CHAPTER 27

CONSENT AND COMPLICITY: THE ATHLETES' ROLE IN THE

NORMALISATION OF DAMAGING COACHING PRACTICES

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Abstract

This chapter reviews scholarship relating to the normalisation and proliferation of abusive coaching practice and the way that athletes come to misrecognise and contribute to this. In the first part of the chapter, the nuanced ways that athlete abuse is enacted within the coach-athlete relationship is contextualised. The mechanisms of constraint that encourage coaches to recycle taken-for-granted notions of best coaching practice is also elaborated. The second part of the chapter centres on a case study that reveals how female cyclists bought into questionable coaching practices in order to achieve national team selection. Social theory is used to illuminate how the athletes consented, conformed and were in part complicit to the normalisation and proliferation of abusive coaching practice. This chapter demonstrates the ways that abuse can be perpetrated by coaches, the complexity of resistance within the coach-athlete relationship, and the role of both parties in the proliferation of damaging practices that affect athlete well-being.

Athlete abuse in the coach-athlete relationship

Sociological investigations of sporting environments illuminate the unique socio-cultural environment that can result in athlete exploitation and abuse (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Lang 2010; Hartill, 2005; Markula 1995; Stirling, 2013; Sterling & Kerr, 2007, 2013, 2014).

Gervis and Dunn (2004) found athlete maltreatment to occur across sporting contexts with various authors reporting sexual abuse (Malkin, Johnston & Brackenridge, 2000; Owton & Sparkes, 2017), emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, 2014) and physical abuse (Kerr, 2014; McPherson *et al.*, 2017) Other sport researchers (Bringer, Brackenridge & Johnston, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Malkin *et al.*, 2000; Owton & Sparkes, 2017) have exposed how coaches have abused their position of power resulting in non-accidental harm to athletes. O'Malley, Winter and Holder (2017) described coach-athlete relationships as a complex relationship within which organisational structures, cultural aspects and power relations between multiple coaches, organisations and the athlete combine. It is within this complex maelstrom of influences that breakdowns can occur, resulting in intentional and unintentional maltreatment of athletes (see Kavanagh, Brown & Jones, 2017). Abusive practice exhibited by coaches describe one element of the narrative around athlete abuse; the way that the athlete responds describes another element. Sterling and Kerr (2008) found that abused athletes can become fearful and that this, combined with the respect and admiration they have for their coaches, encourages acceptance of poor coaching practice. Contrary to Cense and Brackenridge's (2001) assertion that abusive relations stem from a willingness of the perpetrator to abuse, Sterling and Kerr (2014) found that athletes who have suffered emotional abuse can misinterpret harmful coaching strategies as not deliberate and in their athletic best interests. This social process highlights the mechanism by which such coaching behaviours can become normalised and accepted within the coach-athlete relationship (Kerr & Dacyshin, 2000).

In order to clarify these social processes, it is helpful to position the cultural site (in which the coach-athlete relationship resides) within a theoretical perspective. In particular, the theorising of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) on misrecognition and symbolic violence can be used to understand how an active social process (the expression of power) can lead to abuse

and maltreatment in the sporting context. Jenkins (2002, p. 104) suggested that cultural mechanisms result in the misrecognition of legitimacy and the "imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning", resulting in the reproduction of normalised [coaching] practice. What is of particular importance to this chapter is how this normalised practice is legitimised via misrecognition and the collective deception of athletes (Kim, 2004). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 164) describe this deception as a form of symbolic violence that is often "exercised upon a social agent [athlete] with his or her complicity". This deception highlights the unbalanced nature of the coach-athlete relationship; because of misrecognised legitimacy, the bulk of symbolic capital, and therefore symbolic power, is skewed towards the coach (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

Recycling taken-for-granted notions of best practice

Coaches also work within complex relational systems (excluding that of the coach-athlete dyad) that shape their practice. These systems can include colleague coaches, mentor coaches, club administrators and members of the accrediting and overarching sporting bodies. As a result, social and professional forces need to be accounted for in the decision-making of coaches. Contrary to the intent of formal coach education models, beginning coaches value the experiential knowledge of established coaches over formal coach education (Gilbert, Coté & Mallett, 2006) and are more likely to develop their coaching practice by modelling off someone that they admire (Cassidy, 2010). This modelling of another coach's practice has "potential social and cultural benefits that such a complement can bring" (Zehntner & McMahon, 2018, p. 3), but can also contribute to the docile recycling of taken for granted coaching practice (Zehntner & McMahon, 2014). In many instances this will be of no consequence, however the uncritical recycling of performance centric and detrimental coaching practices has been demonstrated to have deleterious and long-term effects for athletes (McMahon, Penney &

Dinan-Thompson, 2012; McMahon, Zehntner & McGannon, 2017). In addition to mentee-centric recycling of practice, mentor coaches act as "intermediaries in a wider system of power relations" (Zehntner & McMahon, 2014, p. 612), and discipline and control mentee coaches in such a way that their "coaching practice and ideas align with mentors and the culturally accepted coaching model" (Zehntner & McMahon, 2018, p. 1). This notion aligns with Cushion and Partington's (2016) finding that coaching practice is ideologically laden with the collection and proliferation of beliefs that are not always grounded in theory.

Case study: Australian women's Cycling Selection Camp

In 2015, the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in partnership with High5 Nutrition (a sport nutrition provider) and cycling's peak body, Cycling Australia (CA), held the Australian Women's Cycling Selection Camp. The stated aim of the camp was to "increase the efficiency of the transition of athletes selected domestically into international competition" (Barras, 2015, para. 6). Athletes invited to the camp were pitted against each other in order to achieve selection into the 'High5 Australian women's Road Development Team' that would compete in continental Europe. The selection camp, which had been running since 2011, made use of "secret army techniques" (Duffy & Moore, 2015, para. 2) and was characterised by CA and High5 Nutrition as brutal, scientific and a very rewarding activity (High5 Nutrition, 2015; Barras, 2015). The methodology used in the camp was based on that utilised by Australia's Special Air Service Regiment, with the intention to evaluate discrete cycling skills, strategic knowledge, emotional and physical resilience and ability to learn (Barras, 2015).

A feature of the 2015 camp was the extensive media coverage that followed the progress of participants. The Australian Development Team opened a Twitter™ profile[1] that shared reports from television and print media, cycling magazine articles, personal blog posts

from athletes, and behind-the-scenes footage of athletes undertaking physical and psychological challenges.

Emotional abuse

When considering the non-accidental forms of athlete abuse (above), other researchers have found that emotional abuse is the most common form of abuse an athlete will be subjected to (i.e. Kavanagh *et al*., 2017). What is of great concern is that emotional abuse is also under-recognised by athletes and, therefore, pervasive and difficult to police (Sterling & Kerr, 2013). Emotional abuse perpetrated by a coach is defined by Sterling and Kerr (2008) as a repeated and sustained pattern of non-contact harmful interactions that result in the emotional upset of an athlete.

Using social theory to identify emotional abuse in a coaching site

By utilising a theoretical lens to interpret social interactions, we can expose the exchanges that contribute to emotional abuse and clarify how these practices can be hidden in well-meaning coaching practice. We can also use social theory to understand how these practices are legitimised and proliferated. Zehntner, McGannon and McMahon (2019) investigated non-accidental harm in this particular cultural setting (Australian women's cycling selection camp) by positioning media work as a cultural site within a theoretical perspective, in this case, magazine articles authored by athletes who took part in the selection camp. Researchers investigating sporting cultures (i.e. Cushion & Jones, 2006; Zehntner *et al*., 2019) have found Bourdieu's theorising on misrecognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) helpful in identifying how power can lead to maltreatment and abuse in sporting cultures. Jenkins (2002, p. 104) described how indirect cultural actions could encourage the misrecognition of legitimacy and, in this way, contribute to the "imposition of

systems of symbolism and meaning". It is these systems of meaning that Taylor and Garratt (2010) argue can become the embedded orthodoxy and the "common sense behind the distinctions we make" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471) in coaching practice. Of relevance to this case study is how the discourse (expression of coaching practice) was imposed as the 'right way' (Schubert, 2002), despite the possibility of alternative and less extreme approaches. This is elaborated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 5) as the "imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power". In this case, the agents acting or imposing the cultural arbitrary are the head coach of the Australian women's cycling programme and a sport physiologist from Australia's peak sporting body, the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS).

While coaches and agents from the AIS are central to this process, they conceived the programme and carefully planned activities that would be used to determine the progress of athletes throughout the camp. As such, athletes can be described as complicit in the normalisation of the dominant coaching discourse (Cushion & Jones, 2006) due to their buy-in and glorification of the process. What this simple explanation fails to consider, though, is the challenges faced by female athletes to secure selection and funding to compete in the sport of their choice.

In order to illustrate how practice is enacted, misrecognised and legitimised by athletes (and coaches), the following sections will be used to "connect and separate the researcher's and narrator's [insiders of the coaching intervention] voices" (Chase, 2005, p. 664). Excerpts from magazine articles relating to the notions of symbolic violence and misrecognition of maltreatment are presented indented and italicised and are knitted together with the interpretive academic voice. This interpretative academic voice will connect the overt and concealed expressions of abusive coaching practice with social theory and, in this way, illustrate the hidden discourse within the cultural site.

Power and non-accidental violence: How the camp played out

Coaching practice at the Australian women's cycling selection camp was power laden and was designed to control and coerce through the insidious and unbalanced application of social power. The head coach and programme designer imposed and legitimised their coaching practice when they utilised numbered mugshots to disembody female athletes, reducing them to an item of data:

> Along the main wall of the room were pinned about 20 portraits, mugshots of the young women I had seen downstairs. They held up race numbers below their faces like a line-up of suspects, except grinning exuberantly.
>
> (Palmer, 2015)

> 'Wake up Number Seven,' a voice booms. 'You have to get to the lab for your body composition scan at 6:00 am. Bring your urine sample with you' …
> You respond to 'Number Seven' because that's the ID you were assigned for the duration of the camp. It corresponds to the paper number you display on yourself at all times.
>
> (Palmer, 2015)

> … within minutes [of being photographed], we were off to challenge one – a step/VO2 max test in the lab. I realised quite quickly that we would run on precision time, with only so much of a breath in between challenges.
>
> (Stewart, 2015)

This 'datafication' contributes to the instrumentalisation of the athlete body and demonstrates how coaches' sought to surveil and control the athlete bodies (Melin, 2013) into a performance tool that was used to perform an athletic task (Serremejane, 2015). The athletes were not party to the planning of their de-identification and were in part forced by their willingness to participate and achieve selection. This deception highlights how resistance is not always possible, and consent can be the result of coercion and the misrecognition of legitimate coaching practice, otherwise described as symbolic violence.

The coaches used interpretive judgement to ensure that they remained the gatekeepers of selection. Rather than relying on a model that measured the size of the athlete engine (physical ability to perform the task) (Barras, 2015), coaches preferenced culturally arbitrary knowledge for the direct benefit of one party over another (Bush, Silk, Andrews & Lauder, 2013). With reference to the challenges that female athletes face in gaining selection into the professional cycling ranks, this highlights an additional layer to the subtle coercion of athletes.

While the application of power is coercive and insidious, coaches exercised non-accidental violence, characterised by Mountjoy *et al.* (2016) as coaching practices that have psychological or physically damaging effect on athletes, which has been found to be equally damaging. Gendered macro-aggressions have a mental health toll on athletes and underline the difference and disempowered nature of the unprivileged group in the coach-athlete dyad (Gearity & Henderson-Metzger, 2017). Coaching practice both planned and expressed in this selection camp parallel the description of non-accidental violence elaborated by Mountjoy *et al.* (2016). Indeed, coaching practices such as these are on the margins of ethical coaching, and this alone elevates the risk of possible abuse:

[The programme is designed to] …mentally and physically break these girls down and get them to their breaking point … It's brutal and they're going to feel like they're in a living hell, but they're going to get a lot out of the experience.

(Gilmore, cited by Palmer, 2015)

You never get praised. But you do get punished. Like in this year's team time trial, which pitted two groups of campers against each other.

(Yeager, 2015)

You and your fellow campers are split into groups. You have to race each other or play 'games' against each other. The winning team gets access to recovery facilities: plunge pools, compression equipment and massage. If you are in the losing group, you will wash everyone's bikes and [the coach's] car.

(Palmer, 2015)

The entire camp is run in 'silent running' mode: no positive or negative feedback is provided during activities or debriefs. Debriefs are structured so that the candidates themselves assess successes, failures and changes.

(Barras, 2015)

Tensions between participant athletes are elevated by the petty humiliations (washing the winners' bikes) or emotional abuse (non-accidental violence). The gendered nature of the challenges is confirmed by one of the designers of the programme when he states:

The concept is unlikely to be adopted by men's programmes only because talented male athletes would simply walk out. He didn't imagine they were likely to submit to a challenging programme when there are plenty of other places they will be praised and pampered no matter what behaviour and attitude they display.

(Martin, cited in Palmer, 2015)

In order to identify and prevent abusive behaviours we must consider how culturally accepted practice intended to build character can be destructive. David (2015) found that sport coaches frequently use humiliation to provoke a response (anger) and, in this way, build character. The ongoing use of humiliation, which is legitimised via the "concealed power imbalance between coaches and athletes" (Zehntner & McMahon, 2018, p. 6), shows how meaning is imposed on athletes and their emotional status challenged. Further, athlete descriptions of the challenges posed by coaches are alarmingly similar to hazing and initiation rituals in sporting teams (Rees, 2010).

"[The] selection course seeks to weed out the strong from the weak" (Hosking, 2015). Johnson and Holman (2009) remind us that sporting landscapes are male-defined and male-dominated, and that the idealised character form associated with sport – masculine, tough and gritty – is an expression of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, hazing is often justified through reference to tradition or team building (see Jennifer J. Waldron's chapter in this collection for more on this issue):

Since its inception in 2011, the brutal selection camp has become renowned as one of the toughest selection camps in Australian sport.

(High5 Nutrition, 2015)

Our challenges are relevant to the tasks to be performed in racing. Riders will be

evaluated for their physiological capacities in the lab and on road … mindset,

leadership, decision-making, team work, emotional and physical resilience.

(Barras, 2015)

Misrecognition and consent

Athlete misrecognition of maltreatment was in part demonstrated by the athletes' alignment

with the "common sense behind" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471) justifications for the coaching

intervention. Participants described the value of the intervention in three ways. First was how

success in selection would mean a boost to their cycling career and result in financial reward.

Second, by aligning with the dominant coaching narrative, athletes overtly endorsed the

practices as something that they *need in order to succeed* (Zehntner *et al*., 2019), and third,

they would make a contribution to 'science' (that would benefit themselves and others).

Participants wrote positively about that selection camp and what could be achieved by

subjecting themselves to the challenges:

Out of 50 or so applications, mine was one of the 18 accepted. I was thrilled to

make the first cut and ready for the challenge that awaited me …We would be

vying for selection [and that would mean] an all-expenses paid eight-week long

trip to Europe to race our bikes.

(Stewart, 2015)

These excerpts highlight the value placed on achieving an elite status and the challenges

associated with gaining a funded position in women's elite cycling. What can be drawn from

this is the possibility that ethical considerations might be sidelined when such a heavy focus is

placed on selection. Indeed, overt public statements endorsing the challenging selection trial might for some be the only way to demonstrate commitment to the dominant cultural and coaching narrative. Despite the obvious impact that coaching practice had on athletes, the "loudest supporters of the camp" were the athletes themselves (Palmer, 2015, para, 24):

[10 women were to be deselected. The head coach would call their numbers and they would leave the room immediately].

…we were instructed to anonymously vote for our team – the team we each would want chosen. We had to rate our mates. As I circled the faces of the girls that I wanted on my team, I had flashbacks of Survivor. I was now a member of the jury. I voted and then returned to my seat. Numbers were called. Mine wasn't. Marv [the head coach] extinguished the torch in my mind.

The tribe had spoken. I was deselected.

I consider my experience at selection camp to be largely a positive one. Everything that I went through has made me stronger. Although I didn't make it through the camp, I will use the feedback I received as my motivation to improve myself and my cycling into the future.

(Stewart, 2015)

This misrecognition of the symbolic violence, and subsequent justification and support for the process, demonstrates how an athlete can become complicit in the reproduction of the dominant coaching discourse (Zehntner *et al*., 2019). Further, this justification contributes to the orthodoxy associated with membership within the culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Put simply, the athlete helps embed taken for granted assumptions through the process of affirming their membership to the culture and support for the coaching practice.

The value placed on 'science' by the athletes, coaches and the funding organisations clouds the way that non-intentional violence is perpetrated in the name of good practice and for third party benefit (scientific enquiry):

Days would be packed with activities, both in the lab and in the field – to test us mentally and physically. We would receive no feedback – just directions. We would start early and, following an intense debriefing session, finish late.

(Stewart, 2015)

That subjecting oneself to 'science' in order to win is a requirement to secure funding illustrates the way that athletes were coerced (Bourdieu, 1991; Kim, 2004). In this particular case, the scientific testing was touted as the financial saviour of the programme (Barras, 2015):

The sport science team brought in much-needed funds through their scientific studies [allowing] this camp to proceed. For that I thank them greatly, as I'm sure the other girls do too!

(Perry, 2015)

The nature of the challenging tasks was also clouded by descriptions of the programme as "highly scientific" (High5 Nutrition, 2015, para. 3) and "scientific best-practice" (Palmer, 2015, para. 34). Tension and resistance around the 'scientific' challenges were rare in athlete stories. Hosking (2015), however, encouraged teammates to work together rather than subject themselves to a team-based competition that would result in deselection or negative consequence for the losing team.

I told the girls to do a deal with each other and go the same speed – force a tie.

I'm sure I would have been cut for even making the suggestion.

(Hosking, 2015)

Hosking intuitively knew that if this plan was revealed, she may have been deselected, illustrating how athlete concerns are subjugated in hierarchical and power-laden structures. Further, misrecognition of the effect that the extreme challenges had on athletes is illustrated by the way that the athletes describe the programme as, "worth it [and something that] I know will have a great [and] positive effect on my cycling" (Perry, 2015, para. 5). In this way, Perry endorses the dominant narrative by contributing to the normalisation of extreme coaching practice.

Recommendations

This case study illustrates how the "mechanism of normalisation of extreme coaching practices is linked to both the aspirations of athletes and coaches" (Zehntner *et al*., 2019, p. 529). Marginalised groups of athletes can be willing to subscribe to the dominant narrative if this means that they can pursue their dreams. Coaches perpetuate concealed power relationships and contribute to non-accidental violence when working with athletes who have limited means for advancement or are part of un-unequal power relationship.

In order to disrupt power-laden coaching practice that reflects traditional male values (hegemonic masculinity) and contributes to non-accidental violence and the emotional abuse of athletes, we need to meaningfully amend coach behaviour (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009). This requires a top-down approach through education that encourages coaches to identify when accepted coaching practice puts athlete welfare at risk by compromising athlete autonomy. In addition, athletes need to be aware of how they contribute to the veneration, proliferation and

normalisation of extreme coaching practice through media. This includes the publication of personal and professional media articles that become a part of the social organisation or dominant discourse within a particular sporting culture. This could be done through the promotion of awareness by athlete-support organisations (i.e. The Cyclists' Alliance[2], IOC athletes' commission and national sporting organisations) and the development of formal support materials to foster change. Both coaches and athletes need to look for the power behind coaching practice, and athletes need to be encouraged to "respectfully question authoritative knowledge in order to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions" (Zehntner & McMahon, 2018, p. 18).

Notes

1 Australian Development Team Profile: https://twitter.com/AusDevTeam
2 The Cyclists' Alliance represent the competitive, economic, and personal interests of all professional women cyclists (https://cyclistsalliance.org/).

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