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Contending with vulnerability and uncertainty: what coaches say about coaching

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ABSTRACT

In exploring how coaches contend with their professional vulnerability, the purpose of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, to describe the informal rules of coaching that demand the appearance and expression of a certain persona. Secondly, to examine how such rules are tied to a culture of ‘the individual’; and, thirdly, to demonstrate how coaches’ accounts of their work not only reflect, but also ensure such practices. The dataset emanated from 20 individual interviews with professional football coaches. Although taking full consideration of what the coaches actually said, the analysis sought to explore what the explanations were standing on behalf of; what Garfinkel described as an “official (professional) line”. The findings pointed to coaches’ necessity to ‘work hard’, to do things the ‘right way’, whilst limitedly acknowledging any vulnerability associated with the job. Positioned as a ‘greedy institution’, the narrative appeared as a means to contend with the difficulties coaches encountered.

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Introduction

A developing emphasis within a social analysis of workplace settings, and workers’ experiences of them, has been that of precariousness (e.g., Kalleberg, 2011). This concerns not only a contention that poor-quality working conditions lead to precarious lives or vice versa (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Standing, 2011), but also about the importance of appreciating workers’ “ontological precariousness” (Millar, 2017). Such precariousness relates to an individual’s view of reality, circumstance, experience, and personal sense-making of that experience. Similarly, considerable research since the turn of the century has portrayed sports coaching as an arena characterised by constant tensions and strains. Such pressures emanate from the instability imbued in coaches’ work, particularly related to surveillance (Denison, 2007), competitiveness (Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2012),

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dramaturgical performances (Jones, 2006), uncertainty of outcome (Jones & Wallace, 2005) and a culture of accountable blame (e.g., Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015). Drawing predominantly upon micro-sociological and interactionist perspectives, not only does this portrayal of coaching stand in stark contrast to other more functional perspectives (e.g., Duda, 2013), but also alludes to coaches as “vulnerable” individuals (Châtel & Soulet, 2004) who, often by default, become their own and only points of reference.

Consequently, it has been claimed that coaching, similar to other precarious occupations (e.g., nursing, teaching, acting; see Roderick & Schumacker, 2017), has become subject to its own “rules of practice”. Such rules both constrain and enable behavioural scripts of evaluation (Corsby & Jones, 2020a), and reflect a professional “logic of appropriateness” (March & Olsen, 1989). Although such a logic has been interpreted as learning and obeying the routines that define appropriate actions (March & Olsen, 1989), a development in coaching is that such considerations also appear as a “logic of justification” (Corsby, Jones, Thomas, & Edwards, 2022). The adhered to conventions are, in turn, enforced and developed through numerous social stratagems including face work, humour, sarcasm and shame (e.g., Galea, Powell, Salignac, Chapell, & Loosemore, 2021). It is also a logic indicative of Garfinkel’s (1967) “official line”, where a version of events is produced through invoking a “normative” portrayal of the profession. Practitioners are subsequently guided towards what they think they should think and say, from what they hear, and tell each other (Corsby & Jones, 2020a; Corsby et al., 2022).

In further exploring this “official” interpretation or portrayal of coaching, this paper offers an associated, yet alternative, perspective. Here, the professional demands often depicted and expounded by coaches are presented as part of the activity’s own rules-in-use; that is, as demonstrations of how coaching should be done. In this respect, they represent the discourse generally confirmed as expressions of a culture. The argument here is reminiscent of Shulman’s (2005) signature pedagogies, which implicitly define what counts as relevant professional knowledge and how things come to be known. By positioning the study in terms of how coaches make sense of, and subsequently cope with, their professional vulnerability, the purpose of the paper is to examine and critique the implicit structures of such pedagogies; that is, the existing “beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions” (Shulman, 2005, p. 55). The related objectives can be considered as three-fold. Firstly, to draw attention to the informal rules of coaching that demand the appearance and expression of a certain persona. Secondly, to explore how such rules are tied to a culture of the individual; and, thirdly, to demonstrate how coaches’ accounts of their work not only reflect, but also ensure and further reinforce, such practices.

By rejecting the assumption that precarity can causally be deduced from job characteristics (Barnes & Weller, 2020), the principal significance of the study lies in drawing attention to previously taken-for-granted portrayals and practices of coaching; to coaches' embodied tendencies of how they consider and conduct what they do. In doing so, it gives greater voice to de-centred practices (Gardiner, 2000), whilst simultaneously rejecting a simplistic textualism where such social practices are reduced to a provided language. Drawing upon ethnomethodological sensibilities in considering how coaches make sense of their work, attention is not just focused on what coaches say about coaching, but what is meant or represented by what is said, particularly within the socio-historical context. The paper thus sheds light on a type of coaching false consciousness; that is, an implicit assumption of how coaching should be talked about and depicted, and therefore, resists the tendency to passively accept and echo the given official, unproblematic line.

The work also builds on earlier studies (Corsby & Jones, 2020a, 2020b; Jones & Ronglan, 2018) where both the “just whatness” and the social rules of coaching have been initially examined. As opposed to making a theoretical case (Jones & Ronglan, 2018) or utilising observations of practice (Corsby & Jones, 2020b) from which to derive conclusions, the present paper attempts to further analyse coaches' narrations about what they perceive coaching to be, and how its myriad challenges are confronted and managed. In this respect, it contains a more comprehensive empirical critique to previously produced tentative lines of inquiry.

Finally, the value of the paper rests in offering an alternative perspective of coaching; one that reveals the activity beneath its rhetoric. The generative potential here lies in better educating coaches in two principal ways. Firstly, in terms of how coaches can understand and manage themselves as “vulnerable” individuals operating within an insecure and unstable profession. Secondly, and of more significance, is to move the onus of coach development away from that of simply “improving” the person or the practice to challenging and changing coaches' terms and conditions of work. In doing so, a degree of responsibility for coach welfare, development and improvement is relocated from the individual, to organisational or even institutional levels.

Whilst acknowledging elements of short term(ism) will always be present in coaching, we consequently claim that paying attention to matters of sustainable, relative practice, as opposed to the hectic “individuality” currently witnessed, holds the potential for more productive results in the longer term. Recognising that such fundamental change requires acceptance and action on many planes, our claim for the paper's significance in this regard, is to at least begin the dialogue.

Selecting participants, interviewing, and analysing the data

Interviewing the participants

The dataset collected and analysed within this project emanated from 20 individual interviews with professional football coaches conducted via online tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams). Of the 20 participant coaches, 2 were women and 18 were men; and, of these, 3 worked within the women's football while 17 worked in men's football. The participants were selected purposively in terms of meeting the following criteria; (a) currently coaching, or within a year of their last employment at a professional football club; (b) hold a minimum of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) "A" Licence coaching qualification (or Level 4 equivalent); and (c) consider football coaching as their full-time occupation. Participant recruitment involved contacting existing networks within the professional football community (e.g., through emails and calls to potential participants, governing bodies). Additionally, given the challenges associated with accessing individuals from professional football (e.g., levels of celebrity status, privacy; see also Roderick, 2013) a snowball sampling method was used to further recruit participants. Acknowledging that the use of existing networks and snowballing held the potential towards a conformity of participant, we also contacted those unknown to the research team to encourage data collection from a diversity of practitioners. The final interviewed sample came from a variety of educational backgrounds (i.e., qualifications) and possessed very different employment histories, whilst having a range of financial resources available in a professional sense (i.e., team budgets, facilities, squad sizes). The participants were currently, or recently had been, employed at the various following settings; as coaches of national teams, within the professional men's English football pyramid (i.e., the English Premier League to the National League), within the Football Association's (FA) Women's Super League, and the FA Women's Championship; in addition to other professional leagues across Europe.

The specific questions included within the interview guide centred on the coaches' current role demands, the impact of the work on self and others, related enablers and constraints, in addition to general attitudes towards "doing" the job. Participants were also asked to reflect on their working conditions and the nature of their lives as professional coaches, inclusive of how they understood their employment, their concerns and encouragements within their respective contexts. The specific strategies during the interviews included active listening, leaving time during pauses, asking for clarification, and paraphrasing explanations to confirm, explore and challenge the participants' points. Each interview lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours 30 minutes, giving a total interview time of just over 23 hours. The interviews were recorded and either transcribed verbatim professionally or

by a member of the research team. The accounts produced from the data were considered important for what they revealed about the participants, their perspectives, and the larger subculture in which they were rooted. Although an interview guide was constructed, the meanings generated from the interview process were considered contextual, performative and on-going, which required the participants to construct, order, or rearrange their actual world(s) (Dillard, 1982). From this perspective, the interview data were not treated as static, but as dynamic products of the context. This necessitated the production (co-production) of coherent interpretations, not only between interviewer and interviewee, but also through a re-reading of transcripts, re-listening to interviews, and regular sense-making sessions among the research team.

The project received ethical clearance from the host university before data collection commenced. Participation in the study was voluntary with consent being treated as on-going throughout the interview process (i.e., sought before, during and after). The precise procedure involved the participants being given an information sheet, a consent form to sign, and a verbal explanation of the project. However, as a feature of the reflexive attitude described, the research team stressed that absolute anonymity (in terms of individual identities being unearthed) could not be guaranteed. In this respect, although the participants were informed that they would be given pseudonyms and their respective contexts anonymised, the political and power constraints surrounding the data construction were acknowledged. For example, and in keeping with Loveday (2021), this became apparent in some participants speaking freely about their context, while others opted for more neutral phrasing that might be expected in a public forum (e.g., a media interview). Such interactions or presentations were treated as data in and of themselves and, therefore, similarly subject to the mentioned processual scrutiny.

The documentary method of interpretation: data analysis

As stated earlier, a principal purpose of this article was to interrogate the substantive accounts of coaches that sustained and organised their everyday lives. Hence, the participants' narratives were not merely accepted as an "authentic voice of truth" (Back, 2010, p.8). Rather, inspired by ethno-methodological sensibilities, the emphasis of the data "analysis" lay in examining the ways in which the coaches tried to make sense of their work. This is what Liberman (2013) referred to as the study of how the apparent mundanity of social actors' world(s) is justified and achieved; that is, the way the coaches stitched together their understanding of how they "did" coaching in a meaningful way. Consequently, the interview content

was not assumed as accurately describing the orderliness apparent in the coaches' working lives, but rather as evidence of the informal rules which informed the explanations.

The focus here, then, lay in exploring beneath somewhat sanitised and superficial explanations (e.g., Cicourel, 1964; Latour, 1987) by adopting an increased sceptical view about the given "official (professional) line" (Garfinkel, 1967). Adhering to the work of Garfinkel (1967) explicitly allowed such a path to be taken; that is, to critically examine the appearance of what was said in the interviews as standing on behalf of some underlying pattern. In this sense, we took heed of Liberman's (2013) warning that widely applied methods of inquiry, such as interviews, often allow the concerted practices vital for the organisation of everyday affairs to "escape detection". Although taking full account of what was said by the coaches, the largely unproblematic and context free explanations offered (despite appropriate prodding and amending of the questioning) came to be treated as something of a "coaching front"; of what could and should be said. Hence, in employing an "ethnomethodological indifference", the focus of the analysis shifted from "what" was said, to "seeing how he [sic.] spoke" (Garfinkel, 1967, p.29). This "appearance-of-order" given within the interviews thus became the central point of analysis. Treating the social organisation of the interviews as situated accomplishments in themselves allowed the participants' accounts to be treated as both *resource* and *topic* in a principled way.

Such a means of analysis has been termed the "documentary method of interpretation" (Garfinkel, 1967). This involves analysing how individuals' make sense of events in terms of finding connections between what is said, what is (or was) done, and what constitutes rational ways of explaining practice (see Zimmerman & Wieder, 1974). The concern here was with "how" order was produced and maintained by the coaches (i.e., the justifiable and rational explanations of practice), and hence, the potential for on-going action. In doing so, the coaches' justifications were treated as accomplishments in their own right, and therefore, as illustrations of how the coaches asserted the orderliness of events; that is, how they saw, described and proposed situational definitions.

The purpose of adopting such a critical position was not to doubt the coaches' truthfulness, but to highlight and call into question professional coaching "norms"; structures which support and further create ways of "doing" (Cicourel, 1964). Wieder (1974) described such codes (or norms) as "much more a method of moral persuasion and justification than a substantive account of an organised way of life" (p.158). With this in mind, the analysis followed what Garfinkel (1967) and Cicourel (1964) described as creating "trouble". Any "trouble", however, was based upon the principle of examining the unstated meanings assumed in the coaches' talk. In doing so, our on-going analytical discussions as a research team sought to

distort the common-sense interpretations offered by the participants (i.e., to interrogate their official lines of professed practice). This offered a window into how the coaches contended with their uncertain work and status, in terms of the self-portraits they presented and how they justified what they did.

Findings

The manifestation of hard work

All of the coaches, albeit to varying extents, expressed the belief that their role(s) contained precarious features, such as, uncertainty over results, form, success, as well as job security. There was also general agreement that coaching was “full-on” (i.e., omnipresent), frequently being described as “24/7”. This busy-ness was manifest in both the *breadth* and *possibilities* of their roles. For those with lesser resources (i.e., those coaches who worked at the perceived lower echelons of professional football [typically League 1, League 2 and the National League]), the *breadth* of the coaching role, in terms of the hours worked and the sheer number and variety of duties performed, was immense. For example:

I tend to be in the office at 7.30 in the morning and I leave most days maybe at 5 or 6pm, but then I have calls in the evening. I’m never off the phone. I haven’t had a day off in maybe six weeks . . . I’m doing a lot of the analysis work as well. I tend to be doing either post-match or pre-match (video) analysis, or individual clips (of both the team and opponents).

Melvin, Men’s 1st Team Manager

There is a lot of stuff to do away from the pitch . . . [like] I’ve got to put in place technical documents; how we play, coaching competencies, the recruitment for the players and the staff, and the communications with stakeholders, clubs, schools, the NGB . . . it’s constant.

Julie, Women’s Technical Director

Meanwhile, for coaches operating in organisations perceived as larger (e.g., clubs from the English Championship and Premier League), recognising that the *breadth* of their role was somewhat distributed, the *possibilities* (and opportunities) within their core business were nevertheless similarly deemed as never-ending. For instance, one coach within a Premier League club described the attention afforded to each session

It’s relentless. I put so much in for one (coaching) session; the periodisation and the scheduling is really important so I need to give that time . . . It’s about concentrating on the most important things and the next thing, but also what the next few days, few weeks, few months look like.

Chris, Men’s U23’s Head Coach

The busy-ness of the coaches was often couched in a discourse of constantly searching for efficiency gains; for instance, car journeys being described as ideal for “speaking to the players, or other (staff) coaches”. “Doing” the job well then, entailed a sense of being or feeling busy. Not to do so, or to be so, was deemed as not doing the job properly. For instance, Ryan, an Academy Manager, described some colleagues as having “an inseparable relationship with the academy” (i.e., where they worked). This belief tended to stretch across the cohort, no matter where they worked. Here, one coach stated:

I am constantly looking at how we can improve ... On the bus home (from away games), I start thinking about the training session. I've got five hours on the coach I might as well start planning for the week. It would be stupid not to.

Sara, Women's Technical Director & 1st Team Coach

Although the interviews emphasised some contextual differences between the resources available, the general consensus was that the coaches perceived their work as limitless; there was always more which could be done (“the job is never finished”). Positioning coaching in this way meant that not only did the job never *leave them*, but that they neither *left the job*. In this regard, the coaches associated input and individual effort (i.e., working hard) as an antidote to uncertainty (e.g., poor performance, job security). The following quote was reflective of this belief:

When things go wrong, I deal with it really well. A fight comes out in me and that's when I'm at my best. Like when we were in the relegation zone; we did a great escape ... it was made for me that situation. I did everything to get what I could out of that group [of players]. That's probably one of my proudest achievements and that wasn't a trophy, you know ... I'll never, ever forget that ... I suit a team that's against the odds.

Henry, Men's 1st Team Coach

Interestingly, and importantly, the investment in the seemingly ever-present nature of the job was not considered debilitating, but often recast as enabling or even liberating. In this respect, the coaches were complicit in their professional absorption or engagement which reflected an optimism that success was “always around the corner”, or “out there” if one would only work hard enough.

The principled coach: living up to “the right way”

The coaches interviewed were acutely aware that their (coaching) practice was subject to constant evaluation; explained by one as, “everything you do is being judged”. However, similar to the considerable work ethic demanded (described above), the evaluative nature of the job was not

considered in a negative or vulnerability-inducing sense, but rather, as an opportunity to have *control* and *influence*. In the words of one coach, “I know what I need to do. I know what the day should look like; what the week should look like . . . I know what I want”. Although to some extent a corporate message, it also aligned with the coaches’ beliefs about how coaching should be done; that is, as a self-possessed, assertive performance open for all to see. Despite the (recognised) precarious nature of their working lives then (i.e., short-term contracts; likelihood of dismissal), the coaches were clear in their declarations that they could influence and improve their respective contexts and teams. Such a sentiment was often couched in the language of “self-belief” and “confidence” – an apparent pre-requisite for the job. In the words of one Premier League coach, “I came in and the current coaching programme was nowhere near where it should be, so I changed it straightaway. I had to have things right”. It was a narrative that portrayed the necessity to have a considerable degree of “mental steel”; a quality which was both self-contained and, importantly, self-referenced.

Reflective of the individuality and self-reliant nature of the coaches’ work, those deemed to be in more senior or leadership roles in particular (e.g., a Manager, Technical Director or 1st Team Coach), were both persistent and vocal in their belief(s) of the need to do things “the right way”; or, in other words, *their way*. For example:

You should have an honest conversation with players. You might not tell them what they want to hear, but I always did that. Whether it was leaving a player out, or having to release them, I always had that player in my office and spoke to them face-to-face. I feel it’s the right way. [Tom, Men’s 1st Team Manager]

Sometimes I join in [training sessions]; I try to be the best player. I’m showing them the right way to do things. I try to be more vocal. I’m very aware of my job as a coach, and what it takes. [Martin, Men’s U23’s Head Coach]

I’m always dealing with players that haven’t been playing and they know they’re going to have to work hard. Sometimes, I have to convince them to do the work. I’m not here to fuck about; I’m here to get the work done. It’s the only way. [Henry, Men’s 1st Team Coach]

A notable development from this conceptualising of doing things right was the emphasis placed on being *honest*; something considered as critical to the coaching role. Upon further interrogation, such honesty was not a claim to truth or morality, but rather a striving to maintain a perception of being in-charge, fair and transparent. Such a sentiment reflected a concern, above all, with maintaining the right impression. A further consequence of the *hard work* associated with the job then, was not only in terms of the volume

of duties engaged with (as mentioned earlier), but to the constant performative intensity required; that is, through always performing “like a coach” in terms of meeting the ever-present demanded expectations.

This necessity of working endless hours as long as things were done *their way* was even justified in terms of getting the sack. In the words of one:

If they [the football club] say, “We’re going to sack you” then I’m happy with that as long as I’ve done everything how I wanted to do it. It’s Ok as long as I’ve done it my way. [Tom, Men’s 1st Team Manager]

Hence, the coaches often narrated a firm belief in themselves and their practices; a certainty that appeared to protect them from doubts and helped them manage the ever-present pressures of the job.

Relatedly, the most influential obligation the coaches adhered to was not to their official employment, but to the contract they perceived to possess with themselves; that is, the need to always be in the right, to do things their way, and, to fulfil expectations as honest, strong leaders. A certain righteousness was consequently manifest in many of the narratives, with doubt, error or mistakes rarely being admitted to. Further evidence of such a need to believe in being right and correct was the constant reference to trust and loyalty particularly between themselves and the other coaches and players as essential features of coaching. For example:

You trust him [sic; an assistant coach], you trust his opinion and you trust that he’s not going to stab you in the back when things start going wrong. He’s going to back you and work as hard as you. I don’t want him thinking, “Well I’ll get the manager’s job if the manager gets the sack”. That the worst thing in football for me. [Brian, Men’s 1st Team Manager]

I can see why guys have people who they trust alongside them due to what gets thrown at you on a daily basis. Results, player discontent, whatever it may be. You need someone who you feel comfortable working with, certainly as a number two (i.e., an assistant). [Aaron, Men’s 1st Team Assistant Manager]

Yet, paradoxically, despite lauding trust in fellow staff, the possibility of stepping-up to the next level, almost certainly for economic gains and increased credibility, was never far from the coaches’ considerations. For example, one coach asserted that, “*If I do a good job now, I’ll get another in the future. No problem*”. Any discussion of “trust” and “loyalty” then, appeared to relate to what they desired, or demanded, from other staff and players, whilst many of the coaches openly harboured personal ambitions to progress careers elsewhere (and would not hesitate to do so if the opportunity presented itself). Although some of the coaches talked about taking players and (particularly) staff with them, the concepts of trust,

loyalty and honesty initially espoused by the coaches as righteous and necessary features of practice, were, on further interrogation, somewhat problematic.

The imprint of coaching: unveiling vulnerability

Although the coaches constantly asserted their relish for the challenge and busy-ness of the job, their investment in it was not without consequence. The following quote was illustrative of this more reflective sentiment:

On Tuesday, it did hit me. I was drained after the game; I was just exhausted. I felt like, I need a day off, you know. I wasn't slipping into dark places or anything, but I needed to get out; do something or speak to somebody else. I went and watched [names team], so I got out of the house and went and watched the game. [Henry, Men's 1st Team Coach]

The irony from the above quote, of course, lies in the escape to another aspect of the job (i.e., watching another game). Such constant and considerable investment was bound to extract a price:

I've always worked hard. I sometimes get home at 3am in the morning [after an away fixture], and then up at 6am to go back to the ground. I know many people think this isn't normal, but if you read any books on successful people, they always work extremely hard. I think it's definitely a sacrifice when it comes to family but again ... In many ways for me, the game comes ahead of going out with friends and stuff. It's tough ... and when I am off work, I try to do all my calls and stuff while the baby naps ... so I won't get in too much trouble at home! It's not great, and, yeah, you have to have a really understanding wife. [Martin, Men's 1st Team Manager]

The idea of balance away from work was, therefore, not a simple idea for the coaches to manage. Indeed, while bringing work home felt somewhat inevitable, according to one coach, their investment in the role was tied to making their career meaningful (i.e., achieving results). As above, however, this was often to the detriment of personal relationships. The quote below reflected the feelings of many

I got divorced ... she used to like football, but once she realised it was my job and I was bringing it home, you know, it changes. Like when I watch football on TV, I don't watch it because I love it, I'm watching it because of what can I see in it; what can I learn? What can they do? How is that looking? What does the player do in that situation? It's gone way beyond the enjoyment. It's the job. [Henry, Men's 1st Team Coach]

The picture painted was the coaches' considerable investment in the role. It was a commitment woven into the fabric of doing coaching properly (i.e., doing the right thing), both inside and outside the

workplace. In this regard, the ever-present nature of the job stretched from work to home life. For many coaches, there appeared little respite. In the words of one:

The biggest pressure I had was when we were on a losing streak of four or five games; that is tough. You go to bed and all you think about is the next game, desperate for that next win . . . It was tough going to training after a loss and trying to put on a smile . . . but the real problem was coming home, and then the wife would see the bad side of it because I always had the hump. [Tom, Men's 1st Team Manager]

The complication reflected in the above extract was the assumption that such pressure should not be displayed (or discussed) at home. While the emotional baggage of doing the role often came to the fore, albeit rather reluctantly, during the interviews, the coaches were less willing to share feelings or sentiments of contextual vulnerability. That said, the stress associated when making decisions about people's futures was no doubt a heavy and troublesome consideration for many. For instance, one explained:

Letting go of staff is probably the hardest. As difficult as it is saying, "I'm not going to give you a new contract", sometimes I just have to do it; especially to those who have been with me a while. If I'm sitting down with a fitness coach who isn't really earning much money, has got a family, and I'm like, "Sorry, I'm going to let you go", then that becomes hard . . . They're really not nice conversations to have. [Rhys, Men's 1st Team Manager]

Importantly, the coaches' experiences and feelings of vulnerability stretched into all aspects of the job. Here, and rather ironically, many found it hard to break a cycle they had experienced as players; a cycle which involved feelings of rejection and marginalisation. Although they found it problematic to carry on with an established culture, the knowledge of how to oppose or break it, was a task considered too much or too difficult to engage with. Consequently, the performance (or reproduction) of doing coaching, as alluded to earlier, was something they lived with. One coach provided the following as evidence of a wider sentiment

Thinking back to playing days I remember some scenarios where I wanted to break out into tears on a bus full of teammates, but you can't do it. I remember being taken off at half time against [names team] and I sat on the bus afterwards and I spoke to my mum on the phone and never felt so emotional about anything. I said, "I've had enough, I don't want this, this is not for me". Obviously, that was very raw after what had happened . . . it was just an accumulation of events that I didn't agree with . . . I never felt I fitted in . . . I haven't spoken with anyone about this really, 'till now. There was so much vulnerability, but I couldn't show it at the time. But now, in coaching, even though I've been through that as a player, I don't want players to show vulnerability, which is ridiculous, when you think about it . . . I have to act like I know

every single answer. Sometimes they'll [players] ask me something and I don't necessarily know the answer, but I'll talk and get them to buy into what I've said; it's a facade and . . . I do find it hard work. [William, Technical Director]

Discussion

In seeking to understand agential action within situations of vulnerability, Châtel and Soulet (2004, p.1) asked “what resources can be mobilised and how?”; “what alliances are formed and what supports can be found?”; and “how can such anxiety provoking situations be made sense of?” Acknowledging that sports coaching, particularly at the highest levels, is a very uncertain profession, which invariably places coaches in positions of anxious vulnerability, this paper has sought to address what it is to act in such at-risk situations, and what form this action takes. In doing so, we divide this analytical section into four parts; coaching as the performance of masculinity, coaching as an individual phenomenon, coaching as a greedy institution, and, finally, coaches' responses to such positioning(s). The first three afford a deconstruction of coaching's official portrayal, while the final part provides an explanation of why such a depiction is frequently given in terms of how coaches' cope with the professional difficulties encountered.

The coaches interviewed within the project appeared very aware of the precariousness of their work and, hence, the vulnerability of their personal positions. However, although a degree of reservation and anxiety existed about such working orders, they maintained an acceptance of such conditions as “part of the job”; something they claimed to be well aware of when they entered the profession. In doing so, they declared to endure such conditions without complaint. What emerged was a performance of *masculinity*, with the coaches' narratives littered with reference to their technical competence, assertive decision making, toughness, and self-reliance. These were the attributes considered necessary to “do” coaching, which the regularity of such phraseology indicated a degree of socialisation. Consequently, the common language-in-use appeared part of a normative coaching understanding related to what the job required. Reflective of other masculine occupations (e.g., the construction workers in Galea et al., 2021), such assertive characteristics and qualities were considered necessary to “get the job done” above all else. Those who displayed alternative behaviours, on the other hand, were typically described as not *committed* enough, and hence, not suited to coaching.

An aspect of this portrayal was the insistent threads of individuality and stoicism. It was a position grounded in the belief to be both constant and flexible within the professional immersion demanded. Coaching was thus considered as requiring, not only pedagogical competence, but the ability

to pursue and achieve a whole host of other tasks simultaneously. These included a constant “man [sic.] management”, the increasing development and use of analytical abilities, the necessity to “adapt to rapid and numerous changes” (Mercure, 2004, p. 38), and the faculty to oversee and control all these functions (among others) to greater or lesser extents. The paradox, however, was that such a self-determined portrayal, while appearing to offer a protective explanation, left the coaches to act without stable, insightful supports; a perspective which tended to turn the coaches’ accounts in on themselves, thus isolating them as their own judges and points of reference.

The coaches, therefore, portrayed themselves as individuals in the strongest sense and, while being aware of some external constraints on what they could and could not do, often left them with only personal experience of accomplishments as sites of orientation; what Ferry (2004) described as an “attitude of an I”. In doing so, they displayed an inability to understand themselves in relation to others; of personal identity being constructed within and through communities and contexts. Rather, the coaches, almost without exception, interpreted themselves as stand-alone autonomous beings, subject to all the pressures and strains of such a position.

In claiming an individualistic nature of coaching, an irony here was that the coaches were not supported to be individuals. Following Castel (2004), the conditions necessary for them to be individuals as independent, agential selves appeared absent. Such structures include adequate resources (human and technical) and job security (Castel, 2004), to which we can add, institutional backing, and a freedom from the fear of failure. As these stable provisions were manifestly absent from the interviewed coaches’ professional lives, it could be claimed that their so-called individuality was there by default. Consequently, although the coaches were certainly individuals and adhered to a narrative of individuality, by existing without the necessary required supporting frameworks (as suggested earlier), it is hard to consider them as individuals in a “positive” way (Castel, 2004). Conversely, far from being agential, in terms of engaging in idiosyncratic original action, the coaches followed the prescribed “official line”; they worked long hours, adopted many attributes of presenteeism, masculine explanations, and shared a common discourse of doing so (Collins, Barry, & Dzuga, 2021). In short, they did and said what was expected of them.

Building upon the analysis presented thus far, coaching emerged as a “greedy institution” (Galea et al., 2021), a profession which drew incessantly from the participants’ thinking, energy and engagement. Consequently, family life was largely relegated, a situation often justified by recourse to humour (e.g., Tom: “I do it so I don’t get into too much trouble with the Missus [sic.]!”) and having “understanding spouses”. In this

respect, the profession resembles Chappell's (2006, p. 229) description of "a gendered logic of appropriateness" with coaches adhering to the total commitment required to do the job at the expense of other social and familial relationships. Accordingly, and in keeping with Galea et al.'s (2021) analysis, this sacrificial masculinity was embedded, and consequently rewarded, within the profession. Such logic for the coaches in this study prioritised hard work, sacrifice, competition, and being decisive.

The total commitment evident (or rather claimed), then, kept the coaches in a frame of reference they could not see beyond; one that encapsulated the omnivorous demands of exclusivity and loyalty as described by Coser (1974) (albeit in a different profession). Similar to the construction workers featured by Galea et al. (2021), what was evident here was a culture of devotion to work related to a competitive presenteeism; that is, of working long hours and taking pride in being "first in, last out". Although this presenteeism was identified as a general pattern within the interviews, on occasions the coaches did appear to question its necessity or effectiveness. Consequently, when probed to reflect on the logic of such practice and its justifications, some of the coaches queried its need or functionality. Having said that, the limited consciousness demonstrated seemed to lack power within those who possessed it to actually change any future practice.

Although the coaches admitted that professional pressures related to excessive workloads, insecurity of tenure, long and unsociable work schedules, in addition to insufficient time with family, were a feature of their working lives, such pressures were not considered as being unduly problematic. Thus, despite such demands appearing as causes of stress and "psychological injuries" in other professions (Bowen, Edwards, Lingard, & Cattell, 2014; Sunindijo & Kamardeen, 2017), the coaches interviewed within this body of work alternatively tended towards the presentation of positive self-images in the face of such vulnerability. Most, then, relayed an "official line", invoking the aforementioned "normative" portrayal of the profession. This portrayal reflected the preservation of a congruent identity (as outlined above) which involved the neutralisation of negative or stigmatised aspects. Such a quasi-conscious strategy was deemed necessary to carry out the work of identity coping or continuity (Châtel & Soulet, 2004) in a profession recognised as one that seriously and incessantly deconstructs and scrutinises (Jones, 2019).

The coaches' narratives in this regard could also be seen as efforts to bridge the gap between perceived and lived identities, in that they included a recourse to a "mythical" heroic account, and an elevation of the coaching life (Laberge & Roy, 2004). It was a means to justify, contend with, and cope with their (admittedly) precarious professional experiences. For, as Soulet (2004) identified, when individuals do not have relevant resources to

transform a situation, the only way of acting so as to gain a sense of situational control, is to act on themselves. This creation or re-affirmation of a desired identity involves a reorganising or reinterpretation of everyday practices, at the heart of which lies the stories we tell ourselves. In turn, such tales appeared to become both organising and regulating principles for how the coaches in this study thought and talked about the job of doing coaching.

The coaches interviewed thus, appeared to voice a depiction where the given discursive rules or linguistic ethno-methods of coaching were promptly articulated. Doing so, met the need of affording a degree of control and management over the precarious work-related pressures evident; it marked an effort to (re)introduce sense into uncertainty, and consequently, gave greater meaning to practice. In essence, such a development involved a (re)invention of practical norms (or rules-in-use) and a reconceptualisation of experience and biography (Soulet, 2004). This logic of adaptation reorganised the coaches' relationship with what they actually did, particularly in terms of how they understood and contended with their professional pressures and accompanying vulnerability. Although it could be argued that other professions face similar challenges, the particular precarity of coaches' professional lives (as described) enabled such means of dealing with their vulnerable selves to be brought into very clear focus.

Conclusion

A principal finding from the work undertaken was related to understanding how coaches' explanations of workplace practices reflected a culture of "the individual". It was how the coaches both made-sense-of and negotiated the vulnerability and insecurity of their profession. This was (and is) because the work setting described is one where a culture of immediate impact and short-termism dominate, and where traditional forms of social cohesion, despite the often-heard discourse of "team unity", is rarely if ever apparent. Consequently, recourse to a particular professional narrativisation appeared essential for the coaches, both as a means of framing forms of acting, and of "surviving" the doing of the job. The portrait presented is thus claimed as a form of a "practical sociological reasoning" (Garfinkel, 1967, p.1), and comprised the performing of a heroism imbued with notions of individuality, self-reliance, total availability, and competitive presenteeism.

In some ways, the professional vulnerability and its contestation alluded to throughout the paper can be seen as reflective of a general neoliberal social trajectory. Taken in a broad sense, a neoliberalist trend is where the individual is made accountable much more than the collective, promoting

separation, isolation and competition (Scambler, 2018). The irony, however, (as stated) is that coaches are not supported to be individual; in that, they lack the support to guarantee the required solidity to behave as such (Castel, 2004). The position left is a vulnerable way of being an individual; one which mitigates against a degree of authentic integration into context. As presented in this paper, the coaches' response to such a situation was recourse to a resigned positivity; a means of making sense of their eternally uncertain situation(s).

Within this paper, we take issue with the generally positive view of coaching articulated by those interviewed, considering it a "brand"; a form of organisational (coaching) pride. Conversely, we claim that such a view obscures something inherently darker in the profession, which lurks beneath the "shiny" surface; that is, an overly individualistic tendency to emphasise commitment to hard work that undermines connections to others and might obscure pain, suffering, and wider health and well-being issues. The discourse presented and engaged in then, is positioned as an "official line" constructed to help coaches live with the insecure reality of their work through justifying it in a positive light to self and others. Viewing the coaches' articulations as an orientation that obscured, consequently allowed an alternative reading of their stories. This is not to say that interpretation took place without evidence. Quite the contrary. There were many times, following inquisitive prodding and critical scrutiny, when the mask slipped, and the "official line" faltered allowing more than a glimpse of what lay behind the formal curtain (i.e., to unveil some vulnerability).

Acknowledging and recognising such a problematic portrayal of coaches and coaching, the question that follows is what can be done to alleviate or even diminish such uncertainty, so that coaching can become a more sustainable profession? Simply providing workshops on how to deal with symptomatic stress and pressures can only be part of the picture. In this respect, there should be more than merely directing coaches to well-being seminars focussed on individual lifestyle changes (e.g., access to gyms, healthy food, greater stress audits and recognition of poor mental health risk factors), the value of which has been previously questioned (e.g., Carmichael, Fenton, Pinilla-Roncancio, Sing, & Sadhra, 2014). Rather, a need exists to change the focus from an individual to an organisational responsibility, thus producing better and healthier work settings for coaches.

Accepting that it is perhaps unrealistic to call for coaching to be made "less vulnerable" at such an overarching level, particularly in the short term, work should initially focus on providing coaches with the resources necessary to occupy, and succeed in, their unstable roles. A particular avenue of investigation here could be to develop an agenda of

sustainability in coaching; a concept yet to be adequately explored (see Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, & Lindgren, 2020). Key here would be to critically educate coaches about the conditions of their work, allowing them to increasingly view themselves as historically and socially located beings. Coaches could consequently better consider where to best invest efforts for maximal impact, while always having a related eye on longer-term developmental processes and goals. Hence, echoing the recent call of Jones and Hemmestad (2019) to develop coaches' practical wisdom, coaches need both to understand the vulnerable profession they have entered, coupled with guidance on how to best spend the resources and protections granted to them. In doing so, they can aspire to the conditions necessary to be structurally supported individuals, whilst taking issue with the false consciousness of unproblematically following the "official coaching line".

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