investment and 'sport for all' in the 1970s and the 'privatisation' and 'managerialism' of the 1980s and early 1990s (Henry, 2001, pp. 72–86; Green, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2006), the New Labour government of the past 13 years has presided over unprecedented investment in sport whilst introducing a vigorous programme of modernisation.

Drawing on neo-Foucauldian writings on governmentality, Green and Houlihan (2006) and Green (2007) characterise New Labour's modernisation agenda as one of a number of self-validating 'rationalities' of advanced liberal governments. From this orientation, government 'seeks not to govern society per se, but to promote individual and institutional conduct that is consistent with government objectives' (Raco & Imrie, 2000). The central features of modernisation, such as audit, public service agreements, target-setting and performance reviews, therefore constitute an attempt to 'govern at a distance' by shaping and guiding the behaviour of subjects to be active in their own self-government (Green, 2007). In this sense, modern NGBs can be conceptualised as 'self-regulated spaces of illusory freedom' wherein professionals are self-disciplined through 'technologies' of strategic alliance, performance indicators and funding triggers (Green, 2007). In practice, government may also play a more direct role in disciplining NGBs, through 'naming and shaming' or funding cuts, should they fail to (or be slow to) introduce such technologies (Green & Houlihan, 2006). In this environment, the responsibility to self-regulate, to audit, to hit targets and trigger funding, to work with partners and to measure performance 'harden into routine and become common sense' (Power, 1997, p. 138).

If this account is taken to be accurate, it represents a radical shift away from the traditional modus operandi of most NGBs. In the first ever government review of sport in the UK—the so-called *Wolfenden report*—it was suggested that 'the autonomy of each [governing body], within its own sphere, is almost a sacred principle' (CCPR, 1960, p. 12). Such a conclusion was probably expected given the relative absence of government involvement prior to the 1970s. However, a similar characterisation was offered 30 years later by Houlihan (1991, p. 116) who noted that NGBs were 'typified by their reliance on voluntary support…and their fierce determination to maintain the lines of demarcation between themselves and other related sports'. More recently, a report on the potential modernisation of NGBs highlighted the lack of 'basic administrative and professional support essential for organisations' illustrating the need for change and reform (Deloitte & Touche, 2003). It is possible, therefore, that NGBs remain somewhat autonomous and resistant to, or unable to implement, the modernisation agenda discussed above.

This is an especially salient point given that the most recent UK policy statement on sport, *Playing to win: a new era for sport* (DCMS, 2008) appears to place *more*

responsibility for the development of community sport at the feet of NGBs. Indeed, the new partnership between government, its agencies (i.e. the sports councils) and NGBs will involve the 'empowerment of NGBs to develop their sports' whilst being 'more accountable for what they are delivering' (DCMS, 2008, p. 13). So, in the new context of sport governance, NGBs 'earn autonomy' (and thus increased public funding) through the creation of 'Whole Sport Plans' which are subject to biannual review and ongoing monitoring and evaluation (DCMS, 2008, p. 15).

In this 'new era for sport', the training of high quality coaches—to drive up participation and improve the quality of experience for participants—sits 'at the heart of' government's plans (DCMS, 2008, p. 15). Indeed, NGBs are now encouraged to subscribe to sports coach UK's coaching framework,[1] a complex series of models and targets designed to support and standardise coach and participant development, if they are to receive funding and official recognition. Here, the normative neo-liberal rationalities and associated technologies of modernisation and professionalisation, as discussed above, create a semi-regulated space which NGBs must negotiate if they wish to 'play the game' and avoid 'disciplinary sanctions' (cf. Green & Houlihan, 2006).

However, the extent to which NGBs (and local level stakeholders) are *really* 'playing the game' remains unclear. Some authors suggest that local stakeholders are perfectly aware of the game they are often reluctantly playing (Bloyce *et al.*, 2008). Others have proposed that national policies are being actively yet covertly resisted at a local level (King, 2009, p. 237). Similarly, in their Foucault-informed study of the professionalisation of coaching, Taylor and Garrett (2010) contend that the 'rigid and inflexible imposed reforms that seek to homogenise coaching practice' are resisted at local level. This may be partly due to the 'socially embedded voluntarism' of coaching in the UK, and partly due to the inherent complexity and variance in the coaching 'profession' (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Whatever the case, the current aspiration to professionalise coaching through technologies of certification, benchmarking standards and formal accreditation (e.g. coaching 'quality marks') appear to be, at best, problematic. In summary, the neo-Foucauldian notion that current 'mentalities' or 'rationalities' of government are taken for granted and 'not open to questioning by practitioners' (Dean, 2010, p. 25) may not be entirely accurate in the present context.

Coach education

The process of learning to coach has been subjected to considerable academic scrutiny in the past 20 years. Some of the broad conclusions that can be drawn from this literature are considered here to better define the precise subject of this paper and to help generate some initial hypotheses concerning the nature of coach education courses.

First, for definitional purposes, 'coach education' can be considered a specific subset of a broader process of 'coach learning' which is likely to encompass a range of

learning experiences (Mallett *et al.*, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2010). Following Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) organising framework, Nelson *et al.* (2006) conceptualise coach learning as potentially formal, non-formal or informal. Under this scheme, coach education, in the sense implied here, falls under the 'formal learning' category and is defined as taking place in an 'institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured education system' (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). Additionally, formal learning may be further sub-categorised on a sliding scale of effectiveness, ranging from genuine 'education' to 'indoctrination' (Cushion *et al.*, 2010).

Indeed, most formal coach education courses could be categorised towards the less effective end of this scale (i.e. as 'training' courses) due to the flawed assumptions, held by NGBs, about the nature of both coaches and coaching (Nelson *et al.*, 2006). It is assumed, for example, that coaches are 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled with technical, tactical and bio-scientific information (Cushion *et al.*, 2003). It follows that coaching is a 'knowable sequence' to be learned by 'mere technicians' who transmit these facts to future generations (Potrac *et al.*, 2002). The model of coach education (or training) that emerges, then, is one of standardised curricula presenting a 'tool box' of professional knowledge and a 'gold standard' model coach which learners are expected to mimic (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Cushion *et al.*, 2010).

Given these insights, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the few consistent and global findings in the coach learning literature is that coaching knowledge and practices, in both elite and non-elite coaches, are derived overwhelmingly from informal and non-formal sources (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Côté, 2006; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Lemyre *et al.*, 2007). Formal coach education, by comparison, plays only a minor role in the wider process of coach development (Gilbert *et al.*, 2006) and is often treated in an instrumental fashion by coaches who rarely learn or implement any new ideas[2] (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Lemyre *et al.*, 2007).

Indeed, there are a range of explanations as to why formal coach education courses are rarely considered important or useful. First, there appears to be a lack of fit between course content and coaches' experiences. This leads to poor motivation as coaches struggle to see the relevance of the course material to the complex and messy reality of their everyday practice (Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Cassidy *et al.*, 2006; Côté, 2006; Vargas-Tonsing, 2007). Second, and in a related sense, it has been argued that course content is often considered either too basic (as in simple drills) or too abstract (as in bio-scientific content) to be used in practice (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Jones *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, even when disappointed with such situations, coaches are unlikely to challenge the status quo in fear of failing the course. Instead they present an 'outward appearance of acceptance' whilst harbouring disagreement with the 'official coaching orientation' (Cushion *et al.*, 2003).

Closed circles

In order to theorise the phenomena potentially at play here, Munz's (1985) concept of 'close circles' may be useful. A closed circle, according to Munz (1985, pp. 132–133), is a social system in which actors pursue knowledge and behave in accordance with that knowledge. Within closed circles the value of an activity is assessed by reference to a central body of knowledge, or core. Similarly, the truth or validity of any idea or statement is tested by reference to the central dogma which may be replaced, arbitrarily, over time. Activity within a closed circle is therefore irrational. That is to say, the core is protected from criticism: it cannot be criticised from within or without. To criticise the core from within would lead to the 'excommunication' of members from the circle (in the unlikely event that it occurred at all, given that it would appear 'common-sense' for those inside); whereas, criticism from outside the circle is not taken seriously on the grounds that those from outside adhere to different, yet equally valid, dogmas. So, 'while any theory inside any system can be true inside that system, it will appear false when compared to the centre of any other system' (Munz, 1985, p. 133). Without criticism, systems become petrified and both knowledge and practice within closed circles is simply reproduced through transmission (or indoctrination) rather than education.[3]

When applied to the present context of coach education, NGBs could be styled as closed circles with a central dogma represented, in this case, by a coaching manual (or curriculum, or 'gold standard' model). As noted above, coach learners are unlikely to question or criticise the status quo, either because it appears irrelevant, or because they fear failing the course (Cushion *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, it is unlikely that NGBs will respond positively to criticism or new ideas from outside (i.e. from other sports or agencies), for such criticism comes from the uninitiated (see Figure 1). This hypothesis, though somewhat stylised, seems consistent with the literature reviewed above and is also supported by the more general literature in coaching. For example, in their study of youth sport coaches in Canada, Lemyre *et al.* (2007) conclude that 'coaches do not interact to share knowledge and discuss common issues' and describe 'cells' of practice wherein powerful individuals constitute the 'nucleus' around which others gather. Similarly, in their excellent ethnography of a professional youth soccer academy, Cushion and Jones (2006) draw on Bourdieu's concepts to describe a 'self-perpetuating habitus' in the 'field': a reference point for coaching behaviour derived from the (often oppressive) methods the coaches were exposed to as players years earlier. This mode of learning via transmission and reproduction is echoed in similar studies (cf. Potrac *et al.*, 2002; Cushion *et al.*, 2006) and illustrates the possibility that coaching and coach education closely follows the dynamics of cultural reproduction as elucidated, for example, by Bourdieu (1990).

Having reviewed the literature on both the context and practice of coach education, some broad yet tentative hypotheses can be framed. First, formal coach education courses appear to be of limited importance and relevance in the wider process of coach learning. Second, although the reasons for this are still unclear, the
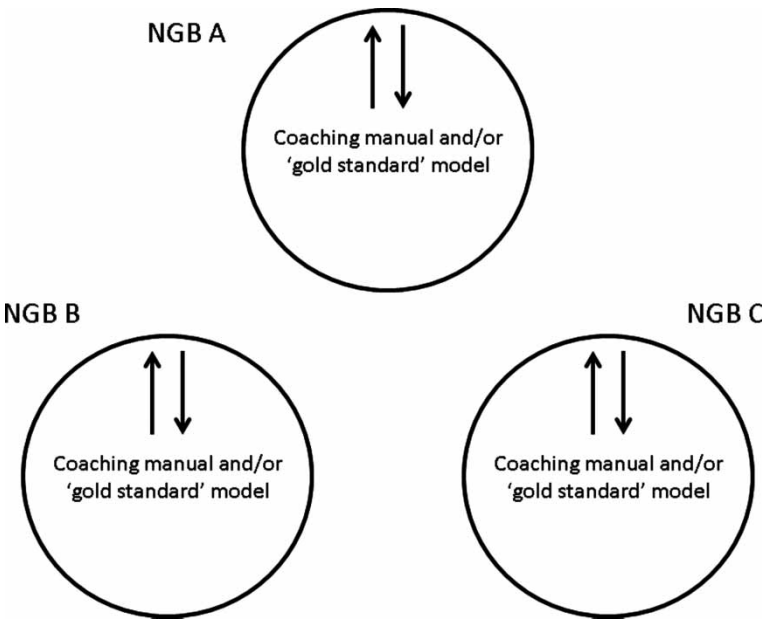
Figure 1. Closed circles in coach education

apparent disconnect between overly technical and rigid curricula and the messy reality of coaching practice render courses largely irrelevant. Third, NGBs and local level stakeholders may be resisting current attempts to professionalise and homogenise coaching, in line with the closed circle hypothesis.

One feature of the research in this field, however, is that academics have been quick (perhaps too quick) to offer solutions to problems that remain poorly understood (cf. McCullick *et al.*, 2005; Cassidy *et al.*, 2006). In Lawson's (1984) terms, academics have perhaps ignored the important process of 'problem-setting' due to a professional pre-occupation with problem-solving (i.e. making premature recommendations for reforming coach education). Indeed, according to a recent systematic review (Cushion *et al.*, 2010), only three studies have attempted, thus far, to investigate the nature of formal education in the UK, none of which draw explicitly on sociological theory to help explain the phenomena they uncover.

The empirical section of this article, therefore, attempts to engage explicitly in a 'problem-setting' agenda (Lawson, 1984) and address this gap in the literature. The empirical study also draws on sociological theory, following Jones (2007), to help describe, in more detail, how coaches experience formal coach education courses.

Method

The 'under-labouring' philosophy of this study was critical rationalism (Popper, 1972; also see Miller, 1994 and Blaikie, 1993, pp. 24–28). From this position, the aim of any investigation is to generate theories that aspire to truth (it is realist) whilst

remaining ever open to improvement (it is also falliblist). Theories, in this view, are solutions to problems and should be subjected to the harshest criticism imaginable by the researcher. Indeed, in response to the classic epistemological question: 'how do you know?' the critical rationalist is likely to respond as follows:

> I do *not* know: my assertion was merely a guess. Never mind the source, or the sources, from which it may spring—there are many possible sources and I may not be aware of half of them; and origins or pedigrees have in any case little bearing upon truth. But if you are interested in the problem which I tried to solve by my tentative assertion, you may help me by criticising it as severely as you can; and if you can design some experimental test which you think might refute my assertion, I shall gladly, and to the best of my powers, help you refute it. (Popper, 1972, p. 27)

So, a critical rationalist study begins with the framing of a problem, or a 'problem situation', to which a tentative solution (or, more likely, a set of possible competing solutions) is proposed (Popper, 1972, p. 222). Moreover, it is important that problems and associated solutions (or theories) are expressed with the highest degree of clarity so as to increase their 'testability' (Popper, 1972, p. 256). Strictly speaking, it does not matter where these tentative solutions come from (though in practice they are usually derived from theories in the relevant literature). What *does* matter, rather, is what you do with them. Again, as noted above, a critical rationalist attempts to criticise and refute her hypotheses. Those hypotheses which survive criticism are maintained tentatively until a new and more severe criticism can be mobilised; whilst those which are effectively criticised are either set aside for good or modified to incorporate the criticism.[4] Under this view of social science—where we learn from error, progressing from one problem to problems (and theories) of increasing depth and fertility—the clarification of the problem is of primary importance.

The problem situation

Clarifying a problem situation involves 'picking up and trying to continue a line of inquiry which has a whole background or tradition behind it' and plainly recognises that 'we cannot start afresh' (Popper, 1972, p. 129). Additionally, in sport and physical education, 'problem-setting' should recognise that problems often represent 'contradictions in institutional structures' (e.g. NGBs failing to meet the expectations of coaches) and thus, necessitate sociological investigation (Lawson, 1984). It was, of course, the aim of the previous sections of this paper to elucidate this problem situation, but the following statements summarise both the general and specific problems steering the empirical part of the study.

General problem. Why aren't formal coach education courses considered useful by coaches? (this seems to be a consistent finding from the nascent literature in the UK and Canada).

Hypothesis (closed circles). The knowledge and methods formal courses propound are too rigid and insensitive to coaches' (often messy) experiences. Moreover, they

become dogmatic and petrified because they are protected from criticism from within and without.

New substantive questions

(1) Does this hypothesis hold across different sports and at different levels of experience?

(2) If and where it does hold, what are the specific social mechanisms through which dogma is protected and practices perpetuated?

As noted above, implicit in the notion of a problem situation—and inherent in the critical rationalist position—is the understanding that researchers bring 'theoretical baggage' with them when they embark on an investigation. Or, in Lawson's (1984) terms, 'problem-setting is a value-laden process'. Indeed, contrary to all those who claim to be doing 'inductive' studies, or conducting 'inductive content analysis' (i.e. over half of the studies reviewed by Cushion *et al.*, 2010) critical rationalists argue that induction is not possible; it is an optical illusion (Popper, 1972, p. 46; Miller, 1994, pp. 1–6). Instead, researchers should make explicit the 'sensitising concepts' that guide them in asking certain questions of, and looking for certain issues and processes in, their data (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006, pp. 16–17). As Wolcott (2001) avers, 'empty-headedness is not the same as open-mindedness'.

Sensitising concepts

In addition to the insights from the substantive literature and Munz's (1985) theory of closed circles, the related neo-Foucauldian concepts of 'governmentality' and 'power/knowledge' were the main sensitising concepts informing the empirical part of this study.

For Foucault, studies in governmentality should be concerned not with 'the best' form of government, but with 'how' people are governed (Foucault, 1991). In this sense, he was a sociologist first and a philosopher second. The basic focus of a neo-Foucauldian study of governmentality, therefore, is an analysis of 'how governing organisations attempt to *shape* rational human conduct' (Dean, 2010, p. 18). Governing, in this sense, also entails 'self government', or an analysis of how the governors convince the governed to govern themselves. More specifically, it is argued that in studying 'the art of government' our gaze should fall on what Foucault called 'regimes of practices': the 'organised practices through which we are governed and through which we govern ourselves' (Dean, 2010, p. 28). Such regimes are normally institutionalised and are informed and reshaped by, but also produce, forms of knowledge and truth (or episteme[5]). It is here where Foucault's notion of 'power/knowledge' becomes important. Power/knowledge implies that those with power maintain their positions as 'professional and authoritative agents of

expertise' by defining the 'techniques, practices and rationalities that shape the conduct of the governed' (Dean, 2010, pp. 32 & 40). Thus, in a closed circle-style of reasoning, those with knowledge secure power which they use to define (or reinforce) the knowledge that shapes the 'rational' (often subordinate) conduct of the relatively powerless. In this sense, power may have both productive and disciplinary potential (Foucault, 1978, p. 95).

At a micro level of analysis, Foucault's work 'purports to address the rich topic of the mechanisms by which the compliance of willing subjects to domination is secured' (Lukes, 2005, p. 88). As such, these concepts may be useful in looking for answers to the second substantive question posed above. More specifically, Foucault directs us to focus on 'the microphysics of power' (Foucault, 1995, p. 139) or power 'in its capillary forms of existence' (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). That is to say, in trying to understand mechanisms of control and domination, as in the present case, the search must begin with the hidden, least visible forms of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 86). A neo-Foucauldian analysis of coach education might therefore ask: by what means, mechanisms, technologies and rituals is the authority of coach educators (and NGBs) constituted, and rule (over coaches) accomplished? (Dean, 2010, p. 42). Or, put another way, if formal coach education courses are understood as 'regimes of practices', an 'analytics of government' should seek to ask: (1) How NGBs and coach educators produce knowledge or 'truth'; (2) How this knowledge informs 'practical rationality' about specific ways of acting (i.e. 'expertise' and 'know-how') in coaching; and (3) How these practices form self-governing subjects (or 'docile bodies') who are unable to question the status quo (Dean, 2010, p. 33).

Sample

In order to answer the substantive questions posed above (and to subject the closed circle hypothesis to criticism), interviews were convened with coaches who had recently completed formal coach education courses in the UK (i.e. within the previous two years). Due to the relative dearth of literature in this area (cf. Nash & Sproule, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2010; Taylor & Garratt, 2010) coaches were sampled purposively based on a desire to canvass a wide range of experiences. In this sense, it was necessary to sample male and female coaches from a range of individual and team sports and with different levels of experience. Table 1 describes the sample of the study.

Some of the 12 participants had undertaken qualifications in more than one sport and often at different levels. During the interviews, coaches were encouraged to reflect comparatively on different experiences if they felt it was relevant.

Data collection

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews (Silverman, 2006, p. 113) were conducted with the 12 coaches, each lasting between 30 and 50 minutes, and recorded using a

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Sex	Male = 8; Female = 4	
Age	Mean = 26.3 years ± 6	
Sport and level[a]	Individual sports	Badminton (L1)
		Orienteering (L2, L3)
		Swimming (L1, L2)
		Gymnastics (L1, L2)
		Trampolining (L2)
		Athletics (L1)
	Team sports	Football (L1, L2, L3)
		Volleyball (L1)
		Basketball (L3)
		Netball (L2)
		Cricket (L2)
		Rugby (L1, L2)

Notes: [a]In the UK, coaching awards range from level 1 (lowest) to level 4 (highest). All but one of the courses that the coaches in the sample had undertaken were pre-UK Coaching Certificate (the new model that many NGBs are currently introducing).

digital voice recorder. The interviews began with the interviewer explaining both the general problem and the closed circle hypothesis described above. The participants were then asked to reflect on the extent to which the hypothesis was consistent with their experience of formal coach education courses. Thereafter, the interviews followed a common core structure (below) but deviated depending on the particular experience of the coach:

(1) To what extent did you feel able to question the status quo (i.e. a particular way of coaching, or a 'gold standard' model)?

(2) Can you think of examples of situations—perhaps very subtle things—that illustrate the general approach to coach education (i.e. closed or open)?

(3) How did the mode of delivery impact on how useful you found the course?

Data analysis

The audio files were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and analysed using deductive content analysis techniques (Silverman, 2006, p. 280) drawing on the theories and concepts outlined above. More specifically, the aim of the analysis was to *criticise* the closed circle hypothesis of coach education—in the spirit of critical rationalism—and to attempt to identify, using the neo-Foucauldian concepts, the 'microphysics' of power relations, specific 'rationalities' underpinning coach education and the shaping influence of 'expert knowledge' in securing the willing

compliance of coaches to institutional practices. It is important to note, however, that there are also limits to the efficacy and range of Foucault's ontology and concepts which are not fixed, but flexible and open to modification. Indeed, it has been argued that:

> Studying governmentality is also about the production of new concepts...[which] multiplies possibilities of analysis.... Concepts of this type are never owned...[and] become public in such a way that their *proper* use can never be dictated (emphasis added). (Dean, 2010, p. 13)

As such, the neo-Foucauldian framework presented a general, flexible yet essentially incomplete web of ideas against which the data were interpreted. In short, it did not preclude the generation of novel and 'grounded' concepts to help explain specific coach education phenomena.

Discussion

By way of overview, and in response to the first substantive question posed above, Figure 2 maps individual coach education courses on continua of openness and usefulness. Clearly, the closed circle hypothesis does *not* hold in all cases, especially where NGBs are relatively small (indicated by public funding). However, the majority of the courses run by the larger, better established NGBs did fit the hypothesised 'mould' described in the literature. Moreover, there was almost complete consensus over the issue of usefulness. That is to say, where coaches experienced closed circle-style courses they invariably classed them as useless (and vice versa).
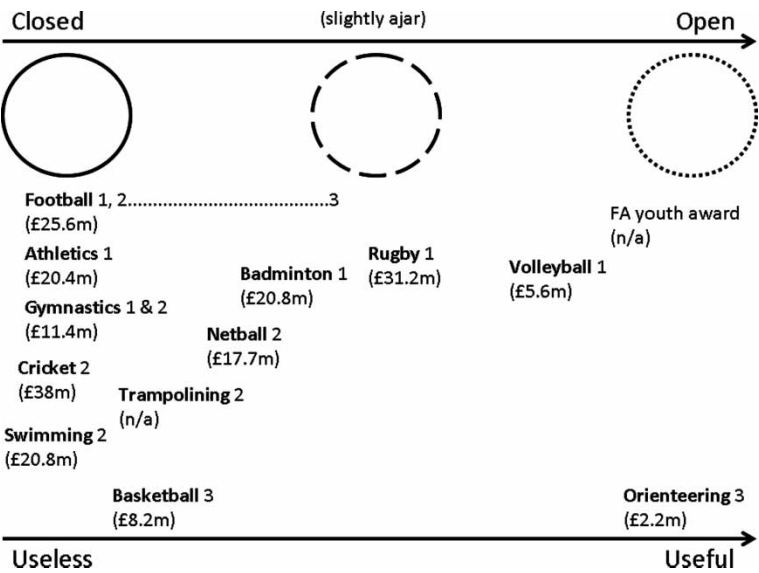

Figure 2. Coach education courses mapped by openness and usefulness (public funding for each NGB between 2008 and 2012 is indicated in brackets)

The smaller NGBs, specifically orienteering and volleyball, clearly endorsed a more liberal and discursive philosophy. For example, in one course, a coach educator told the coaches to 'go away and see what you're comfortable doing; use your own methods to teach' (Robbie, Volleyball L1). Thereafter, these courses encouraged genuine open discussion among the participants, allowing the coaches to compare the merits of using different coaching styles and activities:

> [The coach educator] worked with a small unit—maybe 5 or 6—all coming in with a variety of experiences, and he wanted to open it up and share those experiences and talk about styles of coaching and practices and techniques that were useful, looking at ideas for drills for instance. So he gave us one or two ideas but he then said 'come on, let's share our experiences' and err... 'You guys set up the drills; and let's review them and talk about what worked and what didn't'. (Ben, Orienteering L3)

Though rare, such approaches—where coaches are encouraged to experiment and ask questions; to share and cooperate; to argue with one another and even openly disagree—appear to provide more comfortable and valuable learning experiences (cf. McCullick *et al.*, 2005; Cassidy *et al.*, 2006; Côtè, 2006). Three of the courses described by coaches *aspired* to this type of delivery but, for reasons discussed below, fell short of true open discussion. For example, one coach explained how, in a rugby union course, they had been 'forced to adopt one of three ways of coaching' which, while still restrictive, he considered 'better than being shown just one way, like in football' (Barry, Rugby Union L1). Another example of this partial or 'tokenistic' openness was offered by Lyle, a level 3 football coach, who discussed the limited elbow room available during the course:

> There's always that sequence you have to follow, which I wouldn't follow to be honest when I coach...So there was still that element of 'this is how you do it', but like I say there was a little bit more flexibility: you could ask questions and suggest things.

The closed circle-style courses (i.e. 10 of the 16 courses mapped in Figure 2), by contrast, tended to be characterised as 'by the book', 'formulaic', 'dogmatic' and presenting a 'single style' or 'model' which had to be 'accepted without discussion'. As one female swimming coach explained:

> We were given a model—this is how a swimming session should be coached—and we weren't given any flexibility in that...even the way you taught the techniques...it was very strict. He actually had us lined up on poolside doing the stroke and he was watching us and commenting if we got anything wrong. (Hayley, Swimming L2)

Such experiences were common among the coaches and were often accompanied by feelings of frustration, exasperation, resignation and, in extreme cases, fear and self-doubt. The enduring reaction of most coaches experiencing such courses, however, was the feeling of 'jumping through hoops'. Frank, 26-year-old football coach, explained that 'the level 1 course is easy to pass if you just read the script, but for me that defeats the object of why you're doing it'. Similarly, in gymnastics, one female coach lamented that:

> ...it's not a real-life situation; it doesn't allow for developing alternative philosophies towards coaching; it's just replicating the norm... The assessment is just a jumping through hoops exercise. (Evelyn, Gymnastics L1)

Such sentiments might be expected in relation to level 1 course as they are typically completed over a single weekend. However, even high level qualifications, often featuring extended blocks of delivery and reflective practice, received similar reports. Lyle, a level 3 football coach, conceded that 'ultimately for me it's just moving up the ladder; I wouldn't say it impacted on my coaching that greatly'. Equally, when reflecting on her level 2 course, Carrie, a county-level netball coach, considered what she 'learned from the experiences of the other attendees, rather than the people who were delivering the course' the most valuable element.

Beyond the initial descriptions of largely useless closed-style courses, coaches were asked to reflect in more detail on the pedagogical 'atmosphere' created by coach educators. In doing so, coaches alluded to a subtle yet coherent set of 'rationalities', techniques and institutional practices that appeared to underpin the closed circle-style model of coach education (thus, helping to answer the second substantive research question).

Rationalities in coach education

From a neo-Foucauldian perspective, closed-style courses appeared to be bound by a series of four interrelated 'rationalities', or 'styles of reasoning embodied in governing practices' (Lukes, 2005, p. 96). The first and most general of the four rationalities was labelled 'rites of passage' to reflect the ritualistic and stratified nature of this style of coach education. In this sense, the central assumption is that coaches acquire knowledge and status as they graduate from one 'level' to the next on the route to 'enlightenment'. This rationality was elucidated by Barry, a sports science student who had recently attended a level 1 athletics coach education event:

> We were at this stadium together with a bunch of level 2 coaches. Then this level 2 guy said to us: 'right, all you level 2 guys come over here, the level 1 guys have got to do their stuff first and they might be able to catch us up one day'... And it was a bit like 'we're over here with all the precious knowledge which you guys can't have for the time being because you're clearly not clever enough because you've only just started your level 1'.

The coaching 'rites of passage' also entailed the negotiation of expert gatekeepers in order for a coach to continue their progression, especially through higher level qualifications. This reasoning, and its impact on the potential for criticism, was articulated by Lyle:

> ...to move onto you're 'A' licence [level 4] you've either got to be working in a [professional] club or get an endorsement from an educator... So if you start questioning or defying the [coach] educator time and time again, if you want to move onto the UEFA 'A', then you're going to struggle. (Lyle, Football L3)

Continuing on the quasi-religious theme, the 'rites of passage' were enshrined in 'sacred texts', the blind adherence to which formed the second rationality. Here, coaches often discussed the central role played by 'the manual' or 'the textbook' which was followed, in many cases, 'like a recipe' (Evelyn, Gymnastics L1). In one lucid example, Robbie, a level 1 swimming coach, explained how he was made to coach 'by the book', against his better judgement:

> It seems to be in the 'bible' that you have to stand up. It's set in stone... You know, if you ever bend down: (gestures hand slapping) 'STAND UP!' And that was her approach, but it was set by the governing body.

'Sacred texts', therefore, prescribed and justified coaching methods, model techniques and practices, but were largely ignored by coaches following completion.

The third and fourth rationalities were closely related and almost ubiquitous in the descriptions of closed-style courses. 'Instrumental design' was a characteristic discussed by most coaches who drew analogies with 'driving tests' and 'being coached to pass a GCSE'. In this sense, courses were driven by assessment: all the coaches had to do was to coach 'by the book' and pass the course. So, when coaches ventured 'off script' they were quickly reprimanded, as Frank explained:

> ...in [the practice assessment] we came up with our own progression and he shot us down (laughs). He just said 'don't change it from the book'. He didn't say it was a bad idea, he just said 'this is what the FA wants you to do; don't change it'. (Frank, Football L1)

In a related sense, coaches also made reference to an ever-present sense of 'time crunch' which served to prevent any extended discussion. That is to say, on the odd occasions where opportunities for discussion were created, coach educators 'didn't give it a chance' (Barry, Rugby L1); coaches were typically allowed only two or three minutes of discussion before being 'moved onto the next thing' (Max, Football L2). This relationship between the rationalities of 'instrumental design' and 'time crunch' was outlined clearly by Max:

> It's quite severely time-framed...and if time is short you put all your focus on learning what they want you to reproduce in the assessment, thereby not having much time to be creative or think outside the box. You've got to make sure—rule number one—that you pass. (Max, Football L2)

Power and expert knowledge

Within this tight and constraining mesh of rationalities, coach educators—the authoritative agents of expertise—employed a range of techniques to (re)produce knowledge and protect their positions of power. First, authority was established, usually through reference to experience and status. As Hayley explained:

> ...it was the constant reminder of his years of experience and years in the job that was drip-fed into the conversation...[It] served as a reminder that that he had the experience; he had the knowledge. Therefore there was no need to question it. (Hayley, Swimming L2)

Such practices served to establish dominant-subordinate power relations which were described by coaches as 'paternalistic' where they felt they were being 'treated like children or like players' (Lyle, Football L2). In order to reinforce these relations, coach educators drew on the technique of 'deifying knowledge', rendering unassailable the ideas and practices they were presenting. This practice was discussed by four of the coaches but was characterised best by Craig:

> They constantly referred to 'when they were working with such and such a player' and 'when they were working with such and such a club' and erm…you feel they were bring them in because they feel their experience outweighs your own and undermines your own way of coaching. (Craig, Basketball L3)

When coaches attempted to question this knowledge and the associated practices, questions were either bluntly 'shot down' or countered with the more subtle response: 'that's interesting *but*…'. This technique characterised a sophisticated attempt to 'pay lip service to questions' (Evelyn, Gymnastics L1) whilst simultaneously drawing attention back to the orthodoxy, as Lyle explained:

> …they'll always say 'that's a good idea. I really like that *but*…' Then they'll take it back to what they know. So there is that chance to sort of debate, but it's not real. It's artificial. It's for show. There's still that underlying feeling that their way is still the best way to do it and we accept that because we want to pass the course. (Lyle, Football L3).

Moreover, with repetition, this technique of 'pretending to take questions on board before returning to the same tracks' resulted in coaches 'subconsciously' declining to ask further questions, eventually falling into line and 'singing from the same song-sheet' (Max, Football L2).

Self-discipline and docile bodies

As noted earlier, a central assumption of governmentality studies is that institutional rationalities and technologies, paired with the disciplinary practices of knowledge-able experts, shape the conduct of the governed, convincing them to govern themselves. In short, the end of governance in advanced liberal societies is the production of what Foucault called 'docile bodies' or subjects who 'act as their own overseers' (Lukes, 2005, p. 106). Acquiescence to authority was certainly a posture common among coaches on closed-style courses, though often only for the duration of the course (in this sense, the findings are consistent with Cushion *et al.*, 2003).

For some participants, the possibility of questioning the dominant practices and knowledge of the NGB simply never occurred to them. Often these situations arose where coaches were inexperienced, as Robbie, a level 1 coach, explained:

> Well, if your knowledge is lacking you're more likely to… take a level 3 coach's word for it. If they come across as having knowledge, you'd *assume* they're correct.

In such cases, the 'assumed correctness' of coach educators was partly a product of the above rationalities and practices, but also partly due to the self-doubt of the

participants. The more interesting cases of 'docile bodies', however, were those where participants were more experienced and, arguably, in a better position to criticise the ideas being presented. One lucid example was offered by Max:

> There were rumblings of discontent between people: asking each other 'why are we doing it like this? Why don't we do it like that?' But I don't think anyone asked the coach educator himself. [Interviewer] *And why do you think that was?* I don't know really…Maybe we felt that what he said goes and it's not our place the question it. (Max, Football L2)

Strikingly similar examples were offered by others. First, and also on a level 2 football course, Lyle described a situation where other learners approached him saying 'I dare not question what [the coach educator] is saying, even though I don't agree with it'. Such silent or whispered protests also occurred on a level 2 netball course, as Carrie elaborated:

> The attendees I don't think felt comfortable bringing that stuff up… I don't think their characters were strong enough to question what was being taught. But they *did* want to question… because, in groups, they thought it should have been done in a different way, but they didn't want to say that.

Two levels of 'docility' might therefore be distinguished: the first more complete and underpinned partly by self-doubt; the second more precarious, yet sufficiently efficacious to prevent coaches from explicitly criticising the status quo (even when they wanted to).

However, consistent with Foucault's concept of power, which may have both productive and disciplinary potential, docile bodies may be 'subjected and used' but also 'transformed and improved' (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). Indeed, disciplinary practices 'establish in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination' (Foucault, 1995, p. 138). It should not be assumed, therefore, that coaches are rendered *completely* docile by disciplinary rationalities, technologies and practices. Rather, the concept of docility implies something more sophisticated: that disciplinary practices empower and increase capacity (in coaching), whilst simultaneously reversing the relation of power to one of strict subjection (to the methods prescribed by the NGB). In this sense, a number of the coaches found certain practices useful and enabling; whilst others repeatedly implied that they would deviate from the prescribed methods once the course had ended, indicating only a temporary docility. This point has been made well by others recently—especially in Chase's (2006) study of female rugby players—but remains an enigmatic idea in the nascent sociology of coaching literature (cf. Denison, 2007; Cassidy *et al.*, 2009, pp. 182–186).

Conclusion

A common thread uniting critical sociological approaches to enquiry—neo-Marxist, Feminist, Foucauldian, those drawing on Bourdieu etc.—is a concern with power and a commitment to reveal mechanisms of domination (Giulianotti, 2005). And

although theoretical approaches differ in their conceptions of power (Lukes, 2005), a consistent insight is that power and visibility are inversely related, as the juxtaposition of comments below hopefully demonstrates:

> The transformative action [of symbolic violence] is all the more powerful because it is for the most part exerted invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarisation with a symbolically structured physical world and early, prolonged experience of interactions informed by the structures of domination (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 37–38).

> Power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms (Foucault, 1978, p. 86).

> The effectiveness of power is enhanced by being disguised or rendered invisible, by 'naturalisation' (i.e. through acceptance of conventions), and by 'misrecognition' of its sources and modes of operation. (Lukes, 2005, p. 141)

It is by inverting this relationship, then, that critical sociologists may contest and reduce the effectiveness of uneven, institutionalised power relations. Or, in other words, by rendering the states and mechanisms of domination *more* visible, they become *less* effective. In this sense, the neo-Foucauldian project is essentially concerned with reducing the 'naturalness' or 'taken-for-granted' character of how things are done; it is about 'revealing domination and inspecting its origins'; and it should 'render practices of government problematic, showing that things might be different from the way they are' (Dean, 2010, p. 50; also see Oksala, 2007, p. 87).

Following this tradition, this study sought to illuminate the shadowy 'regime' of formal coach education and criticise the closed circle hypothesis drawn from the nascent literature in the field. In the majority of cases the neo-Foucauldian analysis revealed a series of rationalities, (re)produced by 'authoritative agents' who, through subtle disciplinary practices, produced 'docile bodies': coaches who felt unable to resist the dominant discourse. However, it was also clear that the closed circle hypothesis did *not* hold in all cases, especially where NGBs are small. This may be due to an absence of tradition in coach education in such sports, or they may simply be isolated cases.

Whatever the case, future studies could identify 'deviant cases'—courses that do not follow the prevailing closed circle rationalities—and attempt to understand *why* they deviate or, more specifically, to map the conditions that make deviation possible. Concurrently, future research may also attempt to follow in the tradition of critical sociology, drawing on the insights of Foucault, Gramsci or Bourdieu (or others) to further reveal (and challenge) the still largely hidden practices of formal coach education. Such studies would be especially important in the macro-political context of advanced liberalism and the recent extension of neo-liberal rationalities (i.e. modernisation and professionalisation) to the previously autonomous worlds of NGBs and coach education.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Sport coach UK is the brand name for the National Coaching Foundation. They currently work with 31 recognised NGBs in the strategic implementation of a UK Coaching Framework: a common template for coach education, professional regulation and coach and participant development pathways. They also commission and conduct research on coach education, participant development and monitoring of their policies.
2. This is a significant issue, especially if one considers that level 1 coach education courses in the UK currently cost between £150 and £400.
3. Academic readers will perhaps recognise Kuhn's (1962) historical account of scientific practice here—of normal science practiced in incommensurable paradigms punctuated by infrequent and irrational revolutions—and perhaps also Foucault's (1989) account of historical epochs, each governed by a discrete *episteme*. However, the concept of close circles is an abstraction from the ideas of these and many similar thinkers, from Voltaire to Wittgenstein (Munz, 1985, p. 145). As such, it may be considered a more valid account of states of affairs as the same idea has been proffered by historians, philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists variously since the eighteenth century.
4. Space does not permit a full discussion of critical rationalism here. However, for interested readers, extended discussion of critical rationalism as a methodological guide in the social sciences (entailing multiple criticisms and ripostes) can be found in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970), Schilpp (1974) and Blaikie (1993, pp. 104–110).
5. In the original Greek, at least since Aristotle, *episteme* meant certain, essential and demonstrable knowledge—or, more precisely, unquestionable or dogmatic knowledge—to be contrasted with mere opinion (or *doxa*) (Popper, 2001, pp. 1–5).

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