Title Page

The traditional, the ideal and the unexplored: sport coaches' social identity constructs in film.

Sue Jolly,

School of Sport,

Leeds Beckett University,

Leeds,

United Kingdom

LS6 3QS

s.jolly@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

01138123236

John Lyle,

School of Sport,

Leeds Beckett University,

Leeds,

United Kingdom

LS6 3QS

j.w.lyle@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

01138123251

(Corresponding author)

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Sue Jolly, School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom

John Lyle, School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom

Abstract

The sport coaching construct within mainstream fiction films has been described as stereotypical, reinforcing the traditional notion of the sport coach as a technician who conquers all, or a hapless individual, open to ridicule from athletes and fans (Crosson, 2013). Although this depiction is also prevalent in some independent fiction films and documentaries, film sub genres such as social realism and 'fly on the wall' style documentaries move away from the 'Hollywood sports film structure' (Crosson, 2013) towards stories that focus on everyday coaching moments. Through a critical discourse analysis of two UK films (*Bend it Like Beckham* and *Twenty Four Seven*), both featuring sport coaches in central roles, we reflect critically on these mass media multi-dimensional representations in terms of the sport coaching professionalisation agenda in the UK and the social identification process of sport coaches within their sporting environments.

Keywords

Sport Coaching, Film, Social Identification, Professionalisation, Coaching Roles

Introduction

In this paper we examine the identity portrayal of sport coaches in two independent UK films (*Bend it like Beckham* and *Twenty Four Seven*). Although fictional and based on the directors'/screenwriters' notions of what sport coaching means to them, the sport coach characters have the potential to propagate an image that reinforces or challenges that being described by academic writers on the professionalisation of coaching, or reflects the narratives of the majority of sport films, depicting the sport coach as a mechanism to achieve a utopian dream (Crosson, 2013). Acknowledgement of how media, and in particular film, portrayals of sport coaches invoke or ignore emerging concepts of sport coaching is central to the professionalisation debate. Awareness of such depictions may prompt the policy

community in sport coaching to consider critically how these portrayals contribute to the development of coaching as a valued profession. They also offer sport coaches an opportunity to self-reflect on these sometimes stereotypical representations by comparing and contrasting their own perceptions with those of the directors/producers (Hills & Kennedy, 2013).

Gilbert and Côté (2013) have reclassified a number of conceptual and theoretical frameworks into one overarching framework, proposing three types of knowledge – professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal. These different perspectives attempt to delimit professional knowledge but, more importantly, form the basis of a conceptualisation of professional practice that is evident in the coach's behaviour. Sport coaches' professional knowledge has been situated in everyday social interactions within particular contexts (Cassidy, 2013; Cushion, 2011; Jones 2009). In most of this work, there is an implicit link between the development of knowledge and the social construction of the sport coach's identity. In other words, implicit within professional knowledge construction (description, categorisation and process) is an assumed meaning related to sport coaches' identity construction. This is a contested arena and ripe for further study. In the context of this study, the meaning we attach to social identity construction and by default professional knowledge is influenced by Jenkins' (2014) ideas on social identity.

Jenkins describes social identity/ identification as a function of both the individual and the collective; 'it's how we know who's who and what's what' (2014, p. 14). It is a process rather than a set of characteristics that we possess. For Jenkins, therefore, knowledge construction is an implicit part of the process of social identification. Social identity can be described in terms of three categories that are interlinked and time-dependent; the individual order (the world of embodied individuals and what goes on in their heads), the interaction order (the world of co-presence and relationships between embodied individuals, what goes on between people), and the institutional order (the world of patterned, organised and symbolically templated ways of doing things) (Jenkins, 2000, p. 5). In terms of sport coaching knowledge and social identification within films, we will be cognisant of the meaning of sport coaching identity as constructed through the social interactions and storylines, the process of character building, how the directors show their interpretations of coaching through the everyday interactions within the plot, and the patterns and symbols within sport that appear to have influenced them.

Hills and Kennedy (2013) go some way towards exploring the notion of everyday coaching practice. However, their comparisons were mainly concerned with mainstream Hollywood films and coaching behaviours evident in youth coaching. There are no studies

that explore the British sport independent film genre in relation to sport coaches' identity constructs. This paper aims to address this issue via a critical discourse analysis of two films – *Bend it like Beckham* and *Twenty Four Seven.*

Independent films are a specific genre of films. Genre refers to the film's form; for example, the style of narrative cinematography and sound, and the way that the directors play with these elements leads to specific conventions within particular film genres. The independent film genre in Britain has a long history, in which sport has played an important role, tackling issues including national identity, regionalism and cultural conflicts, particularly within a working class setting, in films such as *The Flying Scotsman, Mike Bassett, When Saturday Comes* and *Bend it Like Beckham.* These films have borrowed from the narrative arch of the Hollywood sports films - sport's capacity to resolve different social issues (Rowe & Lawrence, 1998). Alongside social realism and new British realist films, there is a sub-genre of independent films that challenge the more formulaic model of narrative found in mainstream independent films. These films focus on the struggles of everyday life, painting a bleaker picture of society. They are recognisable by a more adventurous narrative and cinematography style, typically borrowing from art house methods of production. [For example, see *This Sporting Life, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Kes, Looking for Eric* and *Twenty Four Seven.*] Although the production process may at first appear to be insignificant for the analysis of sport coaching constructs, Scott (2013) illustrates how the genre of new British realism and the DIY production process have produced an in-depth ethnographic style that has the capacity to explore people's 'lived experience'.

The sport coach construct in British sport films - The *traditional* notion of the coach

In most of the coaching-related British independent films, the coach could be described as either the hapless, comedic character, a figure to be made fun of, or the stereotypical coach/instructor who spend his time shouting instructions from the sidelines to 'motivate' his team. The former is portrayed in the film *Kes*:

'Ken Loach's poignant 1969 classic Kes features coach Brian Glover taking a rather sadistic session for the boys at his school. Glover likens himself to Manchester United great Bobby Charlton in scenes that seem to stick in the memory for many football fans and film buffs' (Metcalfe, 2014).

Robert Carlyle's portrayal of an ex-football player who is now coaching the local football team in *There's only one Jimmy Grimble* demonstrates the latter.

The film and media research associated with analyses of this genre of film tends to analyse it in terms of the sub plot, that is, the relationship between sport and society. For example, Crosson (2013) and Babington (2014) focus on the links between sport and national identity. The coach's role is analysed, if at all, in terms of this broader perspective, not in terms of the construction and portrayal of the sport coaches' sport identity, which is not treated as a problematic theme.

Bend it like Beckham and *Twenty Four Seven* have each been a focus for analysis for media researchers. Studies on the former have highlighted the link between transcultural issues and race within contemporary Britain (Rings, 2011). In these, the coach is critiqued in terms of his national identity in relation to the national identity of the main protagonist Jess. The analysis of the coach also links the characters' storyline and construction to the typical Hollywood male narrative. There is no reference to the coach's role within sport or the link between everyday coaching skills and practice in relation to construction of the coach's identity. Godfrey (2013) also analyses at length the character of Darcy in *Twenty Four Seven*. Her work focused on the link between masculinity and loss of this in 1980s Britain, in a context of political tensions.

Hills and Kennedy (2013), however, do address the relationship between everyday coaching behaviours and the coach's representation within society. In their research they explore the link between the evidence-based coaching styles displayed in effective practice in youth sport and the coaching styles represented in sport films. They analysed three Hollywood mainstream films, demonstrating how the constraints of the 'Hollywood' formulaic treatment of the mainstream sports film led to stereotypical representations of coaches. The coaches displayed 'Hollywood masculinity', a character profile that leaves no room for realistic coaching styles to be part of the identity construct.

The characterisation of sport coaches as authoritarian and self-focused has been used in polemical portrayals of 'traditional' styles of coaching as a critical reference point against which to encourage more 'enlightened' practice (Kidman, 2005). There is a corpus of writing in coaching that portrays this traditional style of delivery as reflecting and reinforcing power hierarchies and expectations in an unproblematic and unconsidered way (for example, Potrac & Jones, 2011).

The professionalisation agenda, professional knowledge and the *Ideal* notion of the coach

There is a professionalisation agenda within the sport coaching policy network that is focused on improving the status of sport coaching and developing an occupation with a distinctive

body of knowledge that is evident in education and training, and an ethical framework (Duffy et al., 2011; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). The recent interest in the professionalisation of sport coaching has been well documented (Duffy et al., 2011; ICCE, 2013; Taylor & Garratt 2010; 2013). Much of the literature is aspirational and idealised. Duffy at al. (2011) argue that there is opportunity to evolve the current landscape for coaches in the UK and internationally, to increase the quality of sport coaching practice and its status. The UK Coaching Framework (Sports Coach UK, 2008) and the International Framework for Coaching Excellence (ICCE, 2013) outline similarly idealistic visions. These proposals identify the need for coaching systems building and include reference to an evidence-based body of knowledge that will be applicable to a diverse range of sporting environments. Such documents are aimed at sport coach policy makers and administrators, acting as a reference point for their coaching systems building roles. This led to national sport organisations offering 'ideal' coaching practice scenarios to support their education programmes. In some instances these come in the form of *You Tube* clips of sport coaches in staged coaching settings. These clips offer a prescribed and what may be interpreted as an ideal way to coach. Taylor and Garrett (2010) believe that there is resistance to this construction of the coach identity described by the policy makers.

Much of the debate about professionalisation remains aspirational and is conducted largely within the sport coaching community itself. There is limited evidence, if any, of a drive towards profession status from the public's perception of the coach's role or contribution to social priorities. In addition, the documents referred to above have an element of 'moral high ground' about them. Unsurprisingly, they promote a set of ethical behaviours and practices that may not be evident in much of coaching practice. We speculate that media representations of the coach are unlikely to reinforce the idealised conception of coaching emanating from the coaching policy network.

Method

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a critical analysis of two films and to document the depiction of the coach's role therein. We chose two British independent sport films in which coaches play a pivotal role to the plot. These were purposefully chosen to reflect differences and similarities within the identity construct of the coach.

We accept that our personal perspectives about professional knowledge and what it means to be a coach will undoubtedly influence the process; attempting to minimise this bias by recognising the complexity associated with classifying professional knowledge. We chose not to use one theoretical framework to guide the data collection; rather we will remain

cognisant of all the different perspectives. High-level terms associated with professional knowledge act as reference points during the analysis process; for example, coaching behaviours and communication, sport-specific technique, tactical decision making, planning and pedagogy, coaching communication and emotions, and self-reflection. We use a concurrent inductive and deductive analysis process similar to McCarthy and Jones (2007).

Sue watched each of the films three times, took notes and coded the transcripts. She also analysed selected interviews with the directors and the actors playing the coaches, in addition to sampling purposefully film reviews from established British film critics. We chose critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the analysis tool, adopting Fairclough's (2010) conceptualisation of CDA, in which text is always analysed in relation to both other texts and social contexts. It involves three elements, 'text, discursive practice and social practice' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 138). We were aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of this method of analysis, including those arising from our position of power within the research process, and the tendency to analyse the deconstruction of text, as opposed to both deconstruction and reconstruction. The latter process is more likely to bring out positives and negatives within the analysis, while also highlighting the lack of multiple voices represented; for example, audience reception.

To counteract these weaknesses in the analysis technique, we make our position as interpreters explicit, self-reflecting on our own interpretations and our use of language, and by acknowledging our position of power as authors. To address a lack of multi-voice representation, we have used Hall's Reception Theory (1980) to guide the film and media analysis. This involves including opinions of filmmakers, actors and film critics about the film's meanings. We focus on the film-making process to highlight the impact this has on the film's storyline and content.

A brief outline of the film storylines is as follows:

Bend it like Beckham The story is about an Indian girl Jess, who is obsessed with playing football, but her family do not approve of girls playing football and would rather she settles down and married a nice Indian Boy. Unbeknown to her parents, Jess joins the girls' local football team and with the encouragement of her coach, Joe, and her best friend Jules, and after many trials and tribulations, she is encouraged to confront her parents and carry on playing football, in order to help the team win the league and to gain a scholarship to the USA.

Twenty Four Seven Darcy, a middle aged man from a typical working class town in Nottingham, decides to try to help the lads of the estate, to give them a chance to break free from a life with no hope. He sets up a boxing club and through the boxing, the lads

go on a journey of discovery about themselves. Darcy sets up a public fight, which gets all the community involved to prove that they can do something. However, as the fight date gets closer, the lads' confidence wanes, which leads to disastrous consequences.

The stereotype - *Bend it like Beckham*

The first scene with Joe, the coach: he is a handsome figure, dressed in a tracksuit and long overcoat, the football 'uniform' that is common amongst managers in British professional football. Logos displaying information about sponsors are emblazoned on the tops and trousers. He is watching a training session, which is conducted on a football training ground that is well resourced. All the girls are in pristine football kit. Initially, no eye contact is made when he speaks to Jess and Jules; he appears withdrawn and slightly non-plussed about the whole situation, as if he's going through the motions.

> Coach: I want two groups of three in each group. Let's move! - How do you know she's serious? I haven't got time to piss around Jules.
> Jules: She's got balls, Joe. - At least watch her.
> Jess: Hi.
> Coach: Where do you normally play?
> Jess: In the park.
> Coach: I mean what position?
> Jess: Sorry! I usually play all over, but up front on the right is best.
> Coach: Get your boots on.
> Jess: I haven't got any.
> Coach: Right, join in. Start warming up.

Here the coach uses familiar instructional techniques and, at the same time, adopts an informal but aloof manner to both connect with and control the situation. His sullen disposition is used to build up our knowledge of his past; a past that includes 'failures' in football due to injury, the ex-athlete turned to coaching, a typical storyline of the Hollywood masculine sports film (Crosson, 2013).

> Coach: Are your folks up for it?
> Jess: Yeah, they're cool.
> Coach: Suppose you'd better come back, then. I've got to go and open the bar. Some real work!
> Jules: He likes you.
> Jess: You think so?
> Jules: He asked you back, didn't he? - How long have you been playing?"

The coach is now interested in Jess. He can see that she can play, and because of this, his manner softens. He is more engaged in the conversation, offering eye contact and checking that it is okay with her parents for her to play football. Here is the reference to Jess's

Indian upbringing, rather than the introductory routine that he carries out when first meeting new potential players. There are no formal introductions, no managing of expectations, an interaction process that might be expected in a structured community sport club/school environment. At a societal level, the writer Chadha briefly touches on the status of community sport in the UK. Joe references the fact that he has to do 'real work', in the bar, indicating that he is a volunteer coach for the girls. This topic is revisited at the end of the film when Joe is offered a more 'prestigious' job of coaching the junior boys team, which, to complement the film's overall message, he turns down.

In the remaining scenes within the film, the coaching dialogue between Joe and Jess was largely superficial, and there were limited examples of social identification. The dialogue and scenes with Joe appeared more to do with building up the romantic storyline than a reflection of athlete /coach interactions. Although we do not deal with it here, the romantic liaison storyline between athlete and coach is an example of the ethical dimensions of sport coaching and an issue for the professionalisation agenda.

Joe's communication style with the rest of the football squad appears to have an informality about it that we recognise in everyday communications between individuals who have developed respect and trust over time. For example, there are both non-verbal and verbal communication patterns that are part of everyday social interactions and some that we recognise as 'football' culture. We ourselves have experienced this in schools, local clubs and within the media; the unwritten 'way things are' within that particular sporting environment (Jenkins, 2000, 2014). These portrayals of traditional expectations are also present to a lesser or greater extent in other British sporting films of this era; for example, *Fever Pitch*, *When Saturday Comes,* and *There's only one Jimmy Grimble.*

In terms of the core features of professional knowledge, Joe did exhibit interactions that could be described as humour, empathy, instruction, naturalistic decision making, some self-reflection, and impression management. Although these limited snapshots of Joe's coaching interactions could be accused of being successful and representational or 'superficial' and stereotypical; nevertheless, they were present.

In her interviews, Chadha, the writer, acknowledges that she has fond memories of sport through her father's interest in cricket, and this was her 'research' of the sporting world. To some extent, therefore, there is a quasi-autobiographical thread running through the film. Although sport and the sport coach's role is the plotline mechanism for the film, the real story, that of a strong independent Indian girl dealing with transcultural issues, highlights the emotional connection to the 'language' of sport in society. We speculate, therefore, that in

relation to the coach's identity and the professionalisation agenda, there may be losses as well as gains if the emerging 'ideal' coaching discourse and implicitly adopted practices replace the stereotypical mainstream media representation of the coach.

The unexplored - *Twenty four seven*

Darcy, the coach, is the central character of the film. He narrates his own life story through his experiences as a coach in the boxing club he has set up to help the 'lads' of the housing estate. The whole film is shot in black and white; the music score purposefully chosen, not only to represent the times and the minor moments in the film, but also to evoke the continuous sense of dissolution and abandonment that is core to the plot. The opening frames see a young man helping another older man out of a derelict shelter on a railway track. He is obviously in a bad way through alcohol misuse. He takes him back to his house, cleans him up and puts him to bed. You later realise that the old man was Darcy, the coach. The audience's first introduction to him is in stark contrast to the coach in *Bend it Like Beckham*.

We are then taken back to five years earlier. These scenes slowly build up the characters by focusing on the relationship between Darcy and the 'lads', highlighting in a subtle way how much knowledge the coach had about the participants' backgrounds and their upbringings. There is no distinction between sporting and coaching knowledge, and insights into their backgrounds. It is all integrated and useful to him. Darcy, through his narration continually self-reflects and by doing so reveals his coaching and life philosophies. He uses this knowledge to make decisions about how he responds to each of the boys; how to motivate them to join the club and how to keep them motivated. These insights, plus the knowledge of how Darcy was coached as a young person, influence his technical coaching and relationship building. When hearing that Fagash is to appear in court, he pleads with the judge to give him another chance:

> 'Listen off the record, you were around when the boxing club ran when we were kids, you know yourself what happened, the crime rates went down, we had something to believe in, these lads are all survivors, let them fight within the ring, give them, give Fagash just one more chance.'

Using the pace of the film, writer Shane Meadows depicts how the engagement/recruitment process takes time; it is not an immediate, implicit or taken-for-granted action. Unlike most sports films and in *Bend it like Beckham,* the film does not rely on the usual sporting codes and stereotypes. Rather, Meadows appears to reject them outright. In fact the film enters the boxing arena and shows the act of technical coaching only one third

of the way through the film. In other scenes Darcy is seen 'life' coaching, trying to teach the lads discipline and respect. He has a natural, kind disposition, in the main he is softly spoken, although at times his emotions get the better of him. The idea of coaching the person as well as technique is a recognisable and interrelated act; a message that is emphasised within the professionalisation agenda by numerous sports coaching researchers (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2002; Potrac et al., 2013).

The coach continuously uses the contextual knowledge he has acquired through his own lived experience on the estate. His communication techniques and his behaviour management skills are at times in keeping with his upbringing and the environment. The boys understand and expect an element of 'tough love'; this is not 'out of keeping' with what they are used to receiving from their families and mates. They appear to be grateful that someone cares. The social interactions highlight what Jenkins (2014) terms as practices of identification that 'allow us to navigate through the world that is intrinsically uncertain'. These 'coaching' acts, therefore, could be said to be a contextualisation of sophisticated coaching knowledge. However, they could also be seen as inappropriate and 'unprofessional' behaviour, especially for those who have not been exposed to the nuances of the context. Although there are times when Darcy shows subtle communication techniques, there are also times when it could be said that he reverted to coaching behaviours that he himself had experienced. Jenkins (2014) describes this as primary identification, the environment and social interactions that are developed in the formative years, and influence social interactions throughout life.

Darcy's character is also subtly developed throughout the film. Initially he is portrayed as a bit of an eccentric, someone everyone knows around the estate - harmless but open to ridicule and gossip. His coaching 'uniform' is not typical of a coach. In one scene, he returns from the toilet in a tight fitting white and grey tracksuit with a large pair of leather boots. This is not conventional, but the 'lads' don't care. This is in stark contrast to Joe in *Bend it Like Beckham* who looks more like a 'professional coach' and appears to have the respect of his team and the community from the beginning of their interactions.

The coach is also portrayed as a kind, proud and sometimes lonely man, who uses coaching to fill a void and to give hope for a better life to himself as well as the 'lads'. As the film develops, he loses a sense of perspective and this degenerates to the condition witnessed in the opening sequences. This has a strong element of social realism (Godfrey, 2013).

In terms of the sport coach's social identity, Darcy's resolution for the social and personal deprivation is to be nostalgic, to harp back to a time that was happy and supported and worked in his life. The coach's role in those times replicated in parts the role of a father, a

person who was there, maybe not twenty four seven, but certainly one who was around informally when needed. This stable presence is in contrast to current initiatives in community sport coaching, in which agencies are temporary and have limited connection to the community, which militates against the building of relationships (Houlihan & Green, 2011; Mason, 2014).

Discussion

To some extent *Bend it like Beckham* paints a picture of the comfortable stereotype, overplayed perhaps, but non-threatening and demonstrating application of both sport-specific and delivery knowledge. This was in obvious contrast to the flawed but good-hearted intentions of coach Darcy. During the analysis, we became attached to *Twenty Four Seven*, and in particular the character of Darcy. We admired the way Meadows had rejected the stereotypical representation of the sport coach, in favour of a man who despite his circumstance evidenced a subtle level of intelligence that is normally not present in the depiction of working class people in sport films. We resonated with the space and people, but it also made us reflect on what might be appropriate professional practice in this context. We were drawn to the slightly romantic vision of Britain in the 1980s that Meadows refers to in his interview; nostalgia for a changed community (Godfrey, 2013).

The films' representation of the sport coach was dictated to some degree by the genre. There is no doubt that Meadows has pushed the boundaries of the social realism genre to become more like an ethnographic film (Scott, 2013). This opens up possibilities for similar portrayals of sport coaching moments. Sport and recent music documentaries have crossed the boundaries between fact and fiction, with directors using novel ways to tell stories, stories that could not be told if the directors were to adhere to the traditional documentary making techniques. Such a formula has the potential to offer accounts that probe more deeply into the past and everyday lives of their subjects. This could be an unexplored tool for self-refection and research from which sport coaching could benefit. As Hills and Kennedy (2013) recognised in her cinematic exploration of sport coaches, the film in any guise has potential to be a teaching tool, and if the teaching tool is rich in everyday coaching moments, this has even more potential.

The traditional, the ideal and the unexplored are categories relating to social identity that not only resonate with media portrayals and assumptions but provide a framework for further enquiry into what is a contested field of study. There is a distinction between the social phenomenon that is coaching, with its observable behaviour, shared interpretations and

meanings and social esteem, and performance-based expertise. There are also competing ideologies with a (perceived) traditional authoritarianism and unproblematic replication of knowledge criticised by more context-dependent and athlete-centred approaches.

We have to recognise that the subtlety of performance-related contextual practice is unlikely to be represented in film, and using the coach as a vehicle to explore social issues may present a danger of the coach's practice itself becoming superficial. Although this may be an opportunity to treat stereotypical practice as problematic, this may not be possible with an uninformed audience. On the other hand, the treatment of Darcy, the unexplored, gave the audience the story behind the image presented, and there was a greater implicit examination of the contextual factors in his story. Sport coaching may be paying the price of being a hidden profession (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). The advantages of enhanced visibility through film characters may be negated by stereotypical representations of the coach in the search for, and reinforcement of, a social identity. The 'ideal' may be promoted via education and development, but more varied and realistic sport coaching characters may demonstrate how the individual's social identity is shaped by layers of context.

Exploring these films has highlighted the process of knowledge construction and the contextualisation of the core features of professional knowledge. This has given a new perspective on the symbiosis between professional knowledge and professional identity. It has demonstrated that types of knowledge and emphasis on different components ebb and flow between moments and within contexts. Being 'professional' appears to mean both different and similar things to the various sporting communities; the researchers and professionals, the fans and general public, and the mass media and ourselves. What this exercise has highlighted to us is that both the deliberate and inadvertent depiction of coaches needs to be part of the professionalisation debate.

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