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Positioning action research as a critical means of understanding coaching: Considerations from the field.

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Positioning action research as a critical means of understanding coaching: Considerations from the field.

This paper shines light upon the methodological value of action research as a critical means of studying coaching practice. Described as an opportunity for bridging the gap between practice and research (Price & Polister, 1980), the application of action research to sports coaching aims to explicitly and intentionally advance practice, rather than merely understand it. However, far from the enduring depictions of action research as a linear cyclical process (Lewin, 1946), contemporary action research has begun to appreciate its complexity and ambiguity (Tinning, 2022); much like the problematic nature of sports coaching itself (Jones et al., 2010). Despite some of the challenges associated with adopting the methodology, we contend that action research can better harness the messy realities and complexities that coaches encounter within their everyday practice (Allen, 2001). Through the provision of critical reflections around conducting action research then, the overarching aim of the paper was not only to make the case for action research as a means of cultivating critical scholarship in sports coaching, but to go further; problematising some of the complex realities of life as an action researcher, particularly as an outsider.

Keywords: action research; sports coaching;

Introduction and Overview

Despite the field of Sports Coaching's substantial development over the past two decades, scholars, (e.g., Jones, 2019; Jones et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022) have expressed their concerns about a large body of work that lacks criticality. Indeed, Jones (2019) called for research that is more transformative; work that seeks to critically explore the process and act of coaching, with the intention of advancing practice, rather than merely understanding it. Having recognised this omission ourselves, we decided to shed light upon both the methodological value and challenge of conducting action research as a critical means of studying sports coaching. Whilst action research is not a new phenomenon, with Kurt Lewin's conceptualisations dating back to 1946, but for a handful of studies across the past decade (e.g., Castro & Morgan, 2023; Chapron & Morgan, 2020; Hall & Gray, 2016; Pritchard & Morgan, 2022; Ramos et al., 2023), its application to sports coaching remains relatively scarce. This is somewhat surprising, given the approach's explicit aim of intentionally advancing practice (Rapoport, 1970); for it appears to be a logical '*fit*', when researching the practically rooted subject of sports coaching.

When it comes to defining what critical action research looks like, we are not limiting ourselves to one specific '*type*', as highlighted in the works of Carr and Kemmis (1986). Instead, we believe that action research within sports coaching should simply focus on the relationship between theory and practice; a relationship that has been championed by scholars (e.g., Cassidy, 2010; Cassidy et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2016) as a meaningful means of developing coaching. Those of us who have engaged with theory to practice will know that this is not always straightforward; indeed, the messy realities inherent within the '*doing*' of coaching are well documented (Jones et al., 2010). Bridging the gap between theory and practice in a more critical way though (Price & Polister,

1980), action research is well suited to tackling the complexities inherent within sports coaching by explicitly advancing practice and theory simultaneously. Carrying out scholarship of this nature should enable coaches to contest cultural norms, and develop solutions and actions from newly formed perspectives and values (Reason, 1994).

We contest that this is where the real merit of action research lies, in the transformational outcomes in and to theory and practice. Addressing the complex dilemmas encountered by coaches should not merely mean the collection and interpretation of data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999); but a transformation that enables coaches to be liberated from the deep-rooted historical discourses and ideologies that saturate their everyday practice (McTaggart; 1994). This is not to say that we see action research as a straightforward process. On the contrary, our own experiences have shown us that it is far fledged from Lewin's (1946) enduring depictions of a linear cyclical process. Whilst these depictions of action research may add a sense of security and simplicity for those wishing to adopt the methodology (McAteer, 2013), our experience of '*doing*' action research would suggest that such an approach neglects the very thing that makes it meaningful. Indeed, action research is complex and ambiguous (Tinning, 2022), yet this is what makes it well placed to research the problematic nature of sports coaching (Jones et al., 2010). We contend that it is these issues themselves that better reflect the messy realities and complexities that coaches encounter within their everyday practice (Allen, 2001).

Whilst we acknowledge that some scholars (e.g., Castro & Morgan, 2023; Hall & Gray, 2016; Ramos et al., 2023) have already shed light upon the apparent complexities associated with conducting action research in the field of sports coaching, we still feel that our own reflections offer novel contributions to the area. Indeed, these existing contributions offer insight as '*insider*' or '*first-person*' action researchers, where their

agency and subsequent autonomy to illicit change to their own practice may have greater scope. As authors who conducted action research as ‘outsiders’ or external experts in coaching theory, such agency, from our own experience, was not so apparent; thus, advancing both theory and practice simultaneously proved an enduring challenge.

Consequently, the overarching aim and indeed the significance of this paper, was not only to make the case for action research as a means of cultivating critical scholarship in sports coaching, but to go further; problematising some of the complex realities of life as an action researcher, particularly as an outsider. To achieve this, the paper includes three reflective accounts from the fieldwork of the two authors. With the first author highlighting some of his own experiences around positionality and complexities within the field, and the second author considering the role of reflexivity and how this manifested throughout his own work. In doing so, we have illustrated how the challenges and complexities inherent within action research act as the necessary foundations for the critical advancement of coaching theory and practice.

Considerations From our own Fieldwork

Wrestling Positionality (reflections from the first author)

Given that action research is about working ‘with’ participants, rather than ‘on’ them (Heron & Reason, 2001), challenges subsequently arose relating to my own positionality throughout the action research process. Of note, was the limited agency I felt as a researcher, whilst being situated on the outside of the coaching group at the onset of my Doctoral studies.

Walking in the room at the initial coaches briefing it was clear that the coaches were already part way through their agenda. Sat in what appeared to be their very own circle of trust I felt awkward, not knowing whether I had the trust or notoriety to enter this sacred space. Not wanting to come across as too audacious I positioned myself quite literally on the outside of their

circle, as an outsider on the adjacent table looking in. Initially, negotiation turned to when the research would 'fit' into the already hectic schedule of the players. Naturally then, there had to be some compromise; however, given that the programme was already established, and it was I that was infringing on the club, I felt that I couldn't contest the unwavering stance of the coaches. Consequently, I had to flex and sacrifice my own time, impinging on my activities and priorities as a husband and father, to get access to the time-slots available.

The position of an outsider is well known within action research, for it supposedly offers a lens from which researchers are free from particularistic expectations, enabling them to ask novel and critical questions (Chhabra, 2020). However, so are the potential benefits of being an insider; where the researcher may already understand the group's history and cultural practices, and, perhaps most importantly, benefits from an accrued trust surplus (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Whilst I was eventually entrusted to undertake the research as an external expert in coaching theory, I had limited agency or power during the initial negotiations with coaches of when and where to carry out the work (Merriam et al., 2001). I needed them more than they needed me. Therefore, as an outsider I had to be prepared to renounce some of my own personal agendas to ensure access to the field (Gair, 2012). As power within action research is negotiated, i.e., it can ebb and flow, it was up to me to shift the power dynamics over the course of the fieldwork, to help achieve the overall goals of the project (Ballinger and Payne, 2000). This was particularly apparent in my evolving relationship with the players, where my position as a researcher merged the boundaries between outsider and insider.

It wasn't until week 3 until I finally felt like I had turned a corner with the players. I had genuine fist bumps (cultural welcome) when players turned up for our weekly session. I sought to capitalise on this sense of welcome, engaging players with general chit chat regarding training; how they were and how they'd been managing the intense load, with reciprocated questions

of interest about the research and me as a coach and individual coming back. In the ensuing discussions during the immediate and following off-field sessions, players engagement improved; they seemed more confident to engage with me and each other to challenge the perceptions and thoughts of their teammates, thus, leading to greater depth and richness in their discussions.

This shift in positionality may not be new to those well versed in action research, for previous scholars (e.g., Chen, 2017; Merriam et al., 2001; Ritchie et al., 2009) have alluded to the fluid change in positionality of the researcher within social research. To begin with then, my initial role as a researcher may have been seen as a manifestation of power within the players' context (Rowland, 2000). Indeed, Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) note that action researchers possess the knowledge, and the power, that naturally places them in a position to control action. However, as demonstrated in the above extracts, such power and influence were not naturally bestowed upon me at the onset of the action research process, it took time and 'work' to establish. Such work involved a continual consideration and reflection on my interactions with players, a heightened awareness and adaptation of my externalised emotions and outward picture of sincerity (Cassidy et al., 2016; Potrac et al., 2020; Whyte, 1991). In borrowing from the dramaturgical perspective of Goffman (1959), this work can be better understood as a means of presenting oneself in a particular way to your participants. In my case, conveying a front of sincerity, professionalism and unwavering knowledge, as to be expected of an external researcher. In doing so, not only upholding this idealised front, but managing the nature and context of my own communicative efforts to achieve the research objectives. Whilst, if being honest, frequently concealing some of the frustrations, vexes and fatigue that I experienced; that if displayed, may have discredited the impression that I had so long sought to establish (Scott, 2015; Potrac et al., 2021).

As noted above, constructing this idealised space for collaboration was at times exhausting, but necessary to establish a meaningful space for dialogue that resulted in a more collaborative endeavour (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Here, participants could be positioned as valued contributors within the action research, rather than merely being the subject of the research itself (Heron & Reason, 2001; Watt & Watt, 1993). Thus, enabling the perspectives of both the researcher and the participants to be combined in a fusion of horizons, ultimately forming new ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 2006; O’Leary, 2012). However, whilst it is the endeavour of many to seek an egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the participants, one should consider if this can truly be achieved; particularly given the problematic manifestations of power inherent within the evolving position of action researchers. Therefore, those wishing to engage in action research should consider the ongoing ‘*work*’ needed to help negotiate the perceived power imbalance(s) inherent to the social context.

Contending Complexities (reflections from the first author)

Throughout the action research process, lies a complex pervasive cultural dimension that is espoused by and through the interaction of agents and structures inherent to context (Cushion et al., 2006). Given that research does not occur in a social vacuum (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), these interactions are often fraught with unique discourses and engendered norms that influence the inherent agents, structures, and the unfolding nature of action research itself.

To make sense of this, I borrow from Jones and Thomas’ (2015) insights into coaching as a ‘*scaffolded*’ practice, to locate and indeed interrogate, the influence of the cultural dimensions; particularly notable during my own action research study at the macro, meso, and micro level. Whilst there was an obvious development in players’ consciousness and

tactical awareness throughout the study, the dominant discourse inherent to the rugby club served as a significant influencer on the behaviours and decisions that the players produced, as captured during the observational field notes below.

There appears to be a huge influence of structure, through communication of shape related language in open play, to signify actions demanded of players by key decision makers on the field. This is consistent with the narrative and discourse circulated in players' meetings during the week around location on the pitch and the desired way to play. Organisation of players appears to be around the expected way of playing, as opposed to the picture being given to them during the game. So rather than base their decisions on the newly formed consciousness and knowledge accrued through the action research process, players engage in behaviours deemed acceptable based on the narrative and discourse imposed by the coaches.

At the macro level then, this overall cultural mechanisms and dominant discourses, appeared to act as a 'frame', which in turn gave rise to the expected behavioural norms and conventions displayed by players (Cassidy et al., 2016; Edwards, 2016). This also appeared to proliferate throughout the club, with coaches' pedagogical design and interactions appearing to encourage players to play in a specific way and structure (Jones & Thomas, 2015); inherently and often unknowingly, discouraging them from playing the game through newly formed consciousness, as captured in the field notes below.

When playing a 15 v 15 practice the influence of the overall game model circulated to players is an indicator of how they should play, this was apparent in the coach's interaction with a player when they grubber kicked the ball through into the space they had identified. Joe (pseudonym) points out, "Aimless kick James (pseudonym)! Remember in this area [around halfway], just go through phases and find the edge". He followed this up with, "Shouldn't we have the fullback in there, not you, in this structure you should be in midfield."

The challenge here then, was that the discourse at the macro level acted as “cause and compass” (Kretchmar, 1994) for the meso and micro levels; which manifested through and within the structuring of activities (Boblett, 2012) and pedagogical interactions (Engin, 2014), respectively. What was created therefore, was a tension and interplay between individual agency and structure (Jones & Thomas, 2015). As previously noted, given that research does not occur in a social vacuum (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), the researcher, and as captured above the participants, despite the best intentions of the action research, had limited agency and power to elicit change to practice that would actually endure (McTaggart; 1994). Given the often limited time available in the field, as well as the invasive nature of cultural dimensions within the research context, action researchers should be aware that they may not have the necessary power to ensure lasting change. Indeed, the deep-rooted historical discourses that appear to act as markers of conformity and expectation for those operating within a given social context can serve as barriers to success (Kemmis, 2009; McTaggart; 1994).

Being Reflexive (reflections from the second author)

Finally, considering the above discussion about positionality and complexities, action researchers should consider what Finlay (2002) described as ‘*collaborative reflexivity*’; that is, to hear and take multiple voices and conflicting positions into account. Indeed, whilst all methodological approaches to good research may be dependent on some form of reflexivity (Flood, 1999), the ‘*doing*’ of action research is driven by it (Lisle, 2010); for it guides the ongoing construction of theory amongst researchers and participants. Therefore, reflexivity within the ‘*doing*’ of action research is about ‘*being*’ reflexive throughout the process, rather than something to be attained further down the line (Robertson, 2000). A catalyst for broadening the horizons of interpretations (Finlay,

2002), reflexivity is arguably the most powerful weapon in an action researcher's arsenal. Here, it is not simply a means of being more critical about how our own interpretations are constructed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Robertson, 2000), but a continual and simultaneous outward and inward gaze that enhances the quality of action research.

Much like positionality though, 'being' reflexive is not always straightforward; particularly given the 'muddy' ambiguity surrounding the process (Finlay, 2002). Indeed, Finlay (2002, p. 212) described embarking on a journey of reflexivity as being "akin to entering uncertain terrain where solid ground can all too easily give way to swamp and mire". Such an analogy refers to the risk of authors regressing to excessive deconstructions and self analysis, at the expense of their focus on research participants and interpretive understandings (Finlay, 2002).

Practical steps that could help researchers to be more reflexive include, but are not limited to, the ongoing use of reflexive diaries, a continual toing and froing with literature, and my own favourite; engaging in frequent dialogue with trusted critical friends. Seeking to act in 'critical companionship' (Jones & Ronglan, 2018; Titchen, 2003), the aim here should be to form a collaborative research team, rather than a distinct hierarchical relationship; as is explored in the following reflective extract.

Whilst I can now reflect upon my PhD with confidence; knowing that these are my 'final' interpretations of what was 'really' happening, it was the sense-making process that provided me with a number of obstacles. Whilst I read, re-read, and analysed my data throughout the fieldwork, it was during the time after I exited the field that my sense-making really evolved. It was at this point of departure that I really struggled with the work; wrestling with ideas, whilst my supervisors' question of 'so what?' echoed in my ears. It was during and after these critical conversations with my supervisory team that I really crafted my understandings of the cultural historical nature of the data I had gathered. Naturally, this somewhat became 'our' work, but I was

continually reminded that, at the end of the day, it was 'my' work and, as such, I was encouraged to 'critically' challenge their comments as I saw fit. Indeed, the nuanced nature of what 'change' actually looks like within coaching practice requires a certain degree of 'closeness' to the data. Here, what I saw as development of practice did not always align with the views of my supervisors. This misalignment forced me to better justify and argue for my own interpretations and it was a process that I became more comfortable with over the course of my studies. Using these debates to really enhance my sense-making processes, I began to embrace the critiques to help me come to more profound conclusions. Indeed, it was through the social interactions with my supervisors that my supervisors and I really 'learnt' about my data.

Acting in this way involved collaborative evaluations and critiques of practice, to develop knowledge through debate and critical discussion (Jones & Ronglan, 2018); thus, enabling me to think more critically about my assumptions and my position within the interpretations of the data (Koshy, 2010; McNiff, 2016). To generate such collaborative concepts, it was vital that all those who made up the research team, those being myself and my supervisors, remained actively engaged with the action research process over the course of the study (Burrows et al., 2012). As the principal researcher though, it was my own commitment to the scholarship that would prove most important. Relatedly, my role as the principal researcher meant that I had a similar responsibility when it came to the engagement of my participants (Burrows et al., 2012). Here, I did my utmost to ensure that my participants bought into my action research project and helped me to engage in reflexive practices; both for the benefit of my research findings and the development of their coaching practice.

This mutual collaboration in achieving reflexivity recognises scholarship as a co-constructed entity (Finlay, 2002). Citing the work of Smith (1994), Finlay (2002) discussed how researchers may draw upon the interpretations of their participant subjects

to help shape their own conclusions. The fact that some scholars would argue that such an approach merely covers the, essentially unequal, relationship between the researcher and the participants with an egalitarian guise does not really matter. This is because “collaborative reflexivity offers the opportunity to hear, and take into account, multiple voices and conflicting positions” (Finlay, 2002, p. 220). This is not to say that the researcher must incorporate these voices into their work, merely that they must do their best to hear them in the first place before then making a more informed interpretation of their own; much like the process I went through with my supervisory team. Whilst accomplishing such a feat might require somewhat of a ‘*superhuman self-consciousness*’ (Finlay, 2002; Seale, 1999), the value of exploring such relationships has clear benefits for scholarship; both in a practical sense and a literary one.

Final Thoughts

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list of considerations for those wanting to carry out action research. Instead, we have offered an insight into some of the key considerations; relating to positionality, complexity and reflexivity, that we feel require significant thought, before undertaking action research. This was not with the aim of turning people away from the approach; on the contrary, the overarching aim of this paper was to make the case for action research as a critical means of studying sports coaching. However, we did want to highlight the nature of the work as, at times, difficult! Here, it is our hope that this paper has begun to illustrate some of the realities of life as an action researcher situated as an outsider, and in turn, the potential that action research holds for the critical advancement of coaching practice. Indeed, the real worth of action research lies in the approaches’ propensity to drawing out complexity and ambiguity; thus, reflecting the messy realities of sports coaching itself.

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