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## **Reflecting on Reflective Practice: a Coach's Action Research Narratives.**

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## **Reflecting on Reflective Practice: a Coach's Action Research Narratives.**

Reflection is now advocated by coach education programmes around the world as a framework for coaches to learn from their experience. Yet, there is a paucity of empirical and critical work focussed on coaches' experiences of reflective practice. Consequently, we lack understanding as to the utility of reflection in the messy realities of practice, and of what is meaningful to those who engage in such a personally involving, emotive and challenging process. This article presents a series of narratives that evoke the dilemmas I (the lead author) experienced reflecting on my reflective practice within an action research process. The narratives tell a highly personal tale about the temporal, emotional and contextual qualities of reflective practice, a tale that counters traditional presentations of the coach as a calculated, dispassionate and rational being who operates as if in a social vacuum. By providing insight that befits the problematic nature of practice, we hope to contribute to a more authentic and holistic epistemology in sports coaching.

**Keywords:** sports coaching; coach learning; coach development; reflection; narrative research.

## Introduction

Reflective practice has become increasingly popular as a framework for professional learning and engaging in it a seemingly essential characteristic of professional competence (Moon, 2004; Cassidy, Jones and Potrac, 2015; Cushion, 2016).

Consequently, the well-established health professions (e.g. medicine, nursing), noting the benefits of reflecting *on* practice for continuing development, and of reflecting *in* practice to ensure its safety and effectiveness, have positioned reflection within their education and training programmes (Mann, Gordon and MacLeod, 2009). For some time reflection has also been promoted by researchers in the less mature field of sports coaching (Cropley, Miles and Peel, 2012). Thus, it has been heralded as a means to transform traditional coach education (Gilbert and Trudel, 2006b; Nelson and Cushion, 2006), an idea supported by practitioners themselves (Nelson, Cushion and Potrac, 2013). Indeed, reflection is now advocated by coach educators around the world (Callary, Culver and Werthner, 2013), which positions the effective practice of reflection as a global concern for the development of coaching practitioners at all levels.

Reflective practice has been defined as, ‘a dialogue of thinking and doing through which [you] become more skilful’ (Schön, 1987). At its heart, reflection is about behavioural change (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993), it is a commitment to advance one’s practice through experience *in* practice. Usefully, various models *of* and *for* reflection exist (e.g. Schön, 1983; Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Moon, 1999; Gilbert and Trudel, 2001; Johns, 2005; Driscoll, 2007), each describing ways a reflective practitioner might explore this practice. Despite their nuances, these models share in the notion that the practitioner must return to their experience to critically examine it with the intention of developing existing

knowledge and improving future practice. In doing so, reflection promises the individual a way to monitor their situated performance in order to raise self-awareness and identify relevant opportunities for professional development (Moon, 2004). Thus, in the context of coach learning and development, reflective practice has been portrayed as key to becoming an effective practitioner (Cushion, 2016).

Within the coaching literature, several researchers have conceptualised reflection (Gilbert and Trudel, 2006a). Most notably, Gilbert and Trudel (2001) explored the reflective practice of six Canadian youth coaches from ice hockey and soccer. The authors identified a six-stage cyclical process that the coaches used to learn from their experience, which included coaching issues, role frame, issue setting, strategy generation, experimentation and evaluation. Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) work has subsequently stimulated further inquiry focussed, for example, on the use of systematic behavioural observation and other technological support for coach reflection (e.g. Carson, 2008; Partington, Cushion, Cope and Harvey, 2015). However, while their model offers a useful heuristic of reflective practice, as with much of the literature (Cushion, 2016), it does not operationalise the more complex, social and cultural processes involved, for instance, in how coaches set issues to reflect upon (Abraham and Collins, 2011). Indeed, casting a critical eye over current understanding in this area, Cushion (2016) recently highlighted the uncritical acceptance of reflective practice in coaching and coach education, simultaneously calling attention to the need for studies that recognise the "discursive complexities of reflection" (p. 3). If we are to understand how best to promote and support the development of reflective practice in coaching, then we must first understand the problematic real-world experiences of coaches who reflect.

Developing an understanding of what is meaningful to coaches who reflect is important because undertaking reflection is a complex and personally involving skill; it requires a much more sophisticated approach than briefly looking back at what has happened (Ovens and Tinning, 2009). Beyond the simplistic ‘step-following’ suggested by models and schematics of reflection (e.g. Gilbert and Trudel, 2001), having an experience does not guarantee reflection, nor does reflective practice guarantee deep learning (Cushion, Nelson, Armour, Lyle, Jones, Sandford and O’Callaghan, 2010). In order to achieve impact on coaching practice, the literature demands a deep investment in criticality (Knowles, Borrie and Telfer, 2005). Moreover, as Knowles and colleagues’ (2006) investigation of sports coaching graduates showed challenges must be overcome when reflecting. For example, finding the time to reflect, maintaining a narrow focus on negative issues and lacking access to mentors or other peers to support development were identified as barriers to reflection (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie and Nevill, 2001).

Several detailed portraits of practitioners’ applied reflective experiences have been developed in other vocations such as teaching (e.g. Jay and Johnson, 2002). For example, in nursing, Burton (2000) noted that the vulnerabilities identified in what can be a highly emotive process might actually increase anxiety and psychological morbidity. However, though an emerging body of literature identifies barriers to reflection in coaching (e.g. Knowles *et al.*, 2006; Burt and Morgan, 2014), there are few critical and detailed portraits of sports coaches’ experiences (Cushion, 2016). Consequently, we have a limited understanding of the issues and problems related to reflecting in the applied realities of the coaching process, and there have been increasing calls for empirical evidence of the efficacy and impact of reflection *in and on* practice (Cropley *et al.*, 2012; Huntley, Cropley, Gilbourne, Sparkes and Knowles,

2014). In summary, the coach's voice has been largely ignored in a domain where their highly personal experience is absolutely central to the topic of interest. Without richly detailed, situated, interpretive case studies of reflective practice we will be left with an overly formulaic view of what is a highly personal undertaking (Atkins and Murphy, 1993). Therefore, the present study set out to vividly capture real-world experiences of reflective practice through a narrative case study of a rugby coach (the lead author). The aim of using evocative narratives is to more authentically communicate the temporal, emotional and contextual qualities of reflective practice in order to problematise reflection and counter notions of the coach as a calculated, dispassionate and rational being who operates as if in a social vacuum (Potrac, Jones and Nelson, 2012).

## **Methods**

### ***Overview***

The initial stimuli for undertaking this project came as I (Edward) simultaneously started a United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) Level Three rugby-coaching course and an MSc degree in sport coaching. To pass the coaching course I was required to reflect upon my coaching, and in working towards the MSc's assessment criteria I was required to write about and further reflect upon my experiential learning. Therefore, following Leitch and Day (2000), I brought these two objectives together by undertaking a practical action research process concerned with enhancing the effectiveness of my reflective practice. Reflective practice and action research are closely related, but where reflection is not guaranteed to lead to deep learning, action research is characterised by coherent, systematic and rigorous strategic action with a

focus on improving practice (McMahon, 1999). In addition, following Feldman (2007), a narrative approach was chosen to communicate my experiences of this action research process.

### ***The coach (Edward)***

I am a rugby union coach. I first started coaching when I was around eighteen and over the last decade have worked with a variety of players: complete novices, developing athletes and elite internationals; males and females; and various age groups. However, most of my time has been spent in contexts similar to the domain in which this research is set. Specifically, I was working as the assistant coach of a senior women's regional representative team. I was paid, but it was a part-time position. All of the athletes were unpaid adults who had been selected from their club sides to represent a broad geographic region in an extended programme of training and competition. A number of inter-region matches were scheduled for breaks in the club-league's regular calendar, which were used to identify players who would then be invited to train with the national team. This 'athlete-development pathway' is typical of women's rugby union in the UK.

Prior to taking up the regional coaching post I had worked with a number of the players as the coach of a local, top-level club side. In addition, I had undertaken various forms of nonformal and formal coach training and development (Nelson, Cushion and Potrac, 2006). I had been a mediocre young player, reaching the representative level in the boy's 'pathway' below the one I was presently coaching. Following a series of injuries, sustained towards the end of my compulsory education, I began coaching in schools (as a paid community coach) and in a local club (as a



volunteer). I quickly completed the UKCC Level One and Two rugby coaching awards, attended various sports coach UK professional development workshops, and I undertook an undergraduate degree in sport studies. It was not until I began working with an adult, premiership club side, started the UKCC Level Three and simultaneously set out on a part-time master's degree in sports coaching that I became consciously aware of reflective practice. Indeed, I first began the action research process described below after returning from an early residential weekend of the Level Three course. As part of a yearlong process of assessment, I was required to submit a series of reflections on my coaching practice. However, as Nelson and Cushion (2006) noted of coach education, I had received no perceptible support to help me understand reflection or develop reflective skills before I was expected to begin reflecting.

### ***Action research and the narrative approach***

According to its pioneer, action research is an iterative process of planning, acting, reflecting and evaluating, which underpins further action (Lewin, 1946). Action research incorporates action and reflection, theory and practice in order to develop practical solutions to issues that people face (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In this case, the challenge was to find a way to reflect upon my own coaching practice, but without any clear guidelines about what that should mean. However, as I was progressing through the MSc, I was being exposed to research in the areas of the coaching process (e.g. Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria and Russell, 1995; Abraham, Collins and Martindale, 2006), coaching practice (e.g. Saury and Durand, 1998; Cushion and Jones, 2001) and coach learning (e.g. Gilbert and Trudel, 2001; Cushion,

Armour and Jones, 2003; Knowles *et al.*, 2005), as well as research methods including systematic observation (e.g. Lacy and Darst, 1984; Brewer and Jones, 2002) that impacted my understanding of reflection. Thus, in simple terms, my action research process involved experimenting with different approaches to reflection during the delayed stage of reflection on action (i.e. following the time period when immediate or spontaneous reflection occurred; Knowles *et al.*, 2001); the approaches chosen were informed by my learning as an active coach and as a neophyte student of sports coaching.

Throughout the action research process, which spanned the yearlong Level Three assessment period, I recorded my experiences in regular, personal diary entries. Although the diary also contained thoughts focussed on my coaching practice (e.g. perceptions of my body language and technical knowledge etc.), its primary value in the context of the present study was to vividly record my perceptions of the on-going process of reflective practice itself. The use of reflective diaries or journals to support action research is recommended (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011), but it is less common, especially in the coaching literature, to produce from these memos narratives of the self. Yet, narratives can reveal much about such lived experiences including the emotions, feelings and motivations of the storyteller as they change through time (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Indeed, Leitch and Day (2000) argued that the role of emotion in reflective practice for personal change must be afforded greater attention in research.

Narrative research is difficult to define, but can be characterised as an interpretive process oriented around people's storied lives (Smith, 2010); storied experiences being the focus of the research and stories being the written style through which lived experience is communicated. Set against the historical emphasis on

reductive positivism in coaching science (Hall, Gray and Sproule, 2015b), a move towards more authentic portrayals (e.g. narrative approaches) of the dilemmas experienced by coaches in their coaching contexts has been advocated (e.g. Jones, 2006; Jones, 2009; Stolz and Pill, 2014). A narrative approach was therefore chosen to examine the reflective process in a personally and contextually located manner. Indeed, narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) can support understanding of how coaches “‘see,” “‘feel,” “‘act,” and generally make sense of the everyday realities of practice’ (Toner, Nelson, Potrac, Gilbourne and Marshall, 2012 p.68). Moreover, the benefits of a narrative approach include: honouring the ambiguity, complexity and change in situations and perspectives in order to communicate with the reader; offering ways of deepening reflection and self-knowing; and an authenticity to the storied nature of human existence (Smith, 2010).

In the following section we present three narratives that engage with the complexity of reflective practice in coaching and the ways in which my perceptions and meaning making changed over time. These stories are best positioned as a kind of creative nonfiction, being dramatisations of real feelings and events, ‘captured’ through systematic data collection (Jones, 2006). The first narrative *Difficult Beginnings*, from the start of the action research process, highlights the pitfalls of an unstructured approach to reflection. Narrative two, *Later: Measuring my Coaching Practice*, raises questions about the utility of systematic observation in self-reflective practice. Finally, narrative three, *Much later: developing a structure*, from later in the action research process, describes the change achieved in my approach to reflective practice as a result of the practical action research process.

Each narrative was initially written during and represents a distinctive iteration of the action research process. The narratives were subsequently refined and

developed with my co-author, who acted as a ‘critical friend’ (Woodcock, Richards and Mugford, 2008). The critical nature of our collaboration was particularly focussed on ensuring the quality of the narratives and their discussion (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998; Sparkes, 2002). Thus, my co-author played “devil’s advocate”, challenging my analysis (Krane, Andersen and Streat, 1997). Specifically, we have sought to achieve width, coherence, insightfulness and parsimony (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998) in our work, such that it resonates with the reader’s experience and invokes a sense of reality (Richardson, 2000). Through this collaboratively critical approach the following narratives, presented in place of a typical results section, were part of a method of discovery and analysis, as well as a product of it (Sparkes, 2002). By presenting the narratives in this way we invite the reader to form their own judgements and interpretations before we offer our own discussion and analysis (Dowling, Garrett, lisahunter and Wrench, 2015).

## **Narratives**

### ***Difficult Beginnings***

Part of the admission process for the Level Three course required applicants to submit a video of themselves coaching. In addition, I had read that video could help support coaches’ reflective practice (e.g. Carson, 2008). So, that is where my action research process began; I sat down to watch video footage of a coaching session I had delivered.

*My mind swaps between anger and embarrassment. I hesitate over the ‘pause’ button as frame after frame of my torture flickers on. 1 minute 36 seconds and I can’t take it any longer; the DVD’s whir subsides and is replaced by a crescendo of self-questioning.*

*'Why do I sound like that?', 'How many times did I wave my hands around?' and 'Why weren't some of the players listening to me?'. I don't blame them, I wish I could go back two minutes and not listen to myself. I am deflated. The coach that I thought I was does not stare back at me from the screen. Instead, I am a pantomime caricature of my coaching self, with wildly exuberant hand gestures and an adopted 'coaching' voice.*

*Venturing back a little later, I prepare myself emotionally as the DVD's whir resumes, but my horror does not. I see the ball travel smoothly between players. Everyone is busy and actively engaged in their task. I watch myself move around the action and interject with advice, communicating clearly to individuals. When I intervene with the whole group, I can see the players nodding and responding well to my comments. Following my intervention, there is an almost instant improvement in the quality of the practice. Players' speed, dexterity and confidence all shoot up... so does mine - I can coach after all.*

### ***Later: Measuring my Coaching Practice***

*My initial response to the video footage has left me searching for a less painful way of reviewing my coaching practice. Sat in front of the TV once again and this time I have cracked it. Lots of researchers have used observation instruments to measure coach behaviour, so it seems logical that a coach could use one to analyse their own. The Arizona State University Observation Instrument<sup>1</sup> will give me the 'objective' evidence that I need to reflect upon.*

*After the doom and gloom of my first experiences, I allow myself a glimmer of smugness as I review the observational coding sheet spread out in front of me. All I need to do is to watch the video back and keep a tally of my behaviours. 'That's easy' I think to myself, '...much better than just hoping that an issue will jump out at me from the screen'. It feels good to have mastered this thing – obviously reflection is not as complicated as I first thought. I look over the coding sheet once more and settle into the observation process.*

*No more than ten minutes into the video again and some serious questions are already presenting themselves. However, they are no longer questions about my coaching practice; instead, I am concerned about using the observation instrument. Firstly, this process is going to take forever! I have only watched a few minutes of footage and I have to keep pausing it to note my behaviours. Secondly, what are all these numbers actually telling me? So what if praise accounts for twelve percent of my behaviour; is that the right amount, is it too much? Bloody*

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<sup>1</sup> See Lacy and Darst (1984).

*reflection... it's giving me more questions than answers! At the time, I didn't pause long enough to consider that maybe that's the whole point.*

*I shift awkwardly in my chair and try to talk myself through the situation, thinking of my previously emotional experience. 'Now look, at least you're going to have some data to analyse. Just keep going and then figure out the issues at the end...' It's no use; I can't get past how long this whole coaching session is going to take to code. I make a note on the coding sheet: not an effective use of my time. It's a good point. After all, how many coaches, given the time they already commit, can afford to spend four hours counting their use of first names, praise and scold?*

### ***Much later: developing a structure***

*The illuminated light bulb hangs gloriously above my head. No more false hopes or flawed methods. I have finally used my brain and thought critically about what reflection means to me. A list of phrases describing my own reflective principles is engraved not only on the paper in front of me but also in my mind:*

- *Concise – shouldn't take more than half an hour.*
- *Goals – should be limited and focussed by specific objectives.*
- *Deep – go beyond simple measurement. Ask hard questions of myself.*

*What I need is the stability of a structure, but the freedom to do more than just count my actions. It feels like I've been looking for a starting point, a platform to reflect from, but without being tied down by a quantitative procedure or distracted by self-deprecation and dissatisfaction.*

*After the systematic observation disaster, I had poured over my original session plans and tried to identify a focus for further investigation. The pencil drawn sketches of practice areas and scribbled notes looked primitive, and yet, back flooded all the deliberations and intentions of my efforts to prepare. The X's and O's took on real forms as I remembered how I'd envisaged one session would work. Then I had received my first lightning strike of realisation: it didn't work out quite like that!*

*Given the realisation of these gaps between my intended and actual coaching, perhaps I could have expected a flurry of self-doubt. Instead, I paused, took stock, and I considered my next steps. 'Good as well as bad points' I repeated as the DVD delivered its truth once more.*

*I had written out a series of questions to help stimulate and structure my reflection including, for example, What do my behaviours say about my values?; How does this connect with previous experiences?; How were others affected by my actions?; What*

*knowledge did and should have informed me?; What would my best self have done?; How do I now feel about this experience? Compared to my difficult beginnings, this questioning approach<sup>2</sup> helped me delve beyond the flatness of my digitized image and into the depths of my coaching self, my philosophy and practice.*

## **Discussion**

Coaching is undoubtedly a practical process, but it is also an inescapably cognitive and emotional practice (Fletcher and Scott, 2009; Chan and Mallett, 2011; Potrac and Marshall, 2011). The narratives show that reflecting upon coaching practice can be as replete with emotion as coaching practice itself, countering traditional presentations of the coach in research as a calculated, dispassionate and rational being (Potrac and Marshall, 2011). For me, these emotions came from developing a conscious awareness of my actions by adopting, for the first time, a dual stance as both an actor *in* and a critic *of* my own performance. As Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) explained:

When we inquire into our own unrecognized [sic] assumptions and behaviors [sic] and find them wanting, there is an emotional load associated with self-confrontation and with personal wrestling about how to respond to the awareness.

In my case the emotional load was so great that it was paralysing at first, inhibiting the benefits to an accurate recall of events, cognitions and emotions promised by the video stimulation method (Lyle, 2003). This negative affective response to viewing oneself on video for the first time has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Hutchinson and Bryson, 1997; Rich and Hannafin, 2009), and, as I experienced, the response is typically feelings of embarrassment and anxiety (Raymond, Dowrick and Kleinke, 1993). Although Raymond *et al.* (1993) proposed that viewing such video in solitary conditions could significantly reduce negative affective responses I would have

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<sup>2</sup> The questions were informed by the work of Ghaye *et al.* (2009), Johns (1995) and Hardman and Jones (2013).

benefited from some facilitative support. Indeed, even being warned that reflection might not be as easy as the coach educators had indicated could have helped maintain my commitment to the process when I encountered challenges.

My reflective paralysis at the outset of the action research process was ultimately grounded in a low self-awareness. The pantomime caricature I witnessed can be understood as a manifestation of the gap between how I had assumed I acted as I got on with the everyday business of being a coach and how I perceived those actions once confronted with their stark reality on video. Being previously consumed only with more tangible concerns (e.g. session content, organisation) as opposed to any deeply philosophical questions relating to my practice (e.g. Cushion and Partington, 2014) made this discovery of a new consciousness both abrupt and painful. This negative reaction to self-confrontation might be an issue for other practitioners, because coaches have been found to have low self-awareness or ability to recall how they have behaved (Smith and Smoll, 1997; Partington and Cushion, 2013), which has implications for how they should be supported before and during reflection.

What I saw on the video for the first time is what Goffman described as a 'performed character' (Goffman, 1959), an impression of myself presented to others in order to control how they saw me. This concept of sustaining a viable façade in the eyes of and informed by others has been increasingly used to explain coaching practice (e.g. Potrac, Jones and Armour, 2002; Jones, 2006; Partington and Cushion, 2012). However, it was not that I perceived exuberant hand gestures or authoritarian and highly technical communication as in themselves abhorrent or unnatural in the coaching context. Instead, I later came to realise that my embarrassment and anxiety were caused by the inauthenticity that I saw in *my* use of these behaviours and their



lack of grounding in either pedagogical principles or an understanding of my athletes' needs (Partington and Cushion, 2012).

In further unpacking these concerns, Argyris and Schön's (1974) work highlighted that someone's espoused theory (what they would advocate or say they will do) and their theories-in-use (what they actually do) may not be compatible, and that the person may not be aware of this incompatibility. My discomfort about the inauthenticity of my actions can be explained in these terms – I do not want to be so formal, instructive and humourless in my speech, and though I value being an animated speaker, I had assumed my gesticulations were less exaggerated than shown on the video. My discomfort then was piqued by both the gap between my intentions and actions and by the blunt realisation of this incompatibility. Ultimately, as a result of this new consciousness, I had (temporarily at least) lost a sense of myself (Hochschild, 2003).

Eventually, these disjunctures – uncomfortable situations that presented moments of potential for learning (see Jarvis, 2012) – became useful catalysts to develop my understanding as I constructed critical questions about my actions (see 3.3 *Much later: developing a structure*). For example, What has informed my use of a 'managerial' voice when speaking to the players on a one-to-one basis?<sup>3</sup> and, Do those hand gestures not distract the players' attention from the message I'm trying to get across?<sup>4</sup> Yet, this more pragmatic questioning only occurred much later. As Rich and Parker (1995) proposed in nursing, without thorough preparation and sufficient structure, the reflective process actually started out being counter-productive.

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<sup>3</sup> I later reflected upon my early memories as a player of coaches talking to me like this, as well as seeing similar verbal delivery modelled by older coaches and tutors in coach education settings. Finally, it became clear from watching further video footage that the team's head coach also used an authoritarian tone of delivery, which all likely informed my own 'performed character'.

<sup>4</sup> Some speech-associated hand gestures can be distracting to recipients (Skipper, Goldin-Meadow, Nusbaum and Small, 2007).

Initially, the horror of seeing myself for the first time was all consuming – I simply knew something was wrong. Even when I returned to the video and liked what I saw, my positive affective response was also acceptingly uncritical – I simply knew something was right.

In the context of reflection as a process of change, such inexplicable judgements about the quality of my coaching can be understood to have resulted from the perpetuation of my tacit understanding of coaching practice, as well as evidencing the beginnings of a critical disruption of this knowledge. Specifically, the positive interpretation evident in the second part of the narrative reveals my vulnerability to and simultaneous preservation of an accepted discourse in coaching (Cushion and Partington, 2014). My assured views about the players being ‘busy’ and of my interventions being useful can be seen to reflect traditional approaches to instructive authority (Kirk and Tinning, 1990), something I perceived as the ‘right way’ to coach. As Cushion (2016) explains, rather than supporting a critical self-awareness, reflection was actually normalising my practice, serving to ensure “conformity to a received ideal image of the coach” (p. 10). Indeed, these practices were routinely used, taken for granted and accepted without question (Nash and Collins, 2006). Yet, the first part of the narrative shows that, as in Partington *et al.* (2015), the video footage had begun to disrupt this entrenched practice (Cushion and Partington, 2014). However, this disruption was not yet actionable. I was able to recognise facets of my practice that I wished to change, but I lacked a mechanism to take meaning from this recognition. In other words, compared to Gilbert and Trudel’s (2001) overview of reflection in coaching, issues to reflect upon were being triggered, but the subsequent and essential reflective conversation was being stifled by the personal emotions attached to them. Recognising this problem and trying to deal with it within the action

research process, I then sought out what I hoped would be a more objective, less emotive catalyst to reflection: a systematic observation approach.

Research has shown that low self-awareness and uncritical, traditional practice approaches can be challenged when connections are made between cognitions, actions and learning outcomes (Hall and Smith, 2006). In other words, coaches need to examine the alignment between their objectives, behaviours, practice structures and athletes' learning in order to narrow the sort of intention-action gaps that were identified in the present narratives (Cushion, Ford and Williams, 2012a). To do this, coaches require the tools to reflect upon the relevance of their practice behaviours (Harvey, Cushion, Cope and Muir, 2013); they need to know what they have done before they can consider its efficacy. In this vein, O'Donoghue and Mayes (2013) highlighted that systematic analysis can support instructional behaviour change in teaching pedagogy, a point underlined recently by Partington *et al.* (2015) in coaching. However, SO data have most commonly been used in evaluative ways and in mediated interventions, meaning the utility of self-systematic observation for learning and development has not previously been explored in the coaching literature.

Systematic observation involves generating descriptive data of observed coach behaviour (Cushion, Harvey, Muir and Nelson, 2012b). This is accomplished by recording frequencies of behaviours against predefined categories either by live hand notation (e.g. Smith and Cushion, 2006) or by using digital and computer technology to assist the accuracy of retrospective coding (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 2015b). Although more sophisticated general SO instruments (e.g. Cushion *et al.*, 2012b) and sport-specific instruments (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 2015b) are now available, incorporating contextual information in addition to the behaviour itself, the Arizona State University

Observation Instrument (ASUOI; Lacy and Darst, 1984) was one of the most widely used and reputable instruments available at the time of this study.

One of the major issues encountered in the second narrative was over the time taken to carry out SO coding. This process is undoubtedly time consuming and cognitively demanding for researchers (O'Donoghue and Mayes, 2013); some procedures require the coder to enter information at least every three seconds (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 2015b). Consequently, based on best-practice guidelines (i.e., Brewer and Jones, 2002), recent SO studies (e.g. Partington and Cushion, 2013; Hall *et al.*, 2015b) have included a four-week familiarisation stage, as well as extensive practice and reliability checks before commencement. It is therefore little wonder that I found the coding process challenging and time consuming given my lack of familiarity and previous experience of using SO instruments. With coaches at elite and non-elite levels citing time pressures as a prominent stressor (Raedeke, Warren and Granzky, 2002; Pease, Zapalac and Lee, 2003; Olusoga, Butt, Hays and Maynard, 2009), and with time already identified as a barrier to coach reflection (Knowles *et al.*, 2001), the utility of self-analysis using SO for the majority of practitioners is highly questionable.

Despite the previous point, with increasing scrutiny of high-profile coaches, the scientisation of sport (Maguire, 2014) and the emerging commercial availability of analysis applications based on those used by academics (e.g. Coach Analysis Intervention System, 2013), it is possible that other practitioners will experiment with SO in pursuit of practice optimisation. This is most likely in professional or high-performing contexts, where SO of the coach could become an extension of the performance analyst's role, or in a similar way to Stodter and Cushion's (2014) methods, as part of longitudinal intervention evaluations by mentors, coach educators,

employers or governing bodies. As such, it is worth considering the second issue that I experienced: broadly, what do SO data actually tell us about coaching practice?

In isolation, even the most sophisticated single-method SO studies can only provide a reductive picture of *what* the coach has done. Specifically, the use of pre-defined categories of behaviour will naturally exclude or fail to capture the full complexity and nuance in what coaches do. Thus, in a study of an expert basketball coach, Bloom *et al.* (1999) recorded more uncodable behaviour (behaviour that could not be categorised) than the coach's use of modelling and four other pre-defined categories of behaviour. In addition, by presenting behaviours separately from one another, as frequencies and percentages, SO studies typically fail to highlight the full complexity of *how* coaches implement their practice. Indeed, within the ASUOI, the combinations of behaviours used over time, their specific, situated contexts and the contingency of these behaviours on interactions with other social actors are all ignored. Finally, despite very general consistencies being identified within the existing database of coach behaviour (Dodge and Hastie, 1993), the ability to draw worthwhile comparisons, even among sport- and/or domain-specific studies, is limited (Partington and Cushion, 2013). Consequently, as illuminated in the second narrative, there is no universal formula for effective coach behaviour. Indeed, acknowledging the situated and social complexity of the coaching process, we are never likely to be in a position to offer specific prescriptions for a given amount of questioning, praise and feedback (as only three examples among a holistic landscape of other coach behaviour).

The futility of how I carried out SO for the purposes of my action research process quickly became clear, but this does not mean that it has no place in supporting coach learning. Perhaps, as Stodter and Cushion (2014) did when evaluating the

impact of a soccer coach education programme on coaching practice, it would have been more manageable for me to reduce the total number of behavioural categories to focus only on those that aligned with a particular intention or outcome. Then, SO data might provide a valuable reference point to reflect, for instance, upon the congruence between the intention to use more praise than scold in pursuit of affective athlete outcomes (e.g. Potrac *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, it cannot be ignored that, when mediated by experts, initial research findings (e.g. Partington *et al.*, 2015) suggest that SO can play a crucial role in helping to address the limitations to accurate recall of coaching practice posed by coaches' low self-awareness (Lyle, 2003). In spite of these points, the SO data did not stimulate deeper questioning of *how* and *why* I was coaching in particular ways, so I continued to search for a more effective approach to reflection.

Narrative three highlights a desire to move beyond the limits of structureless searching and the 'empty data' indicative of my earlier action research iterations. As Johns (1995) said of learning to become an effective practitioner, I had realised that addressing practice dilemmas through reflection required more than acquiring new skills (i.e., systematic observation), it required a critical and personal deconstruction and reconstruction. It was these outcomes that my structured, interrogative questions were developed to pursue. However, such questions were not intended to act simply as cues to support the identification of issues to reflect upon – for me, the initial catalysts to critical reflection actually came from experiencing 'critical incidents' or personally challenging matters (Tripp, 2011). Rather, the questions, informed by the work of Ghaye *et al.* (2009), Johns (1995) and Hardman and Jones (2013), acted as a framework to invigorate the reflective conversations that dissected these critical incidents once consciously established. In this sense, the questions contributed to a

personally deconstructive process; they were about critically examining my *self* and my practice in pursuit of remaking that self and practice in ways that were more desirable and effective (Johns, 1995).

The process of deconstruction in critical reflection is about questioning how we have developed our practice (Fook, 2010) as well as being able to challenge the assumptions underpinning that practice (Høyrup, 2004). This process is aimed at understanding our experiences within their social circumstances and then utilising this knowledge to enhance future practice (Hickson, 2011). Indeed, by challenging the relationship between my values, knowledge and actions, the reflective questions also examined how these values and this knowledge had been constructed and how this might have influenced my ability to be critical. This meant confronting the social forces and power relations that shaped what I was doing (in the action present) as well as confronting the quality of my reflective thinking about that practice (both in and after the action present).

Drawing upon examples from the first narrative, the deconstructive questioning enabled me to move past paralysis and towards a critical consciousness of the origins of my authoritative coaching voice, helping me to explore ideas about uncertainty and power in the coaching context. In addition, I queried why I had not previously recognised these behaviours in my practice or questioned them before. It was through this more structured and critical approach to questioning that I recognised that much of how I had coached was socially sanctioned. My practice was built upon an entrenched legitimacy (Cushion and Partington, 2014), enduring traditions that informed what I did and how I did it – my pantomime caricature of a rugby coach. I came to realise that it was this established order that had prevented me from questioning the validity of my actions before. Indeed, the questions I had

developed helped me to disrupt the cycle of reproduction, a cycle that it has been argued, underpins more widespread, uncritical and cultural discourses of coaching practice (Cushion and Partington, 2014).

By disrupting the taken-for-granted, tacit assumptions of my coaching self, the reflective questions provided an important cognitive space that allowed me to reimagine ways to approach practice (reconstruction; Hickson, 2011). These new or refined approaches were focussed upon generating other, more favourable outcomes when similar incidents present themselves in the future. Accordingly, reconstruction involved searching for more than a set of immediate, new skills, it was also about identifying strategies to develop further skills in the future, as well as affirming and revising values and expectations (Hickson, 2011). In the case of my authoritative caricature, I had recognised the incompatibility between my desire to be in control all of the time and the complex, unpredictable and ambiguous nature of the coaching process (Jones and Wallace, 2005). I had to find new ways to work within and take meaning from this awareness, new ways of seeing myself operating effectively in this world.

Within the action research process, the literature of coaching offered me new ways to understand how I might take meaning from the challenges and ambiguities of my work as a coach. For example, Jones and Wallace's (2006) notion of orchestration highlights the need for coaches to be adaptable through their sensitivity to the intricacies and ambiguities of the coaching context (Bowes and Jones, 2006). This positions the coach as someone who guides, shapes and manages, someone who does the best they can with what they have, and someone who shares responsibility for outcomes with a host of others. As Santos, Jones and Mesquita (2013) neatly described, the idea of orchestration helped me to recognise that good coaching exists



at the edge of chaos, which led me to reframe expectations for my own practice away from the orthodoxy of viewing the coach as a heroic, dominant and controlling transformer.

Repositioning the coach as an orchestrator, someone involved in a dynamic and interactive social process (Jones and Wallace, 2006), also recognises that their actions in the coaching process cannot be untangled from those of their athletes, assistants and others (Hall, Gray, Kelly, Martindale and Sproule, 2015a). So too, Gilbert and Trudel (2001) identified that reflective practice can benefit from a collaborative approach, with respected peers able to contribute to issue setting, strategy generation and evaluative functions within the reflective process. Moreover, Jones *et al.* (2009) highlighted the important role mentors can play in guiding coach learning through questioning and problem setting. In contrast to these points, I engaged in an isolated introspective approach. Consequently, it is important to also be critical of the limitations of my self-questioning, and particularly the ability of these questions to develop self-awareness.

Despite their value in deepening and bringing structure to my reflective conversations, the reflective questioning approach was still undertaken alone and therefore limited by my own knowledge and beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Hughes, Lee and Chesterfield, 2009). One issue here is that much of the mind is simply inaccessible to introspective, conscious awareness (Wilson and Dunn, 2004). For example, a kind of confirmation bias may have existed where I unconsciously accepted those things that appeared to confirm prior beliefs (Mantzoukas, 2005), preventing some practice incidents deserving of attention from being recognised as issues in the first place. Thus, although I had confronted it in other, more conspicuous aspects of my practice (e.g. using a ‘managerial’ voice), I must accept that my entrenched legitimacy will

have operated in more subtle ways as well. By working alone it is possible that I actually missed opportunities for disruption and reconstruction in the reflective process. To counter this, a more rigorous approach could have been to collaborate with a mentor, someone who could have presented an alternative perspective and challenged me in different, potentially more insightful ways (Jones *et al.*, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to vividly capture real-world experiences of reflective practice through a narrative case study of a rugby coach. This paper contributes to a more authentic and holistic epistemology in sports coaching by highlighting the temporal, emotional and contextual qualities of reflective practice. We have begun to problematise an area of coaching that has been widely accepted as inherently good, but which lack rigorous interrogation (Cushion, 2016). In the face of a historically quantitative epistemology, this focus on socio-cultural, political and complex practice has too often been ignored in the literature of coaching. Indeed, we have attempted to evoke the dilemmas experienced by a coach through creative storytelling, so that others might more critically consider their own assumptions (as well as the social and cultural origins of these assumptions) about coaching practice, reflective practice and knowledge. In this sense, our narratives tell a highly personal tale about the practical, temporal, emotional and contextual challenges of one coach's reflective practice, but they also speak of a coach, 'who is socially situated and culturally fashioned, thereby telling us much about a person or group as well as society and culture' (Smith, 2010 p.91).

Despite a lack of research evidence linking reflection and coach effectiveness, reflective practice is a widely advocated approach to coach learning, both in coach education and in coaching literature (Cushion *et al.*, 2010; Cushion, 2016). However, this study highlights, just as Burton (2000) noted in nursing, that in order to challenge culturally situated practice rather than accommodate it, vulnerabilities identified within highly emotive process have the potential to be personally damaging as well as catalysts of change. Without support, there is a risk that reflection lacks structure and criticality, serving to increase anxiety and psychological morbidity or to perpetuate culturally embedded conventions of practice and ineffectively impact upon thinking and practice (Johns, 1995; Hughes *et al.*, 2009). Thus, we have highlighted the importance of maximising the potential of reflective practice by questioning the discursive complexities of coaching practice and challenging the culturally situated assumptions and knowledge that shape the process of reflection itself.

In conclusion, we urge coach educators, mentors and governing bodies (as well as those in sport psychology, sport medicine and other disciplines) to reflect upon how they currently support the development of practitioners' reflective practice. For example, coach educators could consider facilitating action learning groups (Knowles *et al.*, 2001), the use of reflective cards to encourage awareness in the moment (Hughes *et al.*, 2009), video feedback to aid recall (Carson, 2008) and help structure reflective conversations (Partington *et al.*, 2015), and introducing structured questioning to support positive considerations of new ways to practice (Johns, 1995). Furthermore, we raise the potential of personal narratives, within action research, as a means of supporting reflective learning. Undertaking narrative analysis might help practitioners to avoid maintaining a narrow focus on negative issues and provide an

important reference point for interactions with critical friends or mentors to further scaffold on going development.

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