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“ I’m not prepared to sacrifice my life for other people’s tennis”: An
Explorative Study into the Career Narratives of Female Tennis Coaches

Abstract

Research recognises the existence of a dominant performance narrative in elite sport that values a ‘win at all costs’ attitude, prioritising sport over all other facets of life. This narrative commonly privileges dominant groups of men at the expense of marginalised men and many women. To interrogate this aspect of sporting culture further, this study offers a unique insight into the influence of the dominant performance narrative within the coaching context. Specifically, a narrative analysis approach was employed to explore eight female tennis coaches’ career experiences. Findings suggest that career success was judged on adherence to the dominant performance narrative which required a single-minded dedication to coaching. Whilst some of the coaches aligned closely to this narrative, adherence to the exclusive nature of the performance narrative caused tension and conflict for others. The coaches who did not adhere to the dominant performance narrative resisted cultural norms and aligned themselves to other, less dominant narratives. This highlights that career success in coaching can be a multidimensional concept and importantly that organisational culture needs to change in order that alternative narratives become more available and validated. This could lead to coach identity being less tied to adherence to the dominant performance narrative and focused more on personal development and wellbeing. Ultimately, this may result in higher levels of female coach attraction, retention, and progression.

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Introduction

Research recognises the existence of a dominant performance narrative in elite sport that values a 'win at all costs' attitude.¹ This narrative type recognises that performance outcomes are often the only criteria for success and prioritises sport over all other facets of life, along with a single-minded dedication to success.^{2,3,4} Douglas and Carless⁵ make a connection between the dominant performance narrative and "the traditionally masculine culture of sport, which is organized around masculine values, physiques and needs" (p.228). The performance narrative and the informal organisational practices it leads to (e.g., gendered language and assumptions about leadership), have been shown to privilege dominant groups of men at the expense of marginalised men and many women.^{6,7,8} As a result, the dominant performance culture can be indifferent to "the needs and values of women",⁵ (p.228) and particularly challenging for those who follow alternative narratives.^{9,3} The impact of this can be seen in the underrepresentation of women within the upper echelons of sport leadership and sport coaching. For instance, investigations into high performance coaching, such as at the Olympic level, show females accounted for only 10% of coaches across the last four Olympic games.¹⁰ Similarly, only 30% of coach educators in the United Kingdom (UK) are women¹¹, only an average of 30% women sit on the boards of National Governing Bodies¹², and commonly female coaches are less qualified than their male counterparts.¹¹

The focus of the present study was on women as coaches within the UK. Broadly, the underrepresentation and marginalisation of women in sport coaching has received significant exploration in the literature.^{13,14,15} Multiple studies have highlighted the individual and interpersonal level factors that shape female coaches' experiences.^{13,16,17} At an individual level, the level most proximal to the coach, research suggests that female coaches evidence self-limiting behaviours, such as a lack of self-efficacy as a result of the internalisation of societal expectations and stereotypes.^{18,16} Often, female coaches

thus anticipate barriers, such as limited opportunities for career progression, which can lead to them leaving or reducing their involvement in the coaching profession.^{19,16} Research at the interpersonal level has highlighted a lack of support for female coaches from colleagues, family members and friends, as well as challenges for female coaches who experience work life conflict.^{20,21} Together, this lack of support can leave female coaches feeling isolated and disadvantaged.¹⁷

Studies examining the individual and interpersonal factors that shape women coaches' experiences provide some important insight into the challenges female coaches face. However, it is now vital to shift the focus onto the *structurally* limiting factors that hinder women's progress. As Norman et al.¹⁵ point out, the underrepresentation of women in coaching "needs to be understood as a symptom or an outcome of a deeper issue, rather than the problem in itself" (p.395). A range of studies have shown that both organisational and socio-cultural level factors help to (re)create norms and practices that hinder women's progress.^{22,13} The former consists of organisational policies, strategies and practices. For example, research suggests that bias in recruitment and selection policies appear to marginalise women in sports coaching.^{13,16,22} The latter relates to gendered ideologies and stereotypes about sport coaching. To understand women's experiences as sport coaches, it is necessary to recognise sport as a gendered institution or as Davis and Weaving²³ (p.1) put it, a "social practice that celebrates masculine character qualities". Equally, it is important to acknowledge that "leadership has a gendered past" that conflates good leadership with dominant forms of masculinity "such as heroic individualism, authority, and assertiveness"²⁴ (p.127). The upshot is that women are perceived to lack certain valued masculine characteristics or traits considered necessary to succeed as athletes, coaches, or leaders.²⁵ In fact, Schull and Kihl²⁶ concluded that "the masculine context of sport teamed with dominant masculine leadership ideologies often results in gendered logic and beliefs that men are naturally

better sport leaders and coaches” (p.1). This in turn impacts on the progression opportunities and statuses available to women, at all career levels within sports organisation. ^{22,15,27} To further interrogate aspects of sport organisational culture that marginalise women coaches, this study offers a unique insight into the phenomenon within the context of tennis.

Despite tennis being one of a minority of professional sports in which the popularity of the women’s game is equal to that of men’s²⁸, it has also been shown “to place higher value on the capital of men and align sport leadership to the dominant male habitus”⁶ (p.1021). The exclusive nature of this culture is reflected in gender segregation across the UK tennis landscape in areas such as coaching, governance and leadership. Female coaches comprise only 24% of the accredited workforce²⁹ and gender diversity amongst tennis coaches decreases with coach qualification progression. Specifically, only 34% of the LTA Level 1 Assistant Coaches and Level 2 Instructor Coaches are female, dropping to 22% at the LTA Level 3 Tennis Coach qualification for those who want to work full-time within the coaching profession. This drops even further within the higher-level coaching qualifications where only 17% of LTA Level 4 Senior Coaches and Level 5 Master Coaches are female. ²⁹ This pattern repeats itself within gender representations across the paid workforce of the LTA. Despite 49% of the LTA’s paid workforce being female, there is only 23% of female representation at leadership team levels and 13% at executive leadership levels.⁶

To combat this gender segregation, the LTA³⁰ set the ambitious goal of doubling the number of female coaches in the UK from 800 to 1,600 within five years. Four years later, these numbers remain stagnant despite attempts to address the issue with examples of good practice, such as starter and competition training for novice female coaches²⁹, female performance-coach mentor schemes, and a national women’s coach conference.³⁰ A potential reason for the stagnation of numbers is that the

outlined initiatives aim to increase the number of women in tennis coaching by changing individual behaviour and empowering women. The focus of such initiatives lies on the individual level factors that shape female coaches' experiences rather than trying to facilitate change on an organisational and sociocultural level. Strategies that address individual and interpersonal level barriers can increase coaching opportunities for women and help build important support networks.¹⁶ However, emphasis on individual access and other proximal level strategies are not sufficient for enabling conditions needed to create gender equitable sports leadership.^{16,17} The result is that historical values and practices preserving the status quo often go unchallenged.^{6,8,31} Shaw and Slack⁸ (p. 87) make this point clear:

While the intentions behind these policies may be positive, the continual focus on increasing numbers of 'women in decision making' that such initiatives embrace does little to critique the organizational structures that have traditionally constrained marginalized groups of women within sport organisations.

Research into gender equity shows that organisational expectations and values often do not support the ambitions of women that do not fit cultural norms or aim to progress their careers.^{22,32,33} Yet, an individual's sense of self can be harmed if dominant cultural norms have to be rigidly followed.^{5,34,35} Positively, Douglas and Carless³⁻⁵ have uncovered alternative narratives that do and can exist in professional sport. They suggest that discovery and relational narrative types, which value self-development and personal relationships, have positive impacts on career development and self-identity for individuals that do not align with the dominant performance

narrative. These narratives create a wider range of accepted criteria for success and could therefore, help foster more gender-equitable organisational cultures.

Research is therefore warranted to explore the effects of dominant and potential alternative narratives within other sport contexts, such as sports coaching. The aim of this study was therefore to explore female tennis coaches' career stories to understand how they connect to the organisational and sociocultural context of tennis in the UK. Stories can be used to shine a light on shared cultural pressures and the dominant drivers that shape professional identities over time. Indeed, if it is better understood how tennis culture influences female coaches and their responses to the accommodating pressures, strategies could be developed to address the dominant performance narrative and the disproportionate impact on many women.

Methodology

The paradigm underpinning this research is the interpretivist paradigm.³⁶ Interpretivism refers to a subjective reality that differs based upon individuals' experiences.³⁶ The ontological position of this research is the relativist ontology.³⁷ It assumes that reality is not singular or objective, but instead shaped by human experiences and social contexts.³⁷ It further implies that multiple constructed and shared realities exist. To explore these realities to the best of our ability, subjectivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed, guided the study.³⁷ Taken together, these standpoints allowed for the development of an understanding and interpretation of female elite tennis coaches' career stories.

A methodology suitable to investigate how female coaches navigate the British tennis landscape is narrative theory. Narrative theory recognises the complex association between human agency and social structure³⁸ supporting the notion that

individuals rarely find themselves in narratives of their own making.³⁹ Instead, the narratives that guide people's thoughts and behaviours are informed by social and cultural expectations.³⁹ This means that although people tell unique stories, they commonly reflect general narratives that are embedded within their organisational and/or sociocultural contexts.⁴⁰ As such, the stories individuals tell about their careers illustrate general narratives that shape lives and identities within a particular profession.⁴¹ Within the sport context, narrative theory has only been used in conjunction with athletes. We believe that narrative theory is also suited for the exploration of female tennis coaches' careers, as this could help to understand the dominant drivers that shape the context in which these individuals function, ultimately influencing their experiences and behaviours.³⁹

Participants

The participants were eight British female tennis coaches. To protect the identities of the participants pseudonyms have been used and identifiable information has been removed. At the time of the study, participants ranged in age from 37 to 59 years, held the highest levels of LTA coaching qualifications, and had each been in the tennis coaching industry for over 20 years. Between them, they have been lifelong tennis club members, played at junior national and international levels, progressed onto university or professional playing careers, advanced through to higher levels of coaching (Level 4-5), held junior and senior international captaincies, provided support as coach educators, been national age group coaches, held leadership positions, developed county, national and international standard players and are highly regarded within the sport. At the time of the study, Lindsey held a leading national coach position, Chloe and Rachel had recently moved into higher management roles within the British tennis landscape, Wendy was a regular speaker at coach education conferences and

forums, Sam, Jayne, Sarah, and Paula worked as on-court coaches, and Sarah worked part-time as an elite coach due to having a young family. The women within this study were firmly embedded within the UK tennis landscape and had negotiated tennis culture to carve out successful career pathways in tennis. They were therefore well placed to help shine a light on cultural norms and organisational structures that may be impacting on gender equality within tennis coaching.

Recruitment

After ethical approval for the study was granted by the lead author's (Ellen Jones) institution, potential participants were identified through opportunistic and criterion sampling.⁴² The selection of participants was informed by Ellen's experience and knowledge of which coaches would be likely to contribute rich and informative data while providing a range of experiences, contexts, and ages. Ellen contacted all participants in person to inform them about the purpose of the study, what their involvement would entail, how the information would be used, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation.

Lead Researcher Positioning

Participation in the study was likely enhanced due to Ellen's position as an "insider" to British tennis. Specifically, she had also played at junior national level and was a former full-time tennis coach. As a result, she knew all participants and had formed close working and personal relationships with them. The benefits of insider status have been well documented⁴³⁻⁴⁵ and are thought to create the potential for a more personal and less intimidating research environment.^{46,47} This, as well as Ellen's understanding the British tennis landscape and cultural jargon, offered the opportunity for solidarity and disclosure.⁴⁸ Whilst these benefits are a celebrated feature of this study, the concern that Ellen's positioning might lead to a loss of analytical distance was given careful

consideration and minimised through the research team and wider academic community acting as critical outsiders or friends questioning her assumptions throughout the research process.⁴⁴ Further steps were taken to balance the immersion of the researcher in the context with the rigor and trustworthiness of the data analysis process. See the Data Analysis and Quality Standards section for more information.

Data Collection

After written consent was obtained from all participants, Ellen conducted in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with each of the women to ensure consistency in the data collection procedure and freedom to explore individual career experiences. First, participants were encouraged to outline what it means to be a tennis coach in the UK (e.g., lifestyle, priorities, career progression, attributes of an effective coach), before more career related questions were posed (e.g., Can you describe what a career in tennis coaching involves?; What has your life been like as a tennis coach?; Gender equality in tennis coaching is being talked about a lot; what do you feel about this topic?). Due to the women's busy schedules, the interviews were conducted at a number of locations and under ranging circumstances, such as the side of a tennis court whilst babysitting a teammate's child, in a car whilst driving back from tennis events, in Ellen's garden over lunch, at numerous coffee shops around the country, and via video calls. Personalising the locations gave the women time and space to provide considered and detailed accounts of their lives and professional identities as coaches. Each interview was digitally recorded using a smart phone and lasted between 53 and 98 minutes ($M = 68.63$, $SD = 13.90$) yielding 115 pages of verbatim transcripts.

In addition to formal interviews, Ellen regularly engaged participants in informal discussions to clarify information provided and gain feedback throughout the data

collection process. She also kept a reflexive diary to reflect upon these conversations and had access to biographical information about the coaches that was publicly available.

Data Analysis and Quality Standards

The data was analysed using an inductive qualitative approach. First, interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts read and re-read until saturation of familiarisation with their content was achieved.⁴⁹ Second, a within-case thematic analysis⁵⁰ was conducted producing a summary of each woman's career. This step involved considerable thought and care as its purpose was to identify occurrences when the women's stories portrayed narrative tension. As career or life stories are both personal and social, narrative tension can provide insight into moments where personal and sociocultural factors interact or clash with each other. To ensure that the synthesised career narratives accurately represented each woman's experiences, the summaries were shared with them and the coaches were encouraged to provide comments on the scripts and their accuracy.⁴⁷ This step facilitated sustained dialogues with the participants during which data was discussed and additional data collected, leading to minor but important changes to the career narrative summaries.⁴⁴ Third, a second stage analysis comprising of a 'narrative analysis of structure and form'⁵¹ (p.195) was conducted to identify latent binding characteristics within the data. This helped to understand the processes through which (i) tennis culture steered the women towards a particular story of their professional coaching identities, as well as (ii) how these female coaches responded to these cultural pressures. Examining the narrative structures and form of participants' career stories extended our understanding of how sociocultural narrative types shaped or informed each woman's personal career story. To further enhance the rigour, authenticity, and trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis process, Ellen also used her embeddedness within an interdisciplinary research community including

academics from disciplines such as coaching, youth sport development, and sport psychology to frequently discuss and reflect upon her findings, as well as the research process.⁴⁴ Finally, meetings including all members of the research team were held biweekly throughout the data collection and analysis phase to critically reflect upon and discuss each stage of the data collection and analysis process.

Results

Whilst each of the women told their individual story about their coaching career, the analysis revealed moments that bind their stories together as a shared experience. These shared experiences provide a framework to the stories told, with four distinct periods in the coaches' careers emerging as they negotiated and responded to the organisational and socio-cultural context of tennis in the UK. Firstly, their entry point into coaching was a time when the women were processing their tennis experiences in relation to their identities and a potential lifelong commitment to a career in coaching. Secondly, there was an extended period within which the coaches went 'above and beyond' to fulfil their roles as coaches. The women then went through a stage of personal exploration where they self-navigated their understanding of being a coach, in some cases accepting and other cases resisting the dominant expectations of being a professional tennis coach. Lastly, the coaches found contentment with their job and themselves. Each period in the coaches' careers will now be explored in detail.

To coach or not to coach

All of the women, bar one, started their coaching career on the back of a high-level junior or professional playing career. For a few, this junior or professional playing career led to a positive view of a future career in coaching. Lindsey and Chloe both started their coaching careers with this outlook on their occupation. Lindsey explained her playing

experiences reinforced her view that coaching was a viable career option, valuing the skills and experiences she had gained during her playing career. Chloe described that her love of the game and belief in the good of tennis attracted her to coaching: *“I know the massive benefits our sport can give, you know... I wouldn’t be as confident, my self-esteem, I’ve travelled the world, met some amazing people...I’m just so passionate about tennis and what it can bring.”* Although Chloe’s and Lindsey’s entries into coaching were planned, this *“is less usual”* (Lindsey). For many of the women, the nature of their retirement or playing experiences led them to question or have negative perceptions of pursuing a tennis coaching career. These women recalled *“stumb[ling]”* (Rachel) into coaching once their playing careers had ended. This entry into coaching was often unwanted and, in some cases, had been heavily resisted due to feeling trapped by tennis and having limited career options. This was illustrated by Wendy when she discussed her move from professional tennis to coaching:

I had nothing else to do. I fell into it. There were no other options for me. I didn’t want to do it because one of the motivations for retiring was that from the age of 13 when I first picked up a tennis racket I had only known tennis and I didn’t know anything else but tennis and I felt there was a world out there right for exploring. Which remains unexplored actually. Been in tennis this whole time.

This perceived all-encompassing nature of elite tennis resulted in some of the women being apprehensive about undertaking a future coaching career. Despite the women having valued the environment their own coaches had created during their playing careers, some of the women’s experiences of being coached seemed to add to the concerns about pursuing a coaching career themselves:

From playing as a junior, I think I always said I didn’t want to get into coaching. I was like, no I definitely don’t want to do that. Cos I saw what it entailed, and it

entails lots of hard work, unsociable hours, I knew what parents were like and all of those things, so I really wanted to steer away from it. It was just a bit like, I'd rather not go there. (Paula)

Alongside these concerns, Rachel remembered "*being adamant that I wasn't going into coaching*" due, in part, to seeing other coaches "*simply doing it [because coaching] was the only option in their life*" without any passion or enthusiasm. This was consistent with many of the women's views who agreed they only started coaching initially as they were unable to continue their playing career due to a lack of funding or serious injury. At this time, coaching was seen as "*a temporary measure... and a means to an end*" (Wendy) before moving onto "*a proper job*" (Paula). There also seemed to be an underlying feeling that coaches are often "*regarded as a failed player*" (Lindsey). For many, this seemingly accepted low social position of a coach in society and tennis, and feelings of failure in themselves following their playing retirement, added to the initial resentment towards tennis coaching and led to a general lack of self-fulfilment at the start of their careers. Although the women commonly felt it was advantageous to have a high playing standard for a successful coaching career, Sam viewed her lack of a junior playing career as having the benefit of bringing "*less baggage*" and "*looking through a completely different lens*" and therefore not having the negative outlook displayed by some of her contemporaries.

At this point in their careers many of the women seemed isolated by the dominant ideology of being a coach which for them had negative connotations. Coaching was therefore not viewed as an attractive career option. The dominant discourse of an all-encompassing tennis lifestyle resulted in negative feelings for some of the women in terms of their sole commitment to coaching. The lack of a structured entry point into a coaching career and the prevalence of this dominant image of a coach meant the women viewed their coaching career the result of a failed playing career or a temporary measure. Despite this, the one-dimensional nature of tennis did offer the young coaches a sense

of direction which drew them further and further into the expected world of being a professional tennis coach. Whilst this offered these coaches a default career trajectory, the lack of a structured and supported career entry point and positive role models that aligned with their wants and needs, caused considerable tension.

Grinding it out

There was common ground between all the coaches' stories early on in their careers. They went through a period of living up to the expected notion of being a coach, where success is only achievable through complete dedication. As Wendy outlined, this entailed working long hours and having little or no time away from work: *"Grinding it out on court... not seeing daylight... giving the best version of yourself every hour you go on court... it's exhausting... you sacrifice a little bit of yourself every time you go on court."*

A dominant feature of these women's stories, as Rachel explained, was that being a coach *"to a certain degree becomes your life"* and requires sacrifice:

You're doing more than walking on a court and delivering a two-hour session. You're having to do stuff around that all the time, you're travelling away from home, almost everything you do is thinking about the players you're working with, it's way more than just an on-court role. Absolutely no doubt about it, it is a lifestyle and [coaching] is a priority in coaches' lives.

Many of the women valued this level of commitment in their fellow coaches and viewed it as a necessary attribute to fulfilling the role of a professional tennis coach. Lindsey demonstrated this by saying that she highly regards coaches that *"give the extra mile and not going to count the minutes, really hard working, that are prepared to give that extra bit to get the end product"*. Consequently, the coaches seemed to wear their work-ethic as a badge of honour, *"11-12 [on-court] hours in a row, didn't touch the sides"* (Jayne).

Chloe exemplified how the women's attitudes towards hard work formed part of their identities, with her friends viewing her fondly as *"an absolute lunatic, working 100mph... 90-hour weeks... hard work that is out of the stratosphere"*. Living up to the identity of a hard-working tennis coach and the normative expectations of the profession, shaped the belief that 'grinding it out' is a rite of passage every coach should go through and a necessary feature of being a tennis coach.

This outlook came in part due to the coaches following on from what they had seen in coaches before them. As Sarah explained, going *"above and beyond"* in her role is a quality that is expected and needed to provide players with the opportunity to progress; a quality that was afforded by their coaches when the women were playing. In turn, these women expressed the need to pass on that favour to those they were coaching now. Both Lindsey and Rachel acknowledged that at times during their careers they did not find a work-life balance. Indeed, Rachel disclosed: *"At one point my job was completely taking over absolutely everything that I did and that probably did have some negative impacts"*. However, they both felt *"that's what it takes"* if you want to help players be successful, with Lindsey believing *"I don't think anyone can balance that [normal life and the work and life of a professional tennis coach]"*.

The women described extreme circumstances when adherence to this accepted, dominant image of a coach had implications for their personal well-being. Both Chloe and Wendy have suffered serious long-term injuries because of their playing and coaching careers. Chloe remembers working post-surgery against medical advice due to not wanting to let players down and causing a break in their tennis training. Similarly, Wendy felt a coaching career choice is *"not without some cost along the line, more and more, the more you do it"*. She believed that a *"coach's priority is the players"* and recalled feeling that she had *"let everyone down"* when she was forced off court for her tenth surgery. It

seemed that the women sacrificed their own welfare to satisfy the expectations of their profession, especially at the start of their careers. The dominant idea that a player's interests should come first, and that coaching is not only a career but a way of life, defined the coaches' attitudes and beliefs about what it takes to be a successful coach. Whilst this attitude was seen as a necessary feature and requirement of coaching success, it became evident, that for some this caused tension and conflict. Like many of the women, Chloe admitted that she sometimes contemplates the impact her career has had on the direction her personal life has taken:

I would definitely say I've sacrificed. A partner, I found who I thought was the one, we'd been together for 3 years and then it was, like I admit I was working too hard... Well I mean I don't think I want kids but I'm almost thinking had I not been so manic, had I gone down a different path, but then it's like but I love doing what I'm doing.

At this point in their emerging careers, the women were driven by cultural norms to accept sacrifices to their health and wellbeing due to an ingrained belief that success was only possible through prioritising tennis coaching above all other aspects of life. This resulted in the women developing a single-minded orientation towards their occupation at an early stage in their careers, which led them to accept rather than question their identity as a tennis coach.

Finding a way

Following a conflicted early period of their careers, some of the women began to question issues of identity and developed a level of criticality towards their previously accepted notions of what it takes to be a tennis coach. This is exemplified by Rachel who

began to reevaluate her coaching practice realising “*there’s genuine risk of burnout because it is a bit all or nothing... I just think the way that I initially coached... takes its toll on you and it’s quite hard to keep doing that year after year*”. The women also outlined how they started to challenge the impact coaching had on their identity, with Paula commenting “*I do really try for it not to be what defines me, my life being a tennis coach, which is difficult because I want to have a life outside, which is difficult as a performance coach*”.

This challenge to the previously accepted cultural norms, caused conflict for some of the coaches. For example, Sam remembered the dilemma she felt during this period of her coaching career, as despite her long working hours she felt a pressure to “*sacrifice everything*” otherwise the perception is that “*you’re not a good coach*”. Although she saw other coaches sacrifice everything and having “*great careers*”, she was “*not prepared to sacrifice my life for other people’s tennis*”. It seemed adhering to the dominant discourse, that success is only achieved through showing a single-minded drive to their career, was now being viewed as something they could no longer accept and became a problem for some of the coaches.

During this stage of their lives, the majority of the women reported exploring a number of other career options. Wendy “*tried her hat*” at several different coaching jobs, including being a commercial health club coach, National Coach, travelling coach on the Women’s Tennis Association tour, and American college coach, alongside undertaking non-tennis related undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Both Wendy and Paula considered career options outside of tennis, with Paula starting a part-time job and Wendy setting up a small business in the area of her studies. Due to a combination of factors, and the realisation that office-based roles have their own drawbacks, they both returned to tennis coaching. Jayne at one point also tried to make a move away from full-time coaching in pursuit of “*more sociable [working] hours*” but she found her new venture did not offer her

the same rewards as coaching and returned to her previous role. Rachel's ambition to push herself "*slightly outside my comfort zone*" has been a constant force in her career. She has actively sought career opportunities and made very purposeful professional development decisions to "*help give myself options*". She feels this up-skilling means that she has not become "*stuck in a box*" which has been a fear of her's and something she has seen many times in other coaches. It seemed that the women needed to explore different career and professional development options to find out who or how they wanted to be, before making a definite decision about what direction they would take their careers.

The women at this stage of their careers began to create their own understanding of being a tennis coach that aligned more closely with their needs and values. During this self-discovery they questioned the dominant image of a tennis coach, which as Wendy described, is to be "*unbelievably thick skin[ned]*" and, as Paula explained "*a know it all*". Aligning with dominant forms of masculinity, being a heroic, authoritative, assertive type of person was a pressure that Sam felt initially in her career. However, as many of the women attested to, she learnt to make peace with herself and resisted the widely accepted authoritarian image of a coach and found her own way:

It's taken me quite a long time, 20 years or something ridiculous, to find who I am as a tennis coach and I feel like I'm very settled in it now but it took me a long time to get there. I think the perception is you have to be a bit of a hard ass to do it well, you have to shout a lot and you don't, you have to build good relationships and the player trusts you, then it's easy, you don't have to shout at them, you don't have to be nasty and berate them and that's the perception that I initially had, is that you have to be a certain type of, you know, behave in a certain way to get results but you don't have to, it's much better to play to your strengths than try to be someone that you're not. And that took me a long time to figure out as a coach.

Many of the women, as well as resisting the dominant authoritarian image of a coach, started to question the widely accepted notion that the only focus of tennis coaches should be to help athletes maximise performance. This led them to a more natural, holistic approach to their practice, which they found more rewarding. As Rachel explained, “*taking a step back*”, having a less direct approach and developing people as well as performers became a more valued part of her coaching role:

I guess in the morning I have a different purpose in life, that I can help others and that’s what I’m proud of, helping others develop. It might take them a little bit longer to help them problem solve themselves and make some decisions by themselves even if it means mistakes. Because actually as a life skill it’s something they are going to have to do. You’re not only helping them become better tennis players you also have a really important role to play in their development as a person. Because you’re quite a big influence, you can have quite a lot of time and impact on them holistically as well and I think that’s another big part that I really enjoy about what I do. Hopefully fingers crossed in some tiny way a positive impact on them as a person.

At this stage the women also began to prioritise relationships and connectedness. Wendy demonstrated this by attributing the longevity of her coaching career to the support and friendship of the fellow coaches she worked with. She felt that “*sharing ideas*” and “*camaraderie*” reduced the feeling of isolation she had previously experienced working in the profession, due to rivalry between coaches and working one to one with players. Similarly, Paula felt that she was “*just going through the motions*” until a fellow coach took her under her wing and reignited her passion for the game. This type of collaborative environment was identified by many of the women as very important, as it inspired them to retain and progress their coaching careers.

The inherent view of being a tennis coach and conforming to this image that the women described early on in their careers stood out as a focal point to the research. Equally striking, was the following period of challenge to the cultural norms that helped shape this initial view, and a resultant period of self-discovery. In sum, creating alternative ways to be a coach allowed some of the women to find meaning and coherence to their tennis coaching career. For these women, this chapter in their career saw an extensive period of conflict, deliberation and action that saw them move away from a default career course to one that they purposefully constructed for themselves.

At peace

All of the women interviewed for the purpose of this study eventually found a path to career satisfaction that aligned with their personal values. The women who identified more closely with tennis culture's dominant view of a coach described being happy early on in their careers. Rachel had felt a *"huge [sense of] purpose"* in her varying roles throughout her career and Chloe was in a job she *"absolutely love[s] doing"*. Lindsey had no regrets regarding her career and had *"done everything that I wanted to"*.

Those who did not align with the dominant view of a coach took longer to find peace with their job and themselves due to reevaluating their understanding of what it means to be a successful coach. This period of self-discovery and resisting the dominant image of a coach was very important for these women, with Wendy disclosing she no longer views *"coaching as the punishment for not doing better in my playing career"*. Paula's career had seen her change from *"just going through the motions"* to feeling she was *"on an upward path with coaching... still developing and getting better... [having] a good time"*. Developing this increased personal agency enabled the women to shape their working lives in line with their personal values, needs and ambitions - within and outside of tennis.

Sam gained huge satisfaction from her coaching and took the approach to *“do the best you can, help as best you can”* within her own constraints and felt she brought her best to her job by not being *“over invested in tennis and coaching”*. Jayne, who *“loves”* tennis coaching, described being selective about which players she now chose to work with and benefiting from the flexibility a coaching career can offer if she put her own interests alongside those of her players.

What became clear from listening to the women’s stories was that they found diverse routes to career satisfaction whilst also being highly regarded within the tennis community. Although some of the women took longer to find their way in their careers, all the coaches described arriving at a place in which they viewed their careers positively and enjoyed working in an area they loved and were truly passionate about.

Discussion

Female coaches account for less than a quarter of the British tennis coach workforce.²⁹ Fresh thinking has been called for to understand this underrepresentation by exploring the issue at an organisational and socio-cultural, rather than individual level.²² Through a narrative approach, this research sought to explore how the exclusive nature of sport coaching manifests itself in tennis, to further understand the gendered nature of the context. To this end, eight female tennis coaches' career stories were analysed to identify narrative structures that shaped their professional identities. Highlighting how these women navigated the dominant masculine discourse throughout their coaching careers can inform how women coaches should be supported at an organisational and cultural level.

The women who featured in this research aligned to the performance, discovery and relational narrative type identified by Douglas and Carless³⁻⁵ to differing extents during their careers. Whilst a few of the women aligned more closely with the performance narrative, all the coaches drew from alternative narrative types at some point in their careers to navigate their coaching experiences. In keeping with Douglas and Carless's³⁻⁵ research, the dominant performance narrative did at times impose a rigid identity-framework that shaped the women's understanding of what it takes to be a successful coach. Within this, understanding success was perceived as a singular concept, which resulted in the women judging themselves solely on their ability to adhere to the dominant image of a coach which typically values masculine characteristics.² Adherence to this accepted image had negative implications for some of the women's personal well-being^{5,24,25,26} Personal lives, relationships, injury concerns, social and family commitments were side-lined to meet the normative expectations of being a coach.³¹ The focus upon the performance narrative thus caused considerable tension and conflict for the women who

did not align closely to the dominant narrative.³⁻⁵ These findings are consistent with research suggesting that female narratives are often multidimensional and therefore do not align to the dominant, one-dimensional performance narrative.^{3,9,13,22}

To avoid potential narrative misalignment³⁹ aspects of the discovery and relational narratives allowed the women who did not align to the performance narrative to find meaning and coherence within their coaching careers.³⁻⁵ They aligned with these alternative narratives by drawing on support at an individual level¹⁶ for example the confidence gained from their playing experience, to help them transition into, and succeed at, tennis coaching. Although the importance of developing a “sense of relatedness with coaching colleagues”¹⁶ (p.24) emerged as an essential mechanism for changing their coaching story (for the better), it was the individual agency of coaches that helped establish a supportive work-place environment. Less proximal influences such as interpersonal and organisational support were less evident in their stories. Although brought to the fore by individual level supports, these women demonstrated that alternative ways of being a professional tennis coach can and do exist. Specifically, when the performance narrative failed to provide a workable template for the lives of the women, they sought out opportunities that worked better for them, such as welcoming mentorship and collaborative working arrangements. This highlights that the women constructed their own understanding of being a coach and reframed their view of success from a sole focus on the performance narrative to a multidimensional concept that valued self-development and relationships.² Searching for and aligning themselves to these alternative narrative types allowed the women to navigate difficult times in their careers and avoid the general trend of female coaches reducing their involvement within the profession or leaving it all together.^{16,19}

The findings of the study show that the narratives Douglas and Carless³⁻⁵ identified within elite sport also exist and have similar implications for professional identity development within tennis coaching. The study also expands upon Douglas's and Carless's findings, as it outlines that the boundaries between the narrative types are more permeable than previously described. Specifically, if the performance narrative caused conflict or tension during their coaching careers, the women interviewed drew on discovery and relational narratives to construct professional identities that aligned more closely with their beliefs and needs. The women thus showed that they were not bound to a particular narrative or normative expectation of being a professional tennis coach, and were able to move flexibly between different narrative types depending on the different chapters within their lives. Nevertheless, it took the women time, tension and effort to come to this realisation, and having to draw on considerable personal agency as alternative narratives were not as visible and easily accessible as the dominant performance narrative.

The women's career stories provide important insights that have practical implications for tennis governing bodies, policy makers, and system builders. Specifically, the dominance of the performance narrative can be damaging for female coaches. Like other narrative research in sport, this study thus advocates that steps should be taken at organisational and cultural level to challenge the dominate performance narrative and make alternative narratives more accessible and widely accepted.^{2,3,4,5,9} Although the women that featured in this study drew upon individual support to move between narrative types, it is important that alternative narratives generally become more widely seen and heard in the interest of female coaches who may be less well connected and positioned within the British tennis landscape. This could balance the current emphasis evident in elite tennis coaching on adherence to the dominant narrative as the only form of success. To do this, means such as coach education, promotion of positive role models that draw

from the different narratives, provision of diverse opportunities and pathways for coaches to explore, and consideration towards more collaborative working environments can be used to promote change in the values and behaviours currently rewarded within tennis coaching culture. If alternative narratives become more available, coach identity could be less tied to their adherence to the performance narrative and more focused on personal development and wellbeing resulting in, in this case, higher levels of female coach attraction, retention, and progression.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore female tennis coaches' career stories to understand how they connect to the organisational and sociocultural context of tennis in the UK. The findings suggest that career success was judged on adherence to the dominant performance narrative that privileges traditionally masculine needs and values.⁵ The exclusive nature of this dominant performance narrative in tennis coaching culture caused tension and conflict often resulting in a cost to the women's personal wellbeing. To navigate successful careers the coaches drew on considerable individual agency to resist cultural norms and align themselves to other, less dominant narratives. This highlights that career success in coaching can be a multidimensional concept and that organisational culture needs to change in order for alternative narratives to become more available and validated. The research has offered an important contribution to the literature and the coaching community more generally by illustrating there are alternative ways to be a coach and to frame career success than currently defined by the dominant performance narrative. Importantly, if the tennis landscape only recognises the dominant performance narrative it will remain unchallenged and therefore the way things must be. The educational and social implications of alternative narratives are extensive and this

study hopes to provide a broader understanding of being a coach as seen through the eyes of eight female tennis coaches. Through reading this study, the intention is, that those working in connection with the UK tennis coaching landscape consider their role within the current dominant discourse. Thereby, encouraging active dialogue which would result in more broadly informed actions that could lead to more inclusive coaching norms for other female coaches to story their careers and lives in ways that could fit more closely with their own developing identities and needs. Whilst this paper argues that the performance narrative has a disproportionate effect on women, we also recognise that this narrative can have negative implications for men. Future research should thus be directed at men's experiences of this role as well to make gendered comparisons. This is an important line of enquiry to understand women's continued commitment and participation in a tennis coaching career.

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