

# Philosophy for coaching rather than philosophy of coaching: some conceptual clarifications

Chris Hughes

Department of Sport and Physical Activity, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper applies some central thoughts and ways of doing philosophy from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I will draw attention to several of the tempting, yet potentially misleading ideas that concern some sports coaching scholars. Reflecting upon the corpus of research in the area, and the sociology of sports coaching in particular, the paper will argue that such inquiry relies far too heavily upon empirical methods and thus raises further, and deeper, conceptual confusions. Inspired by Wittgenstein's "therapeutic" and "descriptive" approach to philosophy and the work of Peter Winch, the paper will expose some features of the concepts of "behaviour" and "habitus". In the spirit of Wittgenstein, these ideas are not offered as new additions to the ever-increasing palette of theory or methods on offer. The paper offers no new knowledge in this sense but instead, more modestly, a perspicuous description of some conceptual matters.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 October 2021

Accepted 15 October 2021

## KEYWORDS

Philosophy; Wittgenstein;  
Concepts; Social Science;  
Sociology

## Introduction

Most readers will not be familiar with Wittgenstein's philosophy; this need not concern us too much given what follows. It is worth proffering here though that Wittgenstein was not in the business of theory building; his philosophical work is not easy to navigate and the point about theory is important for several reasons. Firstly, this paper seeks not to advance any new form of theory of sports coaching or of its associated elements and topics. In fact, the complete opposite will be the case. Ideas about "social theories" will be one of the main ideas criticised herein. Secondly, the paper takes seriously the central premise of this special issue. To that end, my motive is to bring some important ideas from philosophy in to coaching. This is to help remedy a few conceptual confusions that appear to be lurking in this area of study. My doing so is an attempt to show how philosophy can be used for the good of sports coaching research, not as a dinky means to

further the frivolous attempts to sketch out a philosophy of coaching, or coaching philosophies. This is an important distinction and one that if not properly appreciated would lead the reader to think that I am merely adding another philosopher, or “theorist” into the mix just to add a little extra novelty. That could not be further from the truth.

The academic study of sports coaching is still very much in its infancy. This may sound platitudinous however the point is apt where and when we think about the places to which some coaching scholars have turned for their disciplinary, theoretical and methodological tools. Essentially, seeing sports coaching as a profession, inevitably leads to some form of professionalisation of its study. This very journal is a product of this turn as are the courses being studied by many students in universities, colleges and via National Governing Bodies.

All academic disciplines rest upon conceptual foundations. The conceptual substrate for the empirical sciences (broadly conceived) is laid by philosophy. This is a point overlooked by many. Philosophy, as a discipline, is the discipline that is everywhere yet nowhere in much of the coaching literature. A pause to think about the concepts of knowledge, truth, belief, reason and a whole host of moral concepts, show us that wherever there are concepts, there is philosophy; either explicitly or implicitly. Technical concepts, theoretical concepts, “habitus”, “power”, “dramaturgy” etc. are not, strictly speaking, the kinds of concepts investigated in philosophy (at least in the analytic tradition) but they are in some way built up from them or related in some way. Where, if at all, the word philosophy (note that the word, not, the discipline is implied) is included, it is in the oft-quoted but much confused, “coaching philosophy” or “philosophy of coaching”; this will be taken up a little later.

One of the guiding ideas for this paper is that conceptual clarity and/or confusion inevitably permeates all empirical enquiry, this is something that scholars of coaching must consider in order to conduct credible research. Credible research is sensible research. In other words, it must convey sense. What counts as credible and good can be disputed but the bar has to be sense. All credible research, whether it’s accepted as truthful, or rejected as incorrect, has to be sensible; it has to say something. This paper will show several places where sense has not been achieved, it will not be argued that such research is wrong or false, these are proclamations of empirical form; instead, it will be shown that they are senseless. Rather than being blinded by the word “philosophy” or hamstrung by the phrases “*coaching philosophy*” or “*philosophy of coaching*”, actually *doing* philosophy for the study of coaching may well illuminate some overlooked opportunities to legitimise and strengthen coaching research but also, draw attention to some deep confusions.

## Getting off on the right foot

Philosophy is not easy. Reading Wittgenstein is not easy but his thoughts about concepts, concept use, language, rule following and meaning can help us on many fronts. Philosophy is not “the history of ideas”. Whilst it is about ideas, it is not just about learning and remembering which ideas came from where. Philosophy is something that is *done*; it’s an activity or “work on oneself” (Wittgenstein, 1984, p.16). This is one major point for the paper and seeing this thought in the right light is not an easy task. Wittgenstein was not suggested “more reflection” or “introspection” but instead, working on one’s thoughts, one’s understanding of concepts, one’s confusions and bewitchment. Confusions, on this understanding, don’t require solution; they require dissolution and the erection of reminders or “recollections” (Wittgenstein, 2009[1953/2001] §127) of where we’ve gone wrong to thus help dissolve future confusions. To someone confused about how the mind is related to the body, one might help remedy this confusion by describing the associated concepts “mind”, “body”, “relation”. Such a therapeutic and descriptive approach to philosophy, following Wittgenstein, can remind us of how the mind is not a something to be *related* to an anything. Thinking that it is is a confusion and one that can be remedied and dissolved rather than solved; there is a big difference here. Wittgenstein (2009 [1953/2001] §309) famously remarked that his philosophy was there “to shew the fly the way out the fly-bottle”; this is what it means to dissolve conceptual problems. One does this by describing concepts and language, not refutation via antitheses.

I see two different senses of the term philosophy. The one being used here, to follow Wittgenstein, is the sense of doing philosophy, philosophising about conceptual matters, conceptual investigation, conceptual clarification and describing the ways in which we give language its meaning through use or, create confusions through its misuse. The second sense of philosophy is the one used, when speaking of one’s outlook, worldview or approach to things, the metaphysics – a philosophy of life, being and existence come to mind here. A philosophy of teaching, parenting, coaching are related in a sense here; this is a derivative sense. It is critical that we don’t conflate the two.

The second sense is the one overused and colloquially used in incessant talk of coaches’ “philosophies about . . .”, a new “philosophy of . . .”, the club having a “philosophy towards . . .”. Much has been written on this front and the general consensus is that this derivative sense leads to superficiality, more ideology than real philosophy, and more conceptual confusion (see Cushion & Partington, 2016). Seeing philosophy in the derivative sense might lead to one discounting it as a suitable means to proceed with one’s thinking, this would not be wise.

Alternatively, the credible ideas provided by Hardman and Jones (2013a, 2013b) might tempt thoughts about morality, ethics or phenomenology however even this “practical philosophy” of coaching does not really advocate the kind of conceptual investigation being offered in this paper. There is one other aspect of philosophy that causes much consternation for empiricists of all methodological persuasions – epistemology, ontology, and its many strains and variants. Reality, knowledge, reason, certainty, logic are major points of discussion for the philosophically minded; these are conceptual, *a priori* matters that might be considered and applied, or, quite often, misapplied, by the empiricist. For the philosopher, these are of central concern.

Doing philosophy, in the tradition here being followed, is doing work with concepts such as language and meaning, rules, mind, belief, knowledge, thought, perception, sensation. Rather than experimenting with concepts, people, and the things they do, rather than measuring, postulating, testing, inventing new concepts, the philosopher following Wittgenstein seeks to show conceptual relations and connections, show how things are, provide reminders and show different aspects of concepts and words. Our concepts determine the kinds of things that we do.

We will think about some central coaching related concepts and confusions in the coming pages. For now though, I want to provide a backdrop to matters and show some places where philosophical questions arise and conceptual thinking is needed.

### **Coaching pictures and problems: the birth of its study**

The history of the study of sport, let alone the history of the study of sports coaching, is by no means something straightforward to chart. Here the aim is to sketch out a picture using very broad strokes showing the varying disciplinary approaches to study and the recent turn to sociological analyses.

Sports Coach UK, the UK Coaching Certificate, The UK Coaching Framework and more recently, The Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity are in one way or another tied to a shift in UK sports policy and development from the 1990's. This developing policy landscape has influenced University sports courses generally and sports coaching courses in particular. The London 2012 Olympic games no doubt had some impact too and one could also factor in the changing face of education and PE provision also. Paralleling this, National Governing Body coaching qualifications have expanded to meet the needs of both the volunteer and private sector. If there is/was a need to drive up the standards of coaching, if such higher standards could boost athlete success, if significant revenue (cost of NGB courses, cost of degrees etc) could be generated and if jobs teaching

sports coaching could be created then surely seeing sports coaching as a “profession” would be advantageous. A “complex” (Jones, 2006) profession could be even more desirable.

Let us continue with these preliminary sketches and refine a focus in key places. Sport and Exercise Physiology has for a long time provided empirical insights into sports performance. Elite level sport can for example use insights from sports physiology to develop training programmes, enhance further performance and/or, aid recovery, rehabilitation and therapy etc. Strength and conditioners have/could apply these insights and coaches could/do also.

So, our picture now shows how knowledge and understanding of physicality and physiological processes and concepts could, to varying degrees, be considered and used by sports coaches. There tends not to be too much conceptual quarrel for sports physiologists here, their technical concepts are pretty much agreed upon and their science follows pretty consistent methodological approaches and tests etc. Sports Psychology has a similar history and role in a sense. It seeks for the most part to provide knowledge about the psychology of doing sport. With a variety of methods and foci, sports psychologists have been interested in decision making, anxiety, arousal, motivation, perception etc. and again we’ve seen a growth in courses studied and associated published research. Like physiology, the findings of sports psychology could be taken up by coaches at all levels. Unlike physical/physiological concepts and processes, the psychologist faces trickier conceptual questions about “processes”, “states”, “predicates”, “mind”, “volition” etc.

We also have what might be called the social study of sport. Here we could group together the kinds of university courses such as sport studies, sport development, sport management etc. Essentially, and this is harder to characterise due to its form, insights from sociology, education/pedagogy, political science, business, history, cultural studies etc. and some strain of social-psychology can bring theoretical thrust to proceedings. These approaches to the study of sport might seem not to have the same solid “practical/coaching application” as the previously mentioned physical and psychological explanations. There are many ways in which a coach may be interested in such social matters. This, it seemed for some, is where the study of sports coaching could however gain the most. This, as I take it, was one of the guiding premises of “The Sociology of Sports Coaching” (Jones, Potrac, Cushion and Ronglan, 2011) that thus spawned a wealth of sociological investigation.

This very journal in fact, which is into its second decade, is principally interested in publishing research about “the power relations, the learning context[s], the psychological and social complexity, and the discourse, interactions and exchanges evident in coaching relations and networks” (SCR Aims and scope). The journal welcomes a range of methodological approaches, but, somewhat inevitably, these tend to be empirical

approaches, in the attempt to develop “a critical body of knowledge for the emerging discipline and profession of sports coaching”. This, it is argued, typifies the goal to achieve professionalism; not that this journal is the only such attempt, readers of the journal will be well aware of the copious literature base around such a quest. With the picture becoming clearer before us, it appears that the study of sports coaching needed to use existing scholarly disciplines in order to render such inquiries professional about a profession. One additional point of clarification is needed; I take “discipline” to mean an “academic discipline” (physics, history, psychology, sociology etc.) not a subject (education, business, sport etc.) Sports coaching is a topic within the subject of sport that could be researched via a discipline, it is confused to regard it as a discipline in and of itself.

I want to make it clear that my argument is that the turn to sociology and social theory is not innocuous. Sociological investigation requires the same level of conceptual coherence/sense as physiology, psychology and other disciplines. This is easy to overlook and it's also very easy to see sociology as *de facto* empirical; this is also not as harmless as one might think, we explore this next.

### **The empirical and conceptual**

For an initial look at genuine empirical questions one won't go far wrong from seeing the kinds of research typical in good and credible “sport and exercise science”. Sport physiology, biomechanics and rehabilitation research typically adopts a hypothetico-deductive form of inquiry. It yields results that are testable and applicable to sports coaching in some way or another. Science is always partial, iterative and contingent but if done well, science can tell us things about the kinds of concepts that permit measurement and experimentation. Good science yields empirical claims and further hypotheses to be either accepted or rejected.

“How many coaches are there in the UK”? This is an empirical question. “What did the coach think about the game?” This is also an empirical question but one that is in a sense more delicate and devious. One finds out the answer to the first by counting. One usually seeks to answer the second by asking or looking. This is only feasible when, and only when, one sufficiently establishes and appreciates (for a particular purpose) the relevant concepts to adequately enable an answer. Such inquiry should yield data that enable conclusions and answers i.e. “that there are . . . coaches in the UK” or “that the coach thought . . .”

One thing that is often overlooked in such researches is an understanding of how data fuels conclusions that have propositional form. Careful attention needs to be paid towards our reasoning and the nature of propositions, these are evaluable as true or false. Whether there are . . . coaches in the UK is either

correct or incorrect. This, most researchers do appreciate; the issue is however more pernicious for cases of coaches' "experience", "perspective", "attitude" etc., the coach "thinking . . . when the team . . ." These are however no less propositional but they are very different and delicate. Claiming that a coach "thought" X, Y or Z is not as harmless as it might first appear. There is a range of thoughts that a coach could have, but there are also a lot that just cannot be had, this is a "logico-grammatical" matter.

"How should coaches . . ."? Questions of this form tend to be axiological or ethical. The answering of them is not dependent upon evidence as such; that is not to say that many researchers don't seek such evidence though. How coaches behave, the ways in which coaches react, how coaches communicate, how many times they scold etc. have been researched at great length; whether or not they *should* "scold", "comfort" or "touch" etc. is however a different conceptual matter. Despite best efforts to answer ethical questions with data, the bar for whether or not one should do something is not set by empiricism but instead by us as human agents in our form of life. It is here where again we see how and where empiricism casts its spell; many a scholar is easily dazzled by the "ideal of science" (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953/2001] 2009 [1953/2001] §100, Winch, 1990 [1958]), McFee, 2019) and bewitched into confusing conceptual questions for empirical ones, many fail to appreciate the conceptual foundations needed for credible empiricism.

What empiricism is without propositions is anyone's guess, further still, conclusions to such inquiry that are not evaluable as true or false or conceptually coherent are just plain nonsense and surely not the kind of thing wanted if the motive was to establish sports coaching as a profession with a credible knowledge base. Can any sociology of sports coaching deliver on this front? Let it be made perfectly clear, science is not necessarily the problem; anti-science is not being argued for here. It's the misapplication of empirical methods and the resulting conceptual confusion that is being questioned. This is where philosophical thinking is needed and valued most; this could be where philosophy is needed *for* coaching.

Philosophy is the discipline most concerned with concepts but it is very different to the empiricist/"scientific" juggernaut. It's not that the two are in competition though; they are just in different businesses. Science tests things based upon a conceptual foundation, physics works well for the most part, scientific knowledge and understanding helps us develop vaccines for viruses. Philosophy doesn't do this though, but that's not a problem. Philosophy, if we follow Wittgenstein, is about us getting clear on concepts; this is needed before any science comes in. Whilst the coaching literature has found some room for "practical philosophy" very little attention has been paid to theoretical philosophy, and the kind of conceptual elucidation from analytic philosophy in particular. This is somewhat understandable and again it must be stressed that the agenda here is not to start a conversion of sorts. Instead, for

their conceptual and theoretical needs, many sports coaching scholars have in recent times turned to the social sciences and a “borrowing unavoidably from existing sources and the insightful thoughts of others” in sociology (Jones, 2011, p. 7). This is also understandable at one level given the want to explain the “complexity” of coaching but, it is argued, this is to uncritically assume that all that one is borrowing is the good bits from sociology. Surely there are plenty of questionable ideas that could be taken up without due consideration. We will take a look at this not so innocuous sociological turn next.

### **The allure of the social**

For the most relevant touchstone for the social in sports coaching, “The Sociology of Sports Coaching” (Jones, Potrac, Cushion and Ronglan, 2011) seems the most likely of places to start. Pushing back against the prevailing scientific mode of enquiry and their “dissatisfaction with the reductionist treatment of sports coaching” (Jones, 2011, p. 3), the authors of this collection of essays were “led to a sociological explanation” partly out of their “common struggle with the complexity of trying to influence, teach and inspire others to improved performances”. Their “burgeoning belief that sports coaching is, above all, an interactive, communal endeavour; a social practice” (p. 3) led them to showcase a range of sociological theories, analyses and commentaries to help better understand “how to generate the appropriate relationships with athletes” (p. 3) and explain “what is going on in coaching” (p. 7). Such a project is nothing too dissimilar to research in the sociology of work, or the sociology of education for example. Indeed, up until around the time of its publication, as the editors rightfully note, there had been relatively little research into the social nature of coaching.

As someone previously tempted by social theory I am sympathetic and understanding of this allure. After all, if one is dissatisfied with reductive approaches and decontextualised analyses, and the coaching literature is (or, was at the time) thin in terms of sociological theory, then there might well seem to be fruitful means to proceed on this front; it is not hard to see the tempting thought here. After all, if sociology offers a means to “decode” elements of coaching and “deconstruct” and “reconstruct” concepts, “uncover rules” of behaviour and “problematise coaches’ everyday practice” (Jones, 2011, p. 6–7) then cultivating a “sociological imagination” (C. W. Mills, 1959) might not seem like too bad of an idea. The sociological promise of context and nuance, structure and agency is tempting. After all, what’s not to like about finding means to make the familiar strange and explain complexity?



## Sociological pictures – *the curious case of behaviour*

*The activity progresses. How should I alter it further? The athletes are doubtful about how things are developing, a few parents roll their eyes, how is this being received? There might be uncomfortable conversations later when team selection is made and decisions are questioned. How will I explain this? How might things turn bad if . . . ? Great pass Sam! Oh no, why did she look at me like that? Now wait, how will that be interpreted by Theo? How shall I behave? Shall I show that I'm pleased? I'm nervous but don't want to show it . . .*

If one sees coaching as involving something like this picture or internal monologue, then one might be tempted to think that it is complex, messy, subjective and in need of theory and decoding. Would doing this really bring how coaches deal with athletes into “the light of clear thinking” (Lemert, 1997, p. xi cited in Jones, 2011, p. 3)? Is *this* how things are in the “tugging, hinting, proposing, judging, punishing, comforting, depriving and frightening” (Jones, 2011, p. 4) of athletes when they learn?

Is the above picture what is needed to “embrace the social complexity of coaching” ((Jones, 2011 p. 8)? It's hard to see how this picture, this private conversation is anything like what coaches do, or, what any of us in fact usually do. That is not to say that we don't think about things, we don't consider, muse or worry; it's just to say that this is not just what considering, musing or worrying amounts to. One could have the above “silent sentences running through one's head when one considers” but one need not do so. I'm considering my choice of words here as I type but they aren't being silently deliberated and you wouldn't get much of any sense from me if you asked “how are you deliberating?”, “what does this feel like?”. The above picture seems to be the kind of thing that certain coaching scholars are tempted by, they then, or so they think, need a qualitative, conversational, discursive, narrative, phenomenological, social constructivist social science to avail their worries about reductionism.

When I was deliberating my use of words, I was just writing; this is what writing is. Now whilst one might be tempted to offer a theory of behaviours like the scratching of heads when writing, or for our purposes, the looks, questions, frowns, groans, thumbs up etc. when coaching, would this really help “explore how coaches utilize a number of behaviours”? (Jones, Potrac, Cushion, Ronglan, & Davey, 2011, p. 24). One might behave recklessly but one doesn't *use* recklessness in the same way one uses a cricket bat; behaviours aren't usually *used*, they are not *utilities*. Instead, one behaves. That is not to say that one cannot think about one's behaviour but this is not contemplation of its *use*.

Seeing coaching, or indeed any other social interaction, like this, as there being a private inner dimension, is often one of the first conjuring tricks deployed my many in the social sciences and indeed philosophy. This,

Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote his remarks on “private language” (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953/2001]). Essentially, Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to the nature of language and the way that a “private language” is incoherent on the grounds that languages are publicly shareable and observable. My having a sub-personal, subjective, individual language just for me and nobody else is ruled out as incoherent. Coaches considering, musing, thinking etc. are things they do; they are more out there than in here.

To bring such a thought to light, let’s just imagine that our coach above ridicules Theo, he bullies and abuses him over the course of his career. “But, your honor, for me, I did these things because I care for Theo; this is what my way of caring is”, “it feels like this to me”. Appeal to such inner subjectivity and a personal/private concept of care would not be a defence; caring is a public matter. Caring is related to behaviours, yes, but the coach in appealing to his “using these behaviors to care” would not be speaking falsely, he’d be speaking nonsense and many a juror would be suspicious of such a statement. Earlier on when I was considering my choice of word I made a spelling mistake and swore out loud and banged the desk, I didn’t *use* swearing nor did I *use* this behaviour. It’s hard to imagine cases other than contrived or manipulated ones where one might think of a coaches’ behaviours as “used” in this sense. Unless of course one thinks that coaching is a performance.

### **Sociological pictures – *habitus and the inner***

Cushion and Kitchen (2011, p. 44) tell us “even though we are not conscious of habitus and its operation, it manifests itself in our most practical activities, such as how we eat, talk and walk”. Is there any determinate way one could eat or, talk, walk or coach? Does how one eats with chopsticks differ from how one eats with a spoon? Well, in a sense yes and in a sense no. Could anything sensible be said about a technical concept like “habitus” if as Bourdieu (1984, p. 466) tells us, it is “below the level of consciousness and language”? Such mysteries might tempt some theorists and sports coaching might certainly seem “complex” through this lens but maybe that is because the lens is not quite right. A social science that locates such a concept at a sub-conscious level seems rather misconceived and not something worthy of empirical investigation.

Understanding, thoughts, language, preferences, attitudes, desires and alike are not sub-conscious. Again, they are in what *we do*. This is what Wittgenstein is keen for us to appreciate. This is not to advocate a form of “behaviourism”, the likes of which that has been debunked by some coaching scholars, but if we really do want to know what someone thinks, we might want to look at what they do. A cautionary note is needed here though, behaviours cannot be the manifestation of private thoughts or “habitus”, communication is not us getting words out from within.

Instead, as we all know, but Wittgenstein had to remind some of us of this, thoughts are in their expression (Wittgenstein, 2005, §81). Recognising this might disrupt some readers who either listen to what coaches utter in interviews without realising what they are saying. Equally, if observing coaches were the method of choice, it would be a deep mistake to think that their thinking is the magical stuff going on behind the scenes to be gotten at somehow. Either way of course, if such empiricism is the preferred means to proceed, and even if this be a social variant of science, one had better be prepared to accept that any resulting claims to knowledge are propositional and thus evaluable as either true or false.

Have the preceding years of sociology since Jones, Potrac, Cushion, and Ronglan (2011) really helped coaching scholars “better understand what coaches do and why they do it” (p. 186)? Despite the empirical force and fervour, there seems not to be any evidence that the science is in fact yielding greater understanding on this matter. If indeed understanding is what’s required, as has been suggested, philosophy might provide better means to proceed. After all, and this is often overlooked, good science enables *knowledge* generation; developing an *understanding* however is a human/conceptual/philosophical matter (Hacker, 2010). As Hacker (2010, p. 28) points out, whilst scientific knowledge can be passed on, “each generation has to achieve philosophical understanding for itself”. The allure of social science and its assumed knowledge enabling tools might not be the best way for coaching scholars to proceed after all. This was Peter Winch’s (1990 [1958]) thought and this is where social science rubs up against philosophy and produces just “bad philosophy”. Is this where the sociology of coaching and philosophy of coaching are currently sitting?

Maybe, as is often thought, more time and better methods are needed to refine the social science. Could it be that there just hasn’t been enough sociology done on different coaches, at different levels, in different places, in different sports with different methods and different theories? Maybe, however, it might be better to heed the thoughts of Winch instead of attempting to do forms of science that end up with bad philosophy on the social. The social scientific approach might now sound like a “hostage to fortune”. The science, let’s not forget, might not actually be the problem as such, instead, the issue could well be the initial move that assumed that there are *ways* that coaches *do* things and that *these have* reasons all of which could be explained sociologically.

Thus far I have showed that there are different ways to see the nature of concepts, language, sports coaching and the social. It might be difficult to see this and/or to question ones theoretical or disciplinary approach but this, I hold, is where there could genuinely be a philosophical way forward if we take Wittgenstein’s idea about “work on oneself” seriously. The motive here is not to replace one set of theses with others, but instead to show how

sense about concepts could be achieved via the abandonment of theses, claims and data. Much of this future work is left for readers to consider but what this work is certainly not is any form of “knowledge gap filling”. The paper now turns to another aspect of sociology, the craving of theory.

### **Sociological pictures – *the craving of theory***

The absence of a theory of something does not mean that we do not understand it. Absence of theory is not evidence that one is needed; this thought is hard to acknowledge for those in the business of scientific explanation. For ten years I cooked with skill, precision and flair yet held no theories (either formally or tacitly) of cookery, butchery, sauce making etc., it wasn’t “common sense” though. I followed rules and contravened some, playing, as Wittgenstein shows, “language games” (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953/2001]) in a particular “form of “life”. What counted as “understanding” sauce making at one restaurant did not so count at another, standards of correctness are specific to occasions. We need to think about whether such rules are really the kinds of things that are uncovered by data and social theory; the observations raised earlier point to ways in which it is easy to get confused on matters of behaviour “use”; are social rules “hidden” ready to be “uncovered”?

Does the football coach “hug” his players after a dramatic win with a “social theory” in mind? Surely not. Might the “hug” be explained theoretically/sociologically? Well, you might try to but it’s not clear what exactly might get explained. Does the “hug” contain “inner meaning”? Could we “uncover” this? None of the possible resulting explanation seems like anything that Jurgen Klopp or any other football coach might be astounded to hear, nor would the abstract theorised explanation describe the “social action” of Jurgen. The theorising would be about something other than what the action was, a hug. Notions of “sociological imagination” and “making familiar things strange” can be particularly tempting but devious and they can reinforce ideas of the sociologist as being the enlightened theory wielding intellect out to explain the mundane everyday. It’s hard to see how Jurgen would hug differently as a result of such analysis and let’s not forget, one main driving force for “The Sociology of Sports Coaching” is to improve and change things after all. It was mentioned a little earlier about my own flirtation with social theory, the decision to turn away was mostly because I couldn’t quite see what, if anything, any abstract explanation could mean for a human being, or group of human beings, that do things. The purpose of such inquiry just never became clear; it looked either like abstraction just for the sake of it or just confusion. I asked myself the question “what would people do differently if they/we were all as sociologically enlightened as the sociologists”?

For rules to be rules they have to be publicly shareable; notions of “hidden”, “unwritten” rules again casts a spell and distracts the unwitting scholar or social scientist from what is, and has to be, in plain sight. We need to think about the roles of theory also to get a better and more nuanced handle on this. If theories are explanatory, and indeed, thankfully, some theories can be, what do they explain? If they are illuminatory (lens-like), and here again they can be, what do they illuminate? Either way, the nature of “theory” here is far different from the way the word “theory” can otherwise be used often colloquially – “you know, I have a theory on this”, “well, in theory there should be . . .”, “there’s some theory to his madness”. Nonetheless, what is clear is that “theory”, as used in the former cases, is in some way or another being used to help formulate, formalise, enhance, legitimise, or theorise, empirical claims to knowledge. Rather than being a help, failing to recognise the roles of theory, or better still, the role that theory is given in the coaching sociology, compounds the problems identified by Winch (1990[1958]) and we get yet more pseudo-science, scientism or bad philosophy as a result.

Despite their best intentions to investigate the “everyday”, many sociologists of coaching end up doing so via the not-so-everyday. They import or manufacture “technical” concepts rather than thinking about the “everyday” human concepts that we all, most of the time at least, operate perfectly well with. None of this looks overly helpful to a discipline; a topic being explained via the discipline of sociology fares no better it seems. Winch’s (1990 [1958]) argument was that the social sciences rub up against philosophy in places like this, places where theory is craved. The sociologist in these cases is no better off than the philosopher who is tempted by data and theory, both of them fail to recognise the limits of their respective discipline and usually end up confused.

This everyday humdrum human aspect, coaches doing their coaching, is all too often juxtaposed against the technical, theoretical, intellectual aspect, the academics doing their sociology in other words. It is this, it seems, where Jones (2011) thinks there is a “theory-practice gap in coaching” and where “the entrenchment of both camps in their respective positions has done little to advance the relationship between academics and coaches, or, reduce the divide between theory and practice’ (p. 7). Granted, “The Sociology of Sports Coaching” does weave in coaches’ voices to either breathe life into the theory, or, bring the theory down to the pitch side so to speak, but we should really ask the question, is *this* even a “gap” to be bridged?

### ***The theory-practice gap***

Why might one be drawn to the idea of a gap between theory and practice? Well, to think about this we might start by thinking about how we usually use words. “There’s a gap between the window frame and the lead flashing”. Water is getting in when I don’t want it to; the gap is problematic and needs fixing. The gap in this instance is brought to my attention due to the recent wet weather; I call a roofer. Had it not been raining so heavily; the gap might not have been noticed. “There’s a gap in the trees”. Here I draw my son’s attention to the gap and therefore the opportunity to see the kingfisher about the dive into the stream. Rather than being a problem, such a “gap” is enabling. Alternatively, “there’s a gap in the trees” might well be said on certain other more problematic occasions; something involving a hot tub, nakedness and a forest retreat comes to mind. Now, a gap, as a concept, is more than just the absence of something or a division of sorts; there’s no gap between the countries of England and France, it’s just what we call the English Channel.

It would appear that a “gap” between theory and practice, the kind of “gap” thought to be the one important to some coaching scholars, implies something related with the very first example. Also, and very importantly, for these coaching scholars to sufficiently point out something that genuinely counts as a “gap”, one must surely be able to set out where one thing ends, and another starts. The sports coaching sociologist seems to be setting about a problem like the one encountered by the roofer. The notion of a “gap” here presupposes a standard of correctness, this should be specifiable from the outset; this, in my reading of some of the coaching literature seems never to have been forthcoming nor argued for. Instead, this “gap”, along with “complexity”, and “messiness”, is conveniently assumed.

“Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings” noted Wittgenstein (1969). Should the sociologist retort “we don’t mean ‘gap’ like that”, one would point to the fact that their behaviour and research programmes suggest otherwise. If one speaks of a “gap” then a bunch of other concepts come along for the ride too. Genuine, meaningful talk about “gaps” in research, “gaps” between theory and practice etc. are only brought about if we fix a concern for asking about the current state of affairs. If the theory/practice “gap” in relation to the sociology of coaching involves something like better filling things in with sociological explanations of power, interaction, emotions etc. then the nature of existing studies, and future studies, is presupposed. In effect, all this work that is not yet done, but does need doing, will fill the theory/practice “gap”, or so a sociologist of coaching might like to think. We can see how this picture perpetuates endless empiricism and further confusion about the evolving nature of the “gap” and the conceptual ground therein.

Essentially, we have before us something like the following – “we (some coaching scholars/theorists) know X yet coaches do Y; if they knew X then they might V”. Do musicians need to know tonal theory in order to play an instrument? Does the artist apply colour theory when he or she paints? It doesn’t appear to be the case that they need to, although they might. Equally, should one be able to do so, it’s not clear that they now *really* understand their skill. What counts as playing the music or painting the picture is an occasion sensitive matter; on one occasion then yes, the musician can “play”, on another occasion, “no” the same musician cannot. What determines whether they can perform the skill is the context, not just their playing or painting. Need the coach apply a theory in order to coach well? I see no reason why they must nor why, an absence of theory implies a gap between possible theory and practice.

Would applying X instead of doing Y bring about V-ing? Does one need X to V? Some might be inclined to say something like “well yes, coaching is a profession, it is complex and messy and applying theory is what professionals do” or perhaps, “well no not really, one might be totally professional, successful and respected without applying theory” or even “well, they needn’t but it wouldn’t harm them if they did”. It is the former and the latter that coaching scholars seem drawn to; many develop suspicion about the middle one. One striking accusation often made by coaching scholars about practitioners is their inability to “conceptualise and articulate the meaning and nature of such [coaching] skills” (Jones, 2011, p. 5). Whether or not some coaching scholars think that pre-hoc rationalisation is what coaches should be able to do is up for debate; it would be confused to assume that this must be the expectation, but I leave this for others to consider. There is a big difference between justifications pre, and post, event. This aside though, Jones (2011) persists in asking

“where and how did we initially learn such behaviours, and how can we better interpret them? That is, if coaching is about social things and how we get on with and exert influence over others, where do we look to generate a better understanding of how we go about them? The answer lies in sociology” (p. 5). Such a thought has been explored and by now we might be more than wary. One other aspect of this supposed “gap” is that if the theorist knows X but the coaches Y, could the theorist V. Does knowing X mean that one can V? These coaching scholars are seeking to bring about change in coaching behaviour and practice let’s not forget. So, coaching scholars (the theoretically/sociologically minded) and some coach educators, if they really know X, and X really is worth knowing in order to V, they should be able to V themselves or at least help coaches V instead of Y. The big question is, how better off are coaches in 2021 after over a decade of scholarship about the sociology of coaching?

If a sociology of coaching involves knowing how to coach (with all the complexity baggage thrown in), then the theorist should be able to bridge part of their own self-created “gap” and show us the practice that would count at V-ing with sociological sophistication. The “gap” could alternatively be partly bridged by coaches if they understand X, stop doing Y and instead start to V. It is highly suspect that such a “gap” is likely to close or be filled by either side or by a coming together of sorts. This, it seems, is not through a lack of effort on either side or available social theory from one side, it is because there’s no such “gap” there in the first place. The absence of sociological theory is not absent-mindedness, what, after all, could the sociologist teach the social agent (the coach) that they didn’t already know? Instead of being like the “gap” that makes the window frame problematic or the tree line alarming, things are more like the English Channel; it’s just the way it is.

The pronouncement of a “gap” is either an intellectualist move or a deep confusion. Uncritical acceptance of the notion of a “gap” is either self-serving or at best naïve. What is the current state of the “gap”? Has the empirical sociological research helped coaches in their practice? After all, we aren’t short of research on the social aspect of coaching, for some, this is good, I am more cautious about this than most and hope that this paper casts some doubt on the initial scientific/ “scientistic” move towards the social. Clear-sighted thinking is needed about coaching but the “misbegotten epistemology” from the sociology of coaching seems to offer just more abstract theorising rather than the conceptual clarity advocated by Winch (1990 [1958]) following Wittgenstein or, that advocated by Lemert (1997). The philosophy for coaching here being advocated involves describing our concepts, not inventing new abstract ones in the hope of explanation. My quest is about modesty, but clarity is not always easy to achieve. The scientific method can dazzle us as Wittgenstein warned; it needn’t grip us though.

### **Concluding remarks**

Sports coaching is not a discipline. It is an area or topic within the subject of sport that could be researched by using academic disciplines such as sociology and philosophy. In the quest to professionalise sports coaching, and legitimise it as an area worthy of inquiry, researchers in recent times have turned to the social sciences for answers, and, as this paper has focused its critique upon, the discipline of sociology in particular to develop the sociology of sports coaching. The beacon of hope here for many is the one offered by the scientific study of the social; this, it is thought, as this very journal desires, can help explain matters such as “the power relations, the learning context[s], the psychological and social complexity, and the



discourse, interactions and exchanges evident in coaching relations and networks” (SCR Aims and Scope). The move to study society, if to be taken seriously, comes with a whole host of philosophical presuppositions and conceptual matters that require clarity and care. Some of these, this paper contends, have not been taken sufficiently seriously in sports coaching sociology. Instead, the jump to a “social science”, and failure to take seriously the kinds of ideas brought out by Peter Winch, results in conceptual confusion and yet further commitment to “scientism”. It is ironic that the sociological turn seems to have been borne out of “dissatisfaction with the reductionist treatment of sports coaching” (Jones, 2011, p. 3) yet has compounded much of its study to scientism of some sociological form. This is likely when the sociology of coaching is “borrowing unavoidably from existing sources and the insightful thoughts of others” (Jones, 2011, p. 7) in sociology.

This paper might provide some guiding philosophical ideas, or even more modestly, some acute reminders of the conceptual territory that the study of sports coaching inevitably navigates. In the empirical age, scholars of sports coaching need to be wary not to fall into the traps of scientism. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Winch (1990[1958]) and McFee (2019), warn against this. Equally though, endless rumination, interpretivism and relativism won’t do much good either. Instead, as has been argued, the study of sports coaching might benefit from a step back from the science and a closer inspection of what is most obvious. Wittgenstein encouraged perspicuity and scholars of sports coaching might want to approach their inquiries from a different perspective to see the conceptual landscape clearer. This is not to say, “hey, instead of Bourdieu, Goffman and Foucault, use some Wittgenstein”. This is precisely not in the right spirit but there’s absolutely nothing wrong with thinking about and describing the conceptual nature of sport and sports coaching – concepts like knowledge, belief, understanding, language, thought, perception and memory etc. This requires conceptual investigation rather than empiricism. This is where philosophy *for* sports coaching will be helpful, this is also where, as Winch (1990[1958]) noted, social science rubs up against philosophy and where a lot of resulting social science ends up being misbegotten epistemology. This is avoidable.

The paper, in attempting to bring an “outsider” voice, seeks not to adjudicate on matters held most firm by many coaching scholars and readers of this journal. The arguments in the central parts regarding “theory”, “behaviour” and “habitus” are attempts to remind the readership of what they already understand. One of the core thoughts has been how the inward turn, the subcutaneous turn of some sociology becomes a form of bad psychology complete with subjectivism and relativism. This is of no use to anyone. Notions of “multiple realities” and “multiple truths” spring from such a move and propagate deeply misconceived ideas about “self”,

“agency”, “will”, “behaviour” and “action” etc. The paper seeks not to replace social science and notions of “truths” with “absolute truth” but we are beginning to see where the abandonment of notions of truth might take society; this worries me. Credible research, be that empirical research or conceptual research, must take seriously notions of truth, sense and reason; sports coaching research must do so also.

Sports coaching might not be a discipline, but it surely can have disciplinary import to enable a speaking of sense. We can achieve sense without theory as Wittgenstein shows us; philosophy, if done well, is the establishing of such. This philosophy wouldn’t generate new theses, claims and theories about “behaviour”, “self”, “interaction” and the like though; it would instead more modestly provide reminders and clarifications about concepts. This is surely far more valuable than anything offered by a spurious philosophy of sports coaching, but hopefully that idea was given up several pages ago.

The aim here has not been to replace “the sociology of sports coaching” with “a/the philosophy of sports coaching”; it should be clear by now that that is certainly not the agenda and nor is it something even possible to do. In fact, there is nothing that “the sociology or philosophy” of anything could be other than just Sociology or Philosophy. Peter Winch was much misunderstood on matters like this; his quest was not to change social science or right it’s course, he was instead seeking to remind social scientists of how their inquiries are conceptual, rather than empirical, in nature. Whether or not this paper has offered some slightly different, but clarificatory, ways to view aspects of the concepts most interesting for coaching scholars, this, I leave for the reader of this special issue to decide.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks must go to the editors of this special issue. Without the encouragement from Laura and Natalie, and their vision for the special issue more generally, this paper might well have stayed in draft form. Special thanks also go to Dr Leon Culbertson, Dr Craig Collinson, Dr Philippa Holloway and Dr Goran Stanic. Our weekly reading and discussions about philosophy and Wittgenstein have sparked and fuelled my philosophical fire for the last four years.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Cushion, C., & Kitchen, W. (2011). Pierre bourdieu: A theory of (coaching) practice. In R. L. Jones, P. Potrac, C. Cushion, & L. T. Ronglan (Eds.), *The sociology of sports coaching* (pp. 40–53). London: Routledge.
- Cushion, C., & Partington, M. (2016). A critical analysis of the conceptualisation of ‘coaching philosophy’. *Sport, Education and Society*, 21(6), 851–867.
- Hacker, P. (2010). Philosophy: A contribution, not to human knowledge, but to human understanding. In A. O’ Hear (Ed.), *The nature of philosophy – royal institute of philosophy lectures* (pp. 219–254). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hardman, A. R., & Jones, C. R. (2013a). Philosophy for coaches. In R. L. Jones, M. Hughes, & K. Kingston (Eds.), *An introduction to sports coaching: Connecting theory to practice* (pp. 99–111). London: Routledge.
- Hardman, A. R., & Jones, C. R. (2013b). Ethics for coaches. In R. L. Jones, M. Hughes, & K. Kingston (Eds.), *An introduction to sports coaching: Connecting theory to practice* (pp. 113–130). London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. L. (2006). *The sports coach as educator*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. L. (2011). Introduction. In R. L. Jones, P. Potrac, C. Cushion, & L. T. Ronglan (Eds.), *The sociology of sports coaching* (pp. 3–11). London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. L., Potrac, P., Cushion, C., & Ronglan, L. T. (2011). *The sociology of sports coaching*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. L., Potrac, P., Cushion, C., Ronglan, L. T., & Davey, C. (2011). Erving goffman: Interaction and impression management. In R. L. Jones, P. Potrac, C. Cushion, & L. T. Ronglan (Eds.), *The sociology of sports coaching* (pp. 15–26). London: Routledge.
- Lemert, F. (1997). *Social things: An introduction to the sociological life*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.
- McFee, G. (2019). *Philosophy and the ‘dazzling ideal of science*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Winch, P. (1990 [1958]). *The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*, D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans Blackwell: Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1984). *Culture and value*, P. Winch, Trans Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2005). *The big typescript*, C. G. Luckhardt & M. A. E. Aue, Trans Blackwell: Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009 [1953/2001]). *Philosophical Investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [50th Anniversary (3rd edn.); 4th Rev, edn., P. M. S. Hacker & J. Schulte, Eds].