

The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Sports Coaching:  
An Interview with Professor Robyn Jones: A commentary

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Like many talented individuals from small towns, at one point I was a shimmer of hope. I spent several years as an academy football player chasing an elusive professional contract but my endeavours never reached the dizzy heights I aspired to. Along the way, I have become all too aware of the harsh nature of football as reflected in coaching literature (e.g., [1], [2]). Coaches preached the importance of technical and tactical abilities, while selection did not reflect such a ‘philosophy’. Rather, coaches favoured height and brawn as their main concerns. This story is not unique and it can be placed in the wider (social) world of coaching. As I sit writing this commentary to Simon Jenkin’s article, the interview with Robyn provides a clear insight to how we can deconstruct (and reconstruct) such experience: social theory. After all, our ability as social creatures to tolerate and sometimes enjoy the world comes from knowing something about why things are as they are [3].

The aim of this commentary is to ‘pick-up’ from Simon’s interview by extending the insight provided in relation to the value of Harold Garfinkel as a social theorist for coaching scholars to engage with. In doing so, the purpose is to introduce Garfinkel’s journey arriving at ethnomethodology and, in doing so, identify some parallels with coaching research. In terms of structure, I begin by outlining my connection to Robyn and the wider body of coaching research. Following this, I will briefly introduce Harold Garfinkel as a theoretical lens, before discussing the roots of his ethnomethodological work. Finally, I will offer some insight to my experiences under the supervision of Professor Robyn Jones.

## **COACHING, DECONSTRUCTION AND GARFINKEL**

Professor Robyn Jones and his subsequent body of work have been influential in developing the way I ‘see’ coaching. I have been fortunate enough for Robyn to supervise my PhD research and I have come to know Robyn in many different guises, including a coach. What has been apparent in that time remains Robyn’s enthusiasm for ‘thinking the unthought’ [4] and a commitment to the ‘seen but unnoticed’ [5]. In this regard, Robyn’s (and others) subsequent body of literature points towards a specific attention to what Lemert [3] refers to as our social competence; that is, the basic social logic of how to get things done. This logic is seemingly implicit, unconscious and highly practical, although without it, every new situation would require us to learn anew what to think and how to behave [3]. Yet, the social competency referred to here is not innate or an inborn aptitude. It requires close and sensitive consideration. In this respect, the work of Harold Garfinkel provides an interesting and unique avenue to explore some of the ‘seen but unnoticed’ issues of coaching [5].

With the exception of a few notable examples (e.g., [6], [7], [8]), the work of Harold Garfinkel has yet to permeate much of the coaching research. Garfinkel’s writings coalesced

into a sub-discipline of sociology known as ethnomethodology. The perspective treats practical activity, practical circumstances and practical sociological reasoning as topics for empirical study through addressing each commonplace activity as a phenomenon in its own right [5]. Garfinkel believed individuals were able to produce and manage settings in a way to make them 'accountable'; that is, to interact coherently in the absence of formal instruction with little or no interruption [5]. The grounding for this analysis is based upon the 'observable-and-reportable' interactions between parties, whose skills, knowledge and taken-for-granted competency allow the practical accomplishment of interaction [5].

Thus, Garfinkel's close attention to the detailed practices that allow for order in social situations offer a new 'lens' to help problematize and challenge the everyday realities of coaching (e.g., [6], [7], [8]). The subsequent body of ethnomethodological work has been described by Lemert ([9]) as 'truly impressive'. However, adopting a mono-theoretical perspective in my PhD study was not without its limitations. Despite the ostensible merits of utilising the writings of Garfinkel in coaching, the use of one theorist inevitably 'narrowed' the scope and breath of the research. On the other hand, it certainly enabled an in-depth analysis of social practice; one that allowed a considerable 'deconstruction', complete with using 'follow up' notions, to better understand how coaches act out their ethno-methods [10]. In this regard, using a plethora of theorists, while widening the social lens, would not have provided such focussed analysis. The principle here builds upon Robyn's work that has engaged with various theorists (e.g., Goffman, Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Noddings) in order to 'decode' the mysteries of coaching [11].

## **GARFINKEL AND ROBYN**

Garfinkel's emergence as a theorist was turbulent in a time of positivist sociology. A variety of different thinkers and their accompanying work have contributed to the outcome of Garfinkel's writings. Principal among these was Garfinkel's doctoral supervisor Talcott Parsons. However, despite being Garfinkel's supervisor, Parson's normative conception of social order left Garfinkel dissatisfied. Rather, he advocated that the relationship between actor and situation were not stable but built upon contingent cultural contents and rules. In doing so, Garfinkel turned to the emerging phenomenological writings of Alfred Schutz, Aaron Gurwitsch and Edmund Husserl, as mentioned by Robyn. Ethnomethodology's subsequent attention to social order insisted that coherent interactions are reliant, and produced in and through, complex, mutually recognizable social work; seen but unnoticed rules. However, such rules were not concrete for Garfinkel. Rather, ethnomethodology was concerned with indexical (context specific) expressions and practical actions as "contingent on-going accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" ([5] p.11). In this regard, Garfinkel's attention placed practical organisation of actions at centre stage, allowing individuals to make sense of each other's interactions.

As a consequence, Garfinkel spent a considerable amount of time shifting his ethnomethodological work to an interpretivist paradigm [12]. However, as Schwandt [13 p.191] identified, "to find meaning in action, or to say one understands what a particular action means, requires that one interprets in a particular way what the actors are doing". Whilst relocating Garfinkel's work within an interpretive paradigm, Schwandt [13] recognised that, in order to achieve understanding or interpretation, there lie some differences in the philosophies of interpretivism. More specifically, Garfinkel's work contributed to the development of phenomenological sociology as one of three ways of conceiving interpretivism [13]. Here, ethnomethodology provided several key concepts to understand social reality, including indexicality, reflexivity, practical accomplishment, accountability

and the notion of member [12]. In particular, indexicality and reflexivity have been identified as tools to understand the constitution of everyday life in conversation and interaction.

In outlining the philosophy of ethnomethodology, such reading has inevitably influenced my understanding and position as a sport coaching inquirer. In many ways, the journey of coaching as a discipline, referred to by Robyn in the interview, loosely resembles the struggles of Garfinkel (and ethnomethodology). Such attention to the philosophy of the work is evident in the movement Robyn has generated within the field; that is, the methodological shift from systematic observation in favour of more naturalistic empirical ethnographies. The subsequent mentoring I have received from Robyn has encouraged me to question where my research is placed. In doing so, Robyn has attempted to work 'with' me, and my experience, to question my position as a researcher (and practitioner).

## CONCLUSION

Simon's interview has demonstrated that Robyn's engagement with social theory has developed the quality of sport coaching research. In this respect, the following commentary has attempted to build upon Simon's original article by extending the discussion of Harold Garfinkel's work as a social theorist to be engaged with by coaching scholars. Here, the ensuing discussion contributes to the critical 'deconstruction' of the messy, complex and power-ridden nature of coaching. Furthermore, the discussion has briefly alluded to the struggles of Garfinkel (and Robyn) at arriving at their positions. In this regard, the parallels drawn between Robyn and Goffman are unsurprising. Thus, engaging with the individual theorist's roots and a close attention to their philosophical position, help to critically examine the value of theory. The purpose here, which Robyn insists on pursuing, is the development of authentic coaching research.

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