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**Beyond ‘Crude Pragmatism’ in Sports Coaching:
Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey: A Commentary**

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INTRODUCTION

We agree that there is a lack of clarity in the sports coaching literature about philosophical pragmatism, but this is inevitable when there is a lack of consensus in the literature of philosophical pragmatism itself. In the writing of classical pragmatists there are a “plurality of conflicting narratives” (Bernstein, 1995 p.55). For instance, Charles Sanders Peirce acknowledged notable theoretical divergence between his pragmatism and that of William James (Hookway, 2012). In fact, Peirce viewed the availability of nuanced approaches as a mark of the vitality of this school of thought. After all, pragmatists value diversity, they accept that current thinking, hypotheses and practices may require revision – they are flexibly minded. Such revision, however, must be built upon well-reasoned doubt (Hookway, 2012). In other words, a clear argument is necessary if an alternative proposition is to be considered. In this vein, though we have sympathy for the thrust of his argument, and support calls for more “legitimate philosophical thinking” and “empirical philosophical enquiry” (Cushion & Partington, 2016 p.863), our aim in this commentary is to address a lack of clarity and utility in some of Jenkins’ propositions about philosophical pragmatism and sports coaching.

THE NEED FOR INQUIRY

Jenkins distinguishes “crude” pragmatism from a more sophisticated, philosophical pragmatism. Similarly, research has highlighted what we might call “crude” and more “sophisticated” coaching practice. That is, crude practice where the coach lacks self-awareness and conceptual understanding of their actions (e.g., Cope, Partington, Cushion, & Harvey, 2016; Partington & Cushion, 2013), and more sophisticated, critically considered coaching practice (e.g., Hall, Gray, & Sproule, 2016). The Dewian notions of *habit* and

inquiry provide useful explanatory frames to explore the resilience of such “crude” practice, and, we will argue, a mechanism through which change might be achieved. *Habits*, as Morgan (2014 p.1046) explains, are those “beliefs that we have acquired from previous experiences”. Where this experience is grounded in a dominant (often implicit) discourse of rigid, technocratic rationality (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; S. Williams & Manley, 2016) and authoritarian control (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2015) it entrenches beliefs that produce and reproduce the prevailing orthodoxy, shielding it from critical inquiry. Thus, coaches stick to what they know, preferring “tried and tested” approaches to practice that are uncritically considered adequate to “handle the demands for action in [their] current circumstances” (Morgan, 2014 p.1046).

Dewey (1933 p.15) considered *inquiry* and its prerequisite state of *doubt* to be essential in avoiding such uncritical, routine action. He advocated *doubt* not as a quiescent and fleeting reaction to challenge, but a more active, enduring and iterative state of questioning, where one continuously seeks out the dilemmas in one’s practice. He believed the healthy mind to always be on the lookout. Dewey, however, did not intend inquiry to result in the acceptance of any plausible suggestion that would rid one of doubt; he proposed inquiry should be systematic, situated in real contexts, driven by evidence, and reflexively aware - one should know *why* one believes what one believes. This more sophisticated approach has been explored in the literature of education, with those implementing a Dewian notion of inquiry conceptualised as “transformative intellectuals” and “scholar-practitioners” (Bourgeois, 2010). Similarly, we have utilised the heuristic of “extended professionalism” in coaching (Hall, Gray, Kelly, Martindale, & Sproule, 2015), which develops Hoyle’s (1980) description of an analytical practitioner who adopts a critical, intellectual and reason-based approach in their work. In these terms, pragmatism is an invitation to self-critical conversation (Feinberg, 2012), a commitment to inquiry, where conversations (internal and with others) attempt to be disruptive of one’s habits. Thus, inquiry enables us “re-negotiate the truths we live by in order to keep their meaning alive, our mindset plastic, and our selfhood mobile” (Marchetti, 2015 p.104).

CRITICAL REFLECTION AS INQUIRY

Beyond other approaches to critical inquiry including lesson study (e.g., Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006) and action research (e.g., Clements & Morgan, 2015), reflection has achieved the status of orthodoxy in sports coaching, as it has in other disciplines (Cushion, 2016; Mann

& Walsh, 2013). This is built, in part, upon Dewey's (1933) early exposition of the potential of reflective inquiry to support professional development and behaviour change. However, a lack of critical interrogation of reflective theory and practice in coaching has masked its potential to expose personal vulnerabilities in damaging ways (Hall & Gray, 2016) as well as to "reinforce rather than challenge existing beliefs and assumptions" (Cushion, 2016 p.3). Dewey regarded reflection as a forward-looking intellectual practice grounded in the holistic consideration of prior experience. Yet, a crude, uncritical approach to reflection will carry the "tried and tested" from our previous experiences and project them unquestioningly into the future.

Without criticality, practice termed "reflection" functions, more accurately, as rationalisation; one's existing perspectives dominate, and practice becomes increasingly ossified around these perspectives (Loughran, 2002). Just as crude *habits* of coaching practice need to be disrupted, so do crude *habits* of reflective practice. Hall and Gray (2016) provide a rare example from coaching of how this cycle of reproduction was initially sustained and then disrupted through reflection. Specifically, in the same vein as Partington *et al.* (2015), video self-confrontation was found to usefully challenge usual perspectives on and in practice, which supported the coach's issue setting for critical reflection. Furthermore, the value of a critical friend who plays "devil's advocate" in order to challenge one's own dominant discourse by providing alternative perspectives was also underlined. Indeed, it seems that the interchange of views and experience between people can support inquiry, helping to disrupt habits by promoting deeper levels of practice scrutiny through reflection (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001).

THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Researchers and research can and should be active in the conversations that help to disrupt practitioners' *habits*. However, researchers are not neutral, omniscient experts, they too are guided by habits that produce and reproduce certain assumptions about coaches and coaching through their work (Cushion & Partington, 2016). For instance, coaching is often treated as a phenomenon to be studied from a "safe distance" by those concerned about positivistic notions of objectivity and neutrality. Moreover, a lack of longitudinal and mixed-method designs, and a dearth of reflexive accounts in coaching publications, have limited the extent to which research influences coach education and coaching practice. Yet, the strength of our field is judged by its *impact* (Cushion & Lyle, 2010; S. J. Williams & Kendall, 2007); if research remains neutral or superficial researchers will rightly be accused of crudely

perpetuating a self-serving agenda. To disrupt the methodological *status quo* we agree that research should be done *with* coaches (Gilbert, 2007). Pragmatically, collaborating with coaches through research inquiry has the potential to bring into focus the issues most relevant to practitioners themselves, and to more directly shape the development of coaching practice. Indeed, the distinctive quality of what can broadly be called participatory research is its pursuit of knowledge for action (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

Participatory action research has recently been applied effectively in the physical education context to develop teachers' ability to challenge prevailing curriculum models, to work beyond dominant pedagogical practices of physical education (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2013, 2014), and to increase pupil engagement in physical education (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010). An example from our own work is an ongoing study with PE teachers from three secondary schools. Our primary role, and the main aim of the study, was to work *with* the teachers to explore in-depth the ways in which they have attempted to re-engage pupils previously identified as "disengaged" from PE. This was achieved primarily by posing critical questions, but also by encouraging the teachers to record personal reflections on their responses to these critical questions. Another key component of the research process was to invite teachers from all of the schools to come together to discuss their learning and practice. This learning community gave the teachers opportunities to pose their own critical questions as well as share their learning and their ideas for future curriculum and pedagogical developments. We do not yet know the precise "impact" of this project on the learning experiences of the "disengaged" pupils in each school, but we do know that the teachers continue to read, critically reflect and work with each other to question, challenge and change their practice. Indeed, we also know that all of the teachers in the study have already made changes either to their curriculum and/or pedagogy as a result of their engagement in this research project.

CONCLUSION

Our advocacy of research *impact* should not be interpreted as a crude pursuit for answers in the form of instrumental or technical knowledge. We are not suggesting research present cast-iron, cause-effect rules for coaching practice. Rather, we have argued, by working *with* coaches to expose the complex relations between actions, interactions and consequences in emergent and naturalistic coaching contexts, research can support more critical and intelligent action (Biesta, 2007). To do so requires, in the traditions of a sophisticated, philosophical

pragmatism, we accept the fallibility of our current thinking, and, in turn, pursue the disruption of crude discourses in coaching practice, reflective practice and coaching research practice through a commitment to critical and collaborative debate.

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