# Chapter 2
# Coaching in the Sport Domain: Definitions and Conceptualisations

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**Abstract** This chapter explores the definitions and meanings attached to sport coaching. It does not privilege any particular conceptualisation of sport coaching but reflects on how these should be interpreted. The chapter begins with an argument that sport coaching achieves its social significance from an association with particular forms of sport. This is followed by an acknowledgement that the term sport coaching acts as a 'referent' for an individual's identity, a role or occupation, an intervention process, or the social space occupied by the individuals, institutions, behaviours and practices that constitute the purposes, actions and understandings associated with sport coaching. Emphasis is placed on the process of intervention and the need for boundary markers for the coaching process. Following an overview of different discipline-led conceptualisations, the chapter explores the implications of these and presents a personal interpretation of how coaching may be conceptualised. This adopts a pragmatic approach to the coach's capacity to operationalise practice and embraces an optimistic view of the coach's resources. Stress is placed on the lack of integration of differing perspectives, but it is argued that a fuller account and understanding of sport coaching emerges from an aggregation of these diverse priorities in capturing and representing sport coaching.

**Keywords** Sport coaching · Conceptualisation · Intervention · Pragmatism · Coaching process

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## Coaching in the Sport Domain: Definitions and Conceptualisations

In this chapter, I explore definitions and conceptualisations attached to sport coaching. There are excellent treatments of the meanings attached to sport coaching in texts such as North (2017), Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2016) and Lyle and Cushion (2017), overviews such as Purdy (2018), and a recent account of the historical evolution of associated concepts in Lyle (2018a). This is not a review of literature. There would be limited value in merely rehearsing these very detailed and closely argued accounts, or to do justice to their nuanced arguments. It would impossible, and perhaps counter productive, to attempt merely to provide a synthesis of such work. As will be argued throughout the chapter, it would be inappropriate simply to create a composite or integrated account that satisfies all of the various perspectives on sport coaching and how it has been represented, interpreted and understood. Rather, the purpose of the chapter is to provide a critical reflection on sport coaching and, thereby, to invite the reader to appreciate how the term is used in the academic literature. The outcome should be a framework of critical thinking that will enable students of coaching science to approach the literature with a more insightful, questioning and less-accepting lens.

The basic question is 'what constitutes sport coaching and what meanings are attached to this term?' The term (although usually referred to as sports coaching, simply through historical convention) is in common usage, but it is inappropriate that the meanings implied, consciously or unconsciously, by what is such a wide-spread and varied practice in sport should be used indiscriminately or become taken-for-granted—or be without a considered foundation that renders practical issues, such as coach education, deployment, development strategies or professionalisation, less effective. The nature and substance of our conceptualisations impact on policy and practice. Language is important; it is through the use of language and how it is shared that meaning is socially constructed. In other words, this chapter is not yet another defence of a definition sport coaching but about creating a thinking tool with which to appraise critically any particular conceptualisation of the term.

We might start by asking why exploring definitions and conceptualisations is important. A privilege of academia is that it provides time and opportunity to think about what things are, and what they mean, and how these objects and ideas influence the understandings and actions of other groups—governmental agencies, policy makers, educationalists, practitioners and the public. In many respects, this is one of the most important roles that academia performs for society; that is, exploring and formalising meanings to understand what work they do and what implications they have. Others, particularly practitioners, whilst busy elsewhere, may not have time and the resources for this essential task. The problem that academics have, therefore, is that their scholastic endeavours are not obviously embraced by other groups in society. This is a problem of academic knowledge production, translation and use and is well recognised (Lyle, 2018b). Nevertheless, it would also do a disservice to the influence of academia to suggest that the ideas generated have not

had some influence on coaching policy, coach education and development and indeed on practice, and there are numerous examples of this (North, 2017). Thus, articulating academic ideas remains important.

A further problem is that, as a relatively new area of academic enquiry, perhaps 40 years old at most, scholarly work in sport coaching is still at a relatively pre-paradigmatic stage. We have witnessed attempts by academics to understand sport coaching through behaviours, cognitions, context, and its social and relationship features. These different perspectives on sport coaching provide very valuable insights. However, as result of both disciplinary politics and problems in attempting to resolve apparently incompatible philosophical and methodological choices, there also appears to be conflict and contestation about what 'position' is best. It is inevitable then, that, as academic research matures, it seeks to explore what are in effect definitional and conceptual disagreements, by finding tools that provide additional (and I would argue, important) insights into the debate. It may seem an unnecessary task to conceptualise sport coaching when the practice is evident in our everyday lives. However, this generates a set of ideas that represent sport coaching; an explanation for what we see, experience and imagine. An effective conceptualisation will symbolise the practice of coaching, embracing its variety of purpose, intention and character. In turn, this allows us to address such questions as: what is and isn't coaching, what is its purpose, and what are its characteristic attributes? It is important to remember, however, that any conceptualisation will be contested; that is, it is open to challenge for the extent to which it is considered to represent sport coaching appropriately. The meanings implicit in such a set of ideas are a matter of interpretation, and this interpretation is dependent on more fundamental understandings that we hold about how best to explain social phenomena and human behaviour.

## The Sport in Sport Coaching

Perhaps surprisingly, I begin, not with the term 'coaching', but with the word 'sport'. I would contend that many otherwise laudable attempts to define or circumscribe sport coaching focus on the 'coaching' element and pay insufficient attention to its siting in the sport context. There are many definitions of sport (Lagaert & Roose, 2016); a stricter, narrower definition characterises sport as an institutionalised (and culturally specific) form of physical activity, in which competition outcomes are determined by motor skills and there are clear rules of play. This is evident in traditional sports such as volleyball, athletics, kabaddi or hockey, but may also apply to adventure sports, and emerging 'sports' such as korfball, dodgeball, pickleball, and baton twirling (Liponski, 2003). There are also more general definitions that embrace almost all forms of physical activity and fitness (Council of Europe, 2002). However, sport also has many 'sport forms' in addition to competition performance itself, e.g. training/practice, rallying, casual play or amended games. Although, for many, it is not difficult to recognise sport from other forms

of activity, there are 'grey areas' in relation to purpose and activity. Sport may be used for specific purposes, e.g. physical education in schools. There is also some confusion when truncated forms of sport, i.e. simply teaching basic skills in isolation from competition, is perceived to be a 'means to an end' in terms of subsequent leisure participation, or other societal or individual benefits.

It is reasonable to ask what this has to do with our definition and meaning of sport coaching. The basis of my argument is that there is a close relationship between meaning and context in terms of both discourse construction (how we use the term and what we relate it to) and practice (which activities we include and which we exclude). Not every manifestation of sport-related activity requires the same form of sport leadership; it is not sufficient to say that there is a basic or fundamental process of improving sport-related proficiency. Context and purpose become significant. Not all forms of sport, particularly recreational activity, will be coach-dependent. However, if we accept that sport coaching has a ubiquitous and impactful association with much of sport participation, albeit in domain-specific practices, it follows that the social significance of sport coaching is a reflection of the significance accorded to sport itself. Participation in sport is associated with health and well-being, with economic benefits, with a sense of identity from vicarious association with professional sport or national teams, with social advancement, with cultural exchange, with personal and esteem, with inculcating values in young people, and with the potential for personal development and self-fulfilment. Insofar as sport coaching contributes to the achievement of these benefits, it is a matter of some significance that we understand its contribution and place in the social world. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that, given its social significance, sport coaching remains (in the UK) a largely voluntary activity and a 'hidden profession' (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Part of understanding why this might be so is to explore and appreciate the meaning attached to sport coaching and how it is conceptualised.

Having established that sport coaches and sport coaching achieve their social significance from their association with sport, indeed, it might be argued that this is the defining attribute, it is hardly surprising that the variety of coaching roles and practices reflects the similarly diverse and distinctive provision of sport in all its richness. Without wishing to pre-empt my subsequent argument, this form of leadership will range from intermittent or short-term voluntary activity with young children, in resource-poor conditions, to resource-rich professional employment with Olympic performers. This may prompt you to ask whether we should attempt to establish any boundaries to what we mean by sport coaching. An acknowledgement of the environment in which coaches operate, and the range of predispositions and motivations of the sport participants, in addition to 'progress and refinement' in coaching practice, highlights the issue of whether any conceptualisation of sport coaching is time-and culture-bound. The answer is that any conceptualisation, whether popular or academic, will have antecedents and there will be a historicity attached to any social practice. We recognise that sport coaching has evolved over time and the traditional practices in, for example, soccer, rugby union and cricket in the UK, have evolved coaching roles, and associated meanings and mores, that reflect the social and sub-cultural conditions of the time, and become, to some extent

and for some time, taken-for-granted. Similarly, developments in the organisation and administration of sport, along with policy and resource commitments, impact on coaching as a 'profession' (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; North, Piggott, Lara-Bercial, Abraham, & Muir, 2018). Nevertheless, I will argue that there is an underlying conceptualisation of coaching that helps us to make sense of what we currently experience as sport coaches. It has to be acknowledged that this is shaped by our own personal resources.

## Preparing the Ground for a Definition

One of the traditional starting points is to offer a definition of sport coaching. Definitions are intended to bring clarity to how we think of the object in question; how to distinguish it from other objects and identify what meaning might be attached to it. Good practice suggests that the definition should identify the essence of the object but with sufficient elaboration to distinguish it from other similar objects. This is a demanding 'ask', for what are commonly relatively short, pithy statements. A basic familiarity with the academic literature in this field will establish that there are many, many definitions of sport coaching—or a recognition that the task is challenging (Horton, 2015). How can this be? One answer lies in the distinction between a narrow account of the essence of sport coaching—what it 'is'—and an elaboration that either adds a helpful contextual reference or defines what the writer thinks it 'should be' (Côté, Erickson, & Duffy, 2007). A simple definition of sport coaching would be 'a form of sport leadership', but this is circular and does not provide any clarity about what that 'form' might be. It is also about the role, rather than the process. Another simple statement such as, 'a process of improving sports performance', is process-orientated but immediately raises questions about what is meant by 'process', or 'performance', and implies that it is only to be considered coaching if 'improvement' is the aim.

To illustrate this further, I have selected a definition about which I am broadly supportive. A recent position statement (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, p. 11) defines sport coaching as "a process of guided improvement and development in a single sport and at identifiable stages of development". The statement is process orientated but tells us nothing about what constitutes an 'acceptable' or characteristic process. To what does 'development' refer? We might understand the intention in the term 'guided', but does it have any boundaries? Why mention 'at identifiable stages of development'—what does this add? Overall, does this definition distinguish the process from other similar processes; does it help us to understand what it is not? There is a further elaboration of the definition in the above source, which stresses the "ongoing nurturing and education support of participants". This has clearly moved from 'what is' to 'what should be'. My simple message, through this illustration, is that it is very difficult to provide sufficient clarity to establish 'difference and specificity', and that how we conceive of a phenomenon, a social practice, is a reflection of a theoretical, conceptual or philosophical stance.

We need to move beyond mere definitions to capture, in much greater detail, the essence of sport coaching. This begins by acknowledging that the term sport coaching acts as a 'referent' for a number of social phenomena. In other words, in common usage, the use of the term may be associated with an individual's identity, a role or occupation, with an intervention process, or with the social space occupied by the individuals, institutions, behaviours and practices that constitute the purposes, actions and understandings associated with sport coaching. It is important, therefore, to be clear about the 'target' of any definitional attempt, while, at the same time, recognising that usages of the term will be interrelated and interdependent. It is understandable that the role of the sport coach, however defined, should become evident in a wide range of practice contexts. To reiterate, this chapter has been fashioned to recognise, and provide a reflection on, different approaches to the generation of a conceptualisation of sport coaching, but also to reinforce the principle that different conceptions may simply be partial versions of, or contributions to, a difficult-to-describe whole.

There is also an issue of cultural differences. The arguments set out in this chapter reflect academic writing and ideas in the English-speaking world—with an implicit understanding that these ideas represent powerful academic schools of thought. It would be incontrovertible that coaching practice will reflect cultural mores, norms, and expectations, although there is an interesting argument that the media-and major events-led globalisation of sport, and an accompanying mobility in coach deployment in high-performance sport, have created a universal, homogenous conception of coaching in that particular domain. However, my own experience has confirmed that there are cultural differences in the education and values attached to introducing young people to sport and that this is evident in coaching practice. It remains my contention, however, that there is a fundamental conception of sport coaching when operationalised; in other words, what we see in practice. Nevertheless, sport coaching is reflective of a developmental evolution over time and is subject to a number of layers of both cultural expectations and the political, social and economic ideas and policies attached to sport.

I will try not to fall into the trap of declaring that a simple definition is not possible but then attempting to provide one! As indicated above, the initial question is, 'what is it that you are attempting to define?' Sport coaching can be understood to refer to a role (provision of direction/assistance/support/leadership in a sport context), a social context (understood as a part of the sporting environment/resource within an institutional framework or set of relationships), a process (the collective activities and behaviours designed and delivered by the coach), and a set of interpersonal relationships (most commonly a relationship between coach and athlete(s)). These are stated without any elaboration about how each should be operationalised. Here, I declare a personal position. Each of these dimensions helps us to understand more fully what we mean by sport coaching, but, for me, the essence is the 'process of intervention' to prepare the athlete/team's performance capacity for participation in sport. Without this, the other dimensions have no meaning or context. If we assume for a moment that sport coaching is a form of leadership that involves guidance or direction intended to support sport participants, the term should include the process through

which such guidance takes place. This might beg the question as to whether the many variants of sport coaching practice can be embraced by one descriptor. No matter how we conceive of the social world around us, it is evident that the term sport coaching is understood by specialists and non-specialists alike (although perhaps to a different depth of comprehension) as a descriptor of purposeful practice by individuals. However, there is also a 'system-wide' institutional network of organisations and institutions that aim to maintain and further develop coaching practice, either directly or indirectly. The 'system' and the individuals within it create a sense of how coaching is represented, and individual coaches operate within this framework—or challenge it!

It is important that I state my bias and how my background has influenced the way in which I present this chapter. I adhere to a pragmatic approach (which I elaborate later in the chapter); valuing knowledge that has an impact on practice. I also have an extensive background, both as performer and coach, in high-performance sport, in a team sport in which the coach plays a significant role in directing game performance. In addition, my academic interest is in how coaches cope with the multi-layered set of relationships and the environment within which they operate, rather than simply to better understand what those influences might be. This has undoubtedly influenced the emphasis I place on intervention, on competition preparation and on decision making. For example, and despite the entirely appropriate enjoinder to effective interpersonal behaviour, such behaviour, without reference to specific and purposeful intervention, is not the primary goal of the coaching 'contract'. It is a means to an end—accepting that such an 'end' may have myriad additional outcomes (social mobility, personal development, behaviour modification). I would contend, therefore, that it is important to appreciate the subtleties of context and meaning that are involved, and this is central to an appreciation of 'what we mean by sport coaching'. In circumstances in which there are purposes/objectives/goals that do not involve preparation for and participation in sport (implying competition forms of sport), the term coaching can only be applied as a generic descriptor of a delivery role and behaviour. Its meaning only becomes evident and 'attaches itself' to other complementary meanings and constructs when the purpose is identified. Thus, it is convenient, but unhelpful, if the sport leadership evident in youth clubs, social work, physical education, casual recreation, adventure holidays, and so on, is characterised as sport coaching. Generic descriptors such as medical practitioner, engineer, teacher, lawyer, salesperson or coach evoke an immediate sense of what this means (to the individual who interprets it)—but only in a most general sense.

Sport coaching occupies a social space—the myriad practices of individual coaches are accompanied by institutions and institutional processes that educate, facilitate, develop and support coaches. We often label this the 'coaching system'. Note, however, that these processes are not neutral; they serve to include and exclude, and in some case, regulate. We can rely on our own coaching practice as a lens through which to understand coaching, but North (2017) reminds us that the world of sport coaching is separate from our attempts in research to capture and represent it. I am often struck by the realisation that an individual's coaching practice does not change when being interpreted or conceptualised by competing academic

schools of thought. Nevertheless, a conceptualisation of sport coaching and the setting of occupational boundaries can influence education and development (in addition to recruitment and deployment) and impact on the formulation of sport policy. In this way, our understanding of sport coaching and what it means to coach will impact on practice. The aggregation of these effects is one way to describe the 'profession' of coaching: the requirements and expectations placed on education, expertise, standards of practice, and accountable behaviour. Professional esteem is afforded to the coaching role by social recognition of its value and significance. Once again, the important point to highlight is that the reach, scope and remit of those within the profession and infrastructure of sport coaching is a reflection of how it is conceptualised by policy makers, who, in turn, are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by academic discourse.

This section of the chapter has attempted to reinforce the need for some 'boundary markers' (Lyle & Cushion, 2017) and some definitional clarity about how we should interpret the scope and essence of sport coaching. I also imply that this is a challenge; the use of the term sport coaching as an umbrella term for a family of coaching roles and domains (Lyle, 2011a) invites context-free generalisations that are less than helpful. However, it is also the case that most academic writing that deals with coaching or its practice does not feel the need to inform the reader about the scope of the coaching activity implied in the writing, nor of the characteristic practice of the practitioners (Lyle, 2018b). Without wishing to identify academic colleagues, I invite readers to examine a number of research papers in sport coaching and to test this hypothesis. Surprisingly, it also applies to academic 'position papers', particularly characteristic of academic writing that focuses on inter-personal relationships. These are implicitly held to be common to all forms of sport coaching. To some extent this is incontrovertible, but the coaching context evidences many and varied forms of interaction between athlete and coach.

## Different Perspectives

To reach a conceptualisation of sport coaching we need to take a view on what is important about it, how it relates to the world around it, which questions are worth asking, and how we will frame the answers to these questions. Not surprisingly, there is no absolute consensus on this, and the different characterisations of coaching reflect our preferred perspectives on these philosophical and conceptual matters. There are some fundamental views on the nature of reality and how we understand the natural and social phenomena around us. This is termed our ontology, and is accompanied by our epistemology, which refers to the nature and scope of knowledge that supports what we know about the world (North, 2017). These more fundamental perspectives are the basis of more specific disciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches.

These different disciplinary approaches (for example, psychology or sociology) not only have distinctive ways of understanding and explaining the world around us

and have characteristic methods of investigating it, but also tend to address different issues. Psychology, for example, will focus on individuals' behaviour and cognitions; sociologists are focused on social structures, interrelationships and contextual factors. Each disciplinary approach has a tendency to validate its principles by pointing to the shortcomings of the alternatives. Nevertheless, the resultant conceptualisation is important; not only does it provide an understanding and interpretation of social phenomena, it has implications for education, development and effecting social change. We can think of it as providing a justification for our ideas—our conceptualisations.

Even a cursory familiarity with the academic literature on sport coaching will confirm that there are distinctive conceptualisations that arise from, or obtain their justification from, particular disciplinary perspectives—indeed, to some extent these have generated quite distinctive schools of thought. These have been described and appraised at length by North (2017) and I recommend this source for an excellent account of both the conceptualisations and their genesis. My purpose here is not to restate these competing conceptualisations but to examine a number of issues about which students of coaching science should be aware when relying on academic literature associated with a particular disciplinary approach: why are there different conceptualisations, are they really different, what function do they serve, and how do I, as a practitioner or student, interpret these representations of sport coaching? First, however, I provide a modest overview of these different conceptualisations; this is derived from North (2017), whose text will afford a much more comprehensive account.

North (2017) identifies the following perspectives: behaviourist, cognitive, strategic/functional, complexity, social, and normative. Each of these has a particular conceptualisation of coaching. The behaviourist perspective is said to conceive of coaching as a set of observable behaviours, within which it is possible to identify regularities that can be associated with effective practice. This is evident in the construction of analytical tools to capture and categorise behaviours (Cushion, Harvey, Muir, & Nelson, 2012). The cognitive perspective is rooted in psychology and emphasises the coach's cognitive organisation, storage and retrieval of knowledge. The focus is on the coach as a decision maker (Collins, Carson, & Collins, 2016; Harvey, Lyle, & Muir, 2015). A strategic/functional approach is less disciplinary based and may be termed a 'components approach'; there is an attempt to identify the key components or strategies adopted by coaches and how these are operationalised to best effect (Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016). The complexity perspective has been influential in conceiving of sport coaching as a site of interacting goals, actors and context, to the extent that it is described as messy, dynamic, emergent or ill-defined (Jones, Bowes, & Kingston, 2010). To some extent this has become a reference point for conceptions of sport coaching, and it rejects simplified explanations or representations of practice. The social perspective conceives of sport coaching as a social interaction between coach, athlete and other stakeholders, with a focus on interpersonal relationships (Jones & Corsby, 2015). There is an emphasis on social construction of knowledge and practice, and the power dynamics involved. Normative approaches tend to adduce eclectic arguments,

rather than evidentiary bases, about how best to conceive of effective coaching practice, leading to prescriptions intended to influence coach education and development. North (2017) identifies Côté's 4Cs (Côté, Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010) and conceptions of the coach as 'orchestrator' (Jones, Bailey, & Thompson, 2013) or 'educator' (Jones, 2006) as examples.

One of the key questions to ask is what it is that academics disagree about. The firm conclusion is that they differ in their opinions as to what questions are worth asking and how sport coaching can best be understood from a particular perspective. The debate about what we mean by coaching is an example of a socially-derived construct and is most evident in the discourse about it. This manifests itself in academic writing, in public policy statements, in popular writing (press, media), and in dialogue between individuals. It is tempting to say that 'it is clear that everyone knows what coaching 'is' until they begin to explain it'. In reality, distinctive images and practices, exemplar roles and persons, and one's own experiences combine to 'paint a picture' that an individual holds to represent sport coaching—albeit a picture that benefits from reflection. Academics attempt to explain these representations and, to some extent, perhaps too much, to defend their stance in relation to others.

An example of a particular conceptualisation is Cassidy et al. (2016)) portrayal of sport coaching as a pedagogical and social enterprise. This is an exceedingly well-argued and well-written text. However, it evidences a number of the features of partial accounts described above. It is described as 'a leading perspective in the analysis of sport coaching' (p. 4); the authors feel it necessary to challenge other conceptions. They continue the caricaturing of coaching as a unidirectional technical exercise—a position that provides a 'stalking horse' for their academic agenda but is completely at odds with the experience and personal resources of coaches themselves. There is no doubt that sport coaching (as with all social endeavours) has an emotional, political, spiritual, and cultural context but the impression given is that practitioners and other academics have failed to identify this. The writers imply that the social factors are a 'higher order' perspective and to be valued above a 'what works' approach. In criticising the scientific functionalism (p. 176) said to characterise coaching, the authors perpetuate the partial perspective—of seeing 'what you want to see'. There is no doubt that (some) coaches implement a performance intervention programme based on performance sciences. However, any number of narratives from coaches (including those that conceive of coaching as a humanistic endeavour [Bennie & O'Connor, 2010]) will demonstrate that this is couched in a coach-athlete relationship and practice that acknowledges and attempts to accommodate to the emotional, developmental, social and cultural factors that the authors espouse.

There are reasonably straightforward answers to the questions posed earlier. Once we accept that different conceptualisations represent attempts to illustrate and understand sport coaching in a partial way that is based on a fallible process of capturing and representing the 'reality' of coaching (North, 2017), we realise that they are not inimical—simply addressing different questions and issues. The concepts, theories, narratives, metaphors and models do not provide a 'complete'

account. Indeed, despite the editors' laudable intentions, the *Routledge Handbook of Sports Coaching*'s call for integration of the variety of disciplinary perspectives remains at the level of aggregation rather than integration (Potrac, Gilbert, & Denison, 2013). The different perspectives cannot be aggregated, being based on different foundations and with different purposes. We cannot fully represent sport coaching other than through our (largely disciplinary and therefore partial) lens. Therefore, it is inappropriate to say, 'coaching is . . .', but rather, 'from this perspective, sport coaching can be conceived of as . . .'.

The call for an inter-disciplinary approach has been answered by North (2017). Based on a critical realist evaluation of sport coaching, he moves someway towards a less disciplinary-bound approach, although integrating disciplinary perspectives into an embedded, relational and emergent (ERE) model of a sport coaching-specific ontology (see Chap. 6). The model is described as a tool to aid research and theorising; researchers are invited to look beyond observable practice to the underpinning causal layers that impact the coaches' 'resources, reasoning, reflecting and strategising' (pp. 175–176). Of particular interest is a set of concepts which he suggests can better describe and explain sport coaching. Individually these are not new concepts, but their value lies in the attempt to formulate a basis for integrated inter-disciplinary research. Sport coaching is said to be situated in time and space (particularly a collective historicity); to have a layered set of influences (sociocultural, institutional, interpersonal and individual); to have a goal orientation; to be dependent on the resources available (at each level); to be the product of reasoning, reflecting and strategising; and to feature coaching actions that lead, imperfectly and over time, to outcomes.

There is also a political dimension to the way in which we conceive of sport coaching, and, as a consequence, how we scaffold policy and practice. For example, an extensive incorporation of sport leadership roles supports policies of inclusion (UK Coaching, 2017). The meaning attached to sport coaching also intimates what, at any given time, power brokers (those who determine strategy and resource allocation) choose to prioritise. This may also be related to what the wider society views as worthy of esteem. This is also linked, in what is currently a contentious debate, to notions of the professionalisation of sport coaching (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; North et al., 2018). There are obvious implications, in a practical sense, for research, provision of services and coach education structures. For an example of the importance of this reference point, and a case study of the interaction between national policy and the definition of sport and coaching, consider the case of the changing policy on sport (HM Government, 2015, Sport England, 2016) and coaching (UK Coaching, 2017) in the UK. There has been a deliberate attempt to obfuscate the meaning attached to sport coaching; first, by extending the terminology to refer to 'sport and physical activity', and, second, by emphasising the word 'coaching' in isolation. This satisfies the objectives of Government policy as it responds in policy terms to issues such as obesity, declining participation in sport, and an inactive population. However, it does little to circumscribe the boundaries of sport coaching and consequent implication for matters such as coach education and development and the professionalisation agenda. There will be a good deal of

desirable and laudable leadership and delivery practice in the broader realm of physical activity (fitness classes, jogging, activity holidays, casual participation) and a good deal of children's physical activity resembles 'sport play'. It may even be the case that qualifications currently badged as 'coaching awards' are useful orientation and training mechanisms for leadership in these domains. Nevertheless, this is an example of a conceptualisation of sport coaching that has been devised for political purposes.

## Where Are we? A Personal Interpretation

In immersing myself in the literature, I find myself asking two questions: first, does the author intend that there is a better, newer or deeper understanding of sport coaching or that the practice of coaching should be improved by this academic contribution? Second, has the author identified the coaching context(s) to which the findings/recommendations are intended to apply? I take the view that each and all perspectives contribute to our understanding of sport coaching. Setting aside for the moment the issue of what constitutes reality, as a coaching practitioner, my practice is not altered by the different conceptualisations described above—change comes as a result of coach education and development being influenced by different conceptions of coaching and by my own reflection and reasoning. Schools of thought emerge and evolve over time—was there no good practice before a particular approach took root? My practice could be simultaneously observed, investigated and explained through different lenses. Each would adopt mechanisms to capture an 'as best we can' representation and reproduction of my coaching practice, but to interrogate the results towards different priorities. It might be assumed that better understanding will lead to appropriate coach education and development, which, in turn, will improve practice. However, my experience is that much of the literature is dominated by the quest for understanding, with largely evidence-free prescriptions for education and development.

The coach is an active agent in determining practice. The extent and form of this is criticised, largely in terms of a perception that coaches do not reflect sufficiently on the assumptions and beliefs that they have about their practice and how they do or should behave. This is a fallacious argument. To what extent can we expect a 2-day trained first-aider to reflect critically on the treatments suggested by 'informed practice' in medicine? I suspect that this argument has merit; treatments (and resources) are determined by those with the knowledge and influence to incorporate them in practice. However, and as with beginner coaches, to what extent is it reasonable to expect these minimally trained practitioners to engage critically and with sufficient knowledge and insight in the genesis and appropriateness of such practices? The anticipated level of reflection is incompatible with the level of education and training, and their likely period of engagement as practitioners. I would not condone the unquestioning reproduction of taken-for-granted practices. Allowing that some coaches may well reflect critically, there remain questions about

professional practice. Coaches may well be aware that they are accepting 'received wisdom' and that this is a consequence of power brokers who influence professional discourse, but see this as a practical alternative to 'testing out' alternative notions, given that their practice appears to be successful or effective.

Much of the literature has an unfortunate tendency to defend its ideas by attacking alternative approaches. Most disappointing is that many of the 'critical' writers take such an impoverished view of coaches. In aggregate (and with a little exaggeration) coaches are said not to reflect, simply to reproduce content and practice, to fail to take context into account, to neglect the interpersonal dimension, to rely only on a technical model, to take decisions without history or context and to adopt a unidirectional delivery style. There may well be coaches for whom some or much of this criticism would be valid (not, of course, those writers!), but the criticism stems from their partial account of practice. This is what North (2017) terms an 'epistemic fallacy'. Assuming a particular but partial view of what constitutes practice, researchers create a false 'standard' against which sport coaches are evaluated.

My own approach might best be described as pragmatic. The historical emergence of pragmatism through seminal figures, such as Piece, James, and Dewey, is readily available in the literature (cf. Bacon, 2012), and more recent treatments have documented its re-emergence in the late twentieth century (cf. Rescher, 2017). This brief description merely identifies those key principles that inform my approach to conceptualising sport coaching. There are a number of features of pragmatism that I believe help to understand and appreciate what is meant by sport coaching. First, the practical consequences of an idea or conception give it meaning. Second, experience and experimentation are the basis of understanding. Third, knowledge is fallible because the context, from which we derive our experience of it, is ever changing, and because we can only ever have a partial appreciation of it. Fourth, scepticism should arise from a confrontation with a particular problem, not from a more generalised state of 'doubt'. It is important to recognise that a conceptualisation is not an end in itself. It is an 'instrument' that helps us to understand our environment, or social world. This is abstracted from our direct experience, but this is 'tested' against the contribution of others, and against our own constant 'experimentation'. We have, therefore, a limited capacity to comprehend the complexity and scope of social phenomena. Our grasp of reality is fallible, but we deal with this by judging it against current and contextual standards of acceptance. This might be phrased as, 'how useful is my conceptualisation, not how 'true' is it'. Pragmatism also embraces the concept that developing and refining our conceptualisation is a social process.

Jenkins' (2017) stimulus paper criticises 'crude pragmatism' in understanding sport coaching, and an accompanying array of commentaries provide an excellent source of background reading and argument. The genesis of the argument is that a crude 'what works' approach by coaches should be replaced by a more reflective, values-infused approach—a philosophical pragmatism. However, this set of papers is marked by an unproblematic assumption of what is meant by sport coaching, almost no reference to coaching practice itself, and a focus, in general, on 'coaching philosophy' that might be better conceived of as coaching strategy. In addition, the assertion that such a 'crude' approach is superficial and not accompanied by deeper

reflection, experimentation, or underpinning values is to misread both the evidence of individual coaches and the decision-making process. Pragmatists produce an 'early theorisation' that is workable and refined through practice. Our conceptualisations conform to the real, shared world but do so relatively, not absolutely: our knowledge and ideas exist in an ever-changing historical, cultural and social context. Emphasising this helps us to explain the development of ideas and practices but, I will argue, have less to do with the 'now' of practice; dealing with consequences makes us forward-looking. This will partly explain my emphasis on the practice of sport coaching—'what it is', rather than 'what it has become'. I will argue that sport coaching can be understood in terms of purpose and practice—values, context and resources provide an elaboration that distinguish it from similar social practices. I will argue that I leave 'crudeness' behind by emphasising not just 'what works', but 'what works in which situations' and how coaches can accommodate dealing with such a conundrum.

I am comfortable with all conceptualisations of sport coaching, while accepting that they have a disciplinary foundation and provide only a partial explanation for coaching practice. My questions centre (under my pragmatic umbrella) on how sport coaches cope with the operationalisation of practice. The centrepiece of this is a purposeful, planned intervention process towards identifiable goals. This may form part of a multi-year programme aimed at successful Olympic participation or a shorter-term series of episodic interventions. This explains my interest in coaches' expertise; their capacity for assimilating and accommodating to a multitude of, often competing, factors, which leads to a situation in which coaching can only be understood in the particularity of contextualised practice. In my view this places decision making, in its almost infinite variety, as a key element of coaching expertise. Of course, sport coaching is a social enterprise and comprises interpersonal relationships. It is entirely appropriate that academics should understand how coaching is shaped by this, but in placing performance intervention at the heart of sport coaching, I ask how this understanding impacts on the central purpose of coaching. I also believe that coaching practice can be better understood with reference to coaching domains (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). I do not entirely agree with Cassidy et al. (2016, p. 4) that these are 'artificial' demarcations (Lyle, 2011b), but they are certainly social constructions that are open to debate. Nevertheless, I find them a helpful analytical tool for expertise-led deployment and development. There are undoubtedly 'layers' of influence and a framework of socio-cultural and institutional causal forces that impact on the coaches' practice. There will always be an individual and relationship history to be taken into account. However, I find it helpful to distinguish between those matters that unpressured reflection will illuminate, but which may not be susceptible to immediate change, and the coaches' mechanisms for dealing with those factors that have an immediate impact but may also be 'held' tacitly.

One conceptualisation of coaching portrays it as a 'process' (Lyle, 1999), within a context of the management of sport performance (e.g., enhancement, maintenance, development). This dimension will be impacted by the other dimensions—professional context, social context (including ethical dimension), domain parameters, and

athlete and coach resources. Thus, sport coaching is the management and delivery of an intervention (no matter how sophisticated, intensive or comprehensive) to assist/support/direct (leaving room for context-appropriate behaviour) an athlete/team to achieve specified sporting goals. This intervention is designed and planned to 'do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way ('right' can be substituted by 'appropriate'). It is a redundant exercise to debate whether there is a behavioural dimension, cognitive dimension, social dimension or inter-personal dimension. The answer is simple (even if said very clumsily)—'you cannot not do', 'you cannot not think', 'you cannot act outside context', and 'you cannot coach without athletes'. In other words, each and all of these dimensions are present at all times. This reinforces an integrated account of coaching but allows for a prioritising of focus and interest. It also points to the poverty of academic contributions that seek to focus on one dimension without reference to the others (particularly the nexus of goals, domain and intervention).

## Key Points

The professionalisation of sport coaching as a valued occupation is a current and recurring theme in sport coaching literature (Cassidy et al., 2016; Lyle & Cushion, 2017; North, 2017). It may seem obvious, but perhaps worthy of greater attention, that the professionalisation process and agenda are dependent upon the scope and meaning attached to the term. It is important that we are able to distinguish sport coaching from other, perhaps similar, pursuits. However, the boundaries of sport coaching in policy and professionalisation must be such that its practice—entry, education, qualifications, values, expertise, quality control and regulation—is of sufficient weight as to be commensurate with professional status. It seems to me that professionalisation in a tradition sense is a worthwhile ambition and distant policy initiative but that more tightly defined and managed sport coaching in terms of employment, deployment and licensing is more likely to lead to a higher level of professionalism. It is for that reason that the meaning attached to sport coaching, its association with sporting practice, matters of inclusion and exclusion, its domain properties, and, crucially, a need to recognise and acknowledge the strengths and limitations of seeing sport coaching through disciplinary eyes, are matters that may appear consigned to abstract conceptual debate but have surprisingly practical consequences.

## Conclusion

I have an optimistic view of coaches and coaching. They reason and reflect; they strategise both deliberatively and in pressured situations. They are aware of their own resources/capabilities and those of others. They assimilate history and context, but at times, in everyday practice, they may focus with a narrower perspective on the

immediacy of intervention. They operate within a framework of interdependent goals, ambitions and motivations—institutional and personal—which they understand and work towards, recognising that it is not a linear pathway (no-one ever said it was!) and that goals may be contested by other coaches and athletes. However conceptualised, sport coaching involves higher-order expertise. There is a very broad range of definitions and conceptualisations with which to embrace this expertise; yes, influenced by disciplinary positions or conceptual preferences, but perhaps also redolent of our continued use of sport coaching as a unitary construct for what is a loosely-bound aggregation of roles and purposes.

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