

# THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORTS COACHING



EDITED BY ROBYN L. JONES, PAUL POTRAC,  
CHRIS CUSHION AND LARS TORE RONGLAN

ROUTLEDGE



# The Sociology of Sports Coaching

Sports coaching is a social activity. At its heart lies a complex interaction between coach and athlete played out within a socio-culturally defined set of (sporting) practices. In this ground-breaking book, leading international scholars and coaches argue that an understanding of sociology and social theory can help us better grasp the interactive nature of coaching and consequently assist in demystifying the mythical 'art' of the activity.

*The Sociology of Sports Coaching* establishes an alternative conceptual framework from which to explore sports coaching. It firstly introduces the work of key social theorists, such as Foucault, Goffman and Bourdieu, before highlighting the principal themes that link sociology and sports coaching, such as power, interaction, and knowledge and learning. The book also develops connections between theory and practice by offering a constructive critique of each social theorist's work by current practicing coaches.

This is the first book to present a critical sociology of sports coaching and, as such, represents an important step forward in the professionalisation of the discipline. It is essential reading for any serious student of sports coaching or the sociology of sport, and for any reflective practitioner looking to become a better coach.

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**Part I**

# **Background and context**



# 1 Introduction

*Robyn L. Jones*

## **Introduction and aim**

The origins of this book lay in our respective sports coaching experiences, watching others coach and reflecting upon how we coached ourselves. Between us, we've coached along the spectrum, from children's primary school teams, through professional age-group sport, to national squads at international competitions. Although the context tended to dictate action, what remained constant was our common struggle with the complexity of trying to influence, teach and inspire others to improved performances. Through serendipitous encounters we eventually came to share academic ideas and careers. Initially, our talk was of mutual dissatisfaction with the reductionist treatment of sports coaching by other scholars. It just didn't ring true; a sentiment constantly thrown at us by other coaches. We had no reply, except to agree timidly. Acknowledging that it was easy to criticise from the sidelines, we began to try to do something about it, which led to a sociological investigation of sports coaching. Why the social emphasis? No doubt, this was influenced by our largely social scientific backgrounds. Of greater importance, however, was our burgeoning belief that sports coaching is, above all, an interactive, communal endeavour; a social practice. Of course, coaches must plan sensitively, continually developing and communicating their sport-specific expertise, and manage the physical environment carefully and decisively. Overriding such concerns, however (a point we reached through experience), was how to generate the appropriate relationships with athletes so that they would trust our requests and demands as coaches. Questions of significance related not so much to which exercises to use, but what to say to whom, when and how? What would be the consequences of such actions? And is the social cost worth it? Within our coaching, every utterance seemed to count; every gesture had an effect in terms of securing, maintaining or losing the respect of those we wanted to influence. We came to realise what we perhaps already knew: that coaching happens in our 'comings and goings, our givings and gettings' with athletes (Lemert, 1997). What mattered then, and what our coaching relied on, was what Lemert (1997: x) described as our 'social competencies'; our basic social logic of how to get things done; the 'tugging, hinting, proposing, judging, punishing, comforting, depriving and frightening' of our charges, both

pro- and re-actively, so that they would learn and absorb what we deemed was important. We also came to recognise that coaching was less about us as heroes or villains, and more about how we managed the pressures, constraints and possibilities of context (Stones, 1998b).

A decade ago, then, with the goal of generating a sociological investigation of coaching in mind, we began to ask publicly: ‘Why does sports coaching need sociology?’ (Jones, 2000). Here, the case was made for sociology’s relevance to coaching, building on initial work arguing that social thought was the under-appreciated, yet crucial ‘invisible ingredient’ in coaches’ knowledge (Potrac & Jones, 1999; Jarvie, 1990). It was an attempt to interrogate and lift our practical understandings of coaching, particularly how coaches deal with athletes, into ‘the light of clear thinking’ (Lemert, 1997: xi).

More recently, as coaching has come to be increasingly acknowledged as a social activity, the argument has been further refined through empirical and theoretical study (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2002). This has included recourse to the thinking of such sociologists as Michel Foucault (Denison, 2007; Johns & Johns, 2000), Pierre Bourdieu (Cushion & Jones, 2006), Erving Goffman (Jones, 2006a) and Anthony Giddens (Purdy *et al.*, 2008), among others. Despite this development, a wider application of social theories to sports coaching has not been forthcoming. This leads us to question the perceived relevance (or irrelevance) of social thought to coaching scholars and coach educators as a theoretical framework from which to explore and subsequently understand the activity. For example, at a recent international coaching conference organised by Sports Coach UK entitled ‘Expert Coaches – Expert Systems: Benchmarking Best Practice’ no sociologist was invited as a keynote speaker. Clearly, then, our message, at least within the coach education fraternity, is not being heard.

The purpose of this book is to present the case further, and more fully, for sociology as an appropriate theoretical location from which to view sports coaching. It aims to do so through illustrating the work of nine key social thinkers, and how their writings can be used to inform coaching. Why did we choose these theorists? Sympathising with Guilianotti (2004: 3), who embarked on a similar project in relation to social thought and sport in general, we also found ‘team selection difficult’. Some global theorists, it could be argued, pick themselves. For example, Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault come instantly to mind. These theorists would also be more initially recognisable to scholars and students of coaching as they have, to varying degrees, begun to be used to analyse the activity. Giving a more in-depth account of their thinking, then, would prove to be less of a step for others’ engagement. We were also influenced by personal interest in including less prominent theorists who, on discussion and reflection, we thought would be fascinating and relevant (for example, Niklas Luhmann, Arlie Hochschild and Peter Blau). Indeed, we believe each key thinker discussed in the book gives a distinctive, valuable perspective on the social world of coaching, ‘shining a torch’ on parts of it, while leaving further corners to be discovered by other theorists holding torches ‘at slightly different angles’ (Stones, 1998b: 5). We openly acknowledge that there are

many other thinkers we could (and perhaps should) have used, and their omission should not in any way be read as intellectual dismissal (Guilianotti, 2004). However, for the reasons given above, we hope to be allowed this latitude and penchant.

### **Context, significance and the value of theory**

In questioning top-level international coaches about the nature and essence of what they do, their responses were almost unequivocal:

Unless you understand [athletes] as people, the best coaching book in the world isn't going to help. It all comes down to how well they really want to do for you . . . to the relationship you have with your players.

The art of coaching is about recognising the situation, recognising the people and responding to the people you are working with.

A big thing is the manner you put things across . . . Really, it's the ability to handle men, that's the big thing, to handle people.

Coaching to me is about reading the individual. People, people, people. That's what it boils down to in the end.

(Jones *et al.*, 2004: 28, 18, 19–20, 92–93)

The affirmed social skills required appeared to outweigh other sport-specific and scientific constructs. Despite such conviction, an initial reaction to such a finding, as recently witnessed by one of us when attempting to dissect and deconstruct such notions with a group of coach educators, has often been: 'but that's just common sense'. When the audience was challenged to conceptualise and articulate the meaning and nature of such skills, however, they found the task very problematic: an interesting if rather unsatisfactory response from coach educators in terms of the stated fabric of coaching. Such common sense, then, as Wenger (1998: 47) reminds us, 'is only common sensical because it is sense held in common'. The educators' response in this instance is not altogether surprising, for, as Lemert (1997: xiii) reminds us, most of the time people exist and survive with very little instruction or consideration about 'how to practice their lives with others'. What gets us by is a seemingly implicit, unconscious, highly practical ability; we somehow know what's going on and how to handle it. Far from some innate, in-born aptitude, however, our guide here is the hidden hand of our social competencies or sociologies (Lemert, 1997).

Such competencies relate to behaving appropriately in context, in socially valued ways, in order to maintain and improve relationships. Without them, we would be forced to learn anew what to think and how to behave in every social situation we encounter (Lemert, 1997). But where and how did we initially learn such behaviours, and how can we better interpret them? That is, if coaching is about social things and how we get on with and exert influence over others, where do we look to generate a better understanding of how we go about them? The answer lies in sociology, and perhaps more specifically in developing what

C. Wright Mills (1959) famously dubbed a *sociological imagination*. Here Wright Mills was referring to the capacity of individuals to recognise the influence of larger structural forces on their everyday lives and concerns; understanding that their personal troubles were often public issues. This ability to link the micro-level minutiae of behaviour to broad macro-structural factors such as gender and ethnicity is one of the principal attractions of sociology to such leading theorists as Loïc Wacquant (2005). By having the potential to do precisely this, Mills believed that sociology held the power not only to inform academic debate but to enrich and enable the lives of ordinary people (Lemert, 1997); to help them understand why they behave as they do and, hence, what alternatives are possible. In Lemert's (1997: 46) words, to 'break out of the silences by looking at the practical realities' as related to the assumptions, biases and stances of everyday life. Such a practical sociology was viewed as liberating individuals to take the decisions they can; to give confidence and possibilities in personal worlds and provide a more nuanced understanding of contextual 'social geography' (Marsh *et al.*, 1996). Hence, it has been argued that sociology has an 'immediate relevance which other subjects cannot boast' (Marsh *et al.*, 1996: 5). Sociology, then, can and should be deemed a functional and doable skill, holding particular relevance for coaches whose job it is to influence others directly towards a perceived greater good. In this respect, sociology can be considered 'the inquisitive child of modernity' (Guilianotti, 2005: xiii), being concerned with questioning, challenging and generally injecting a degree of reality to the traditional rationalistic or modernistic view of social development.

Some of the earlier work undertaken by myself and others, being founded on the theorising of Erving Goffman, gives further credence to the value of sociology to coaching. This is in terms of the performances coaches give to manipulate, tease, coax, flatter and bully best effort and achievements from athletes (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 2004). Although they may seem unique, such performances closely conform to accepted social rules; thus representing a dance of agency within a bounded social choreography. As Goffman (1974: xiii) put it, 'interaction is governed by unstated rules more or less implicitly set by some larger entity'. This is not to view such wider structures in a totally restrictive sense, as they can also be considered 'fragile and precious achievements' that keep social chaos at bay (Goffman, 1974: xviii). Like other sociological work, our previous efforts marked an attempt to put into words the secrets everybody seemed to know but never discussed; to deconstruct and dispel the fog of taken-for-granted knowledge, thus developing a critical coaching consciousness (Jones, 2009a, 2007). It was an effort to 'decode' a culture (Hatchen, 2001) through realising the sociologist's alchemy of uncovering the 'constitutive rules of everyday behaviour' (Goffman, 1974: 5). What helped frame the analysis here was Gardiner's (2000) social project into mundane daily action. Following Hegel's maxim that 'the familiar is not necessarily the known', Gardiner's (2000: 5) central thesis was to explore the 'fine grain' and 'connective tissue' of human activities by critically focusing on the 'practical accomplishments of skilled social actors in the course of their day-to-day lives'. As with Gardiner's (2000: 6) book, the purpose of our project is to

problematise coaches' everyday practice better, 'to expose its contradictions and hidden potentialities', thus raising 'our understanding of the prosaic to the level of critical knowledge'. In essence, to help us understand 'what is going on' in coaching. At the heart of such micro-action lies the omnipresent phenomenon of power. Indeed, this book is largely a response to existing work on coaching which has failed to engage adequately with the power differentials that exist within it. It is not surprising, then, that power is the first topic to be tackled in Part III of the text (Chapter 11). But more of that later.

The principal value of this book lies in building on the foundational work done by undertaking a rigorous sociological analysis of coaching. This is not in respect of what Gouldner (1970) criticised as 'cow sociology' (a reference to domicile, tame enquiry) or merely to duplicate what has gone before, but critically to deconstruct and credibly to reconstruct some of coaching's central concepts and notions. This is particularly so in terms of the power balances ingrained within coaching and the 'non-logical logics' to which they are subject (Gardiner, 2000). Lest we overstate the case here, however, we openly admit to borrowing unavoidably from existing sources and the insightful thoughts of others (i.e., our chosen social theorists), only really claiming to bring them together within a sports coaching context.

The significance of the text also lies in further addressing the theory–practice gap in coaching, which, unfortunately, still remains. Thompson (2003) has suggested that this may be the consequence of academics viewing theory development as more important than improvements in practice, with practitioners being equally culpable of 'anti-intellectualism' or the rejection of theoretical matters on the grounds that they are irrelevant to coaches' everyday actions. Certainly, the entrenchment of both camps in their respective positions has done little to advance the relationship between academics and coaches, or reduce the divide between theory and practice. Consequently, Thompson (2003: 99) argues that both parties have 'a shared responsibility to break down such barriers' if we are to maximise the effectiveness of practice. In order to address this issue, the work of the selected social theorists is placed alongside current practising coaches' views of such theory. The practitioners' commentaries were elicited to ascertain and demonstrate the relevance of social thought to coaches and students of coaching; to see if their earlier words about the interactive relational nature of coaching continue to hold true, albeit from a different cohort at a different time. It also reflected an appreciation that (despite being former coaches ourselves) the featured coaches held the potential to experience things in ways we do (or could) not; a position which gives added authority to the personal nature of the activity. Honouring their voices in this way also allowed us 'to see past the edges of our own vision' (Ely *et al.*, 1997: 315), while bestowing credence and recognition on the 'social and contextual dimensions' of practitioners' knowledge, aspects that should be considered when creating theory related to hard-to-define field situations (Ely *et al.*, 1997: 317).

Both the coaches' reflections and the chapters themselves, then, were contested and negotiated between the coaches and ourselves as primary authors. In engaging

in such an exercise, we deliberately tried not to romanticise our theoretical positions or the coaches' thoughts about them. It made us question our writings, as we were forced to move away from the typical and ideological to the tensions and contradictions of coaches' work. What informed our thinking here was both Apple's (1999: 14) call that 'theory needs to be connected' to issues and people, and Anderson and Herr's (1999) belief in the 'importance of getting our hands dirty through forming alliances with practitioners' (Macdonald *et al.*, 2002: 148). By including practitioners' comments we also sought to alleviate any potential 'theory anxiety' that readers could have, thus firmly embedding abstract concepts in practical experiences and perceptions (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In this way, the text marks an attempt to take theory 'off the table and into the field' (Macdonald *et al.*, 2002: 149), allowing for the development of more realistic preparation programmes for coaches which better mirror the complex reality of their work (Jones, 2006b).

No doubt, some will take issue with the seeming academicisation of sports coaching, where many familiar concepts are rendered awkward, strange and troublesome (Perkins, 1999). This is because the theories presented here hold the potential to undermine previous beliefs 'in so far as they uncover the limits of rationality and truth claims' (Meyer & Land, 2003: 3). They will also push some out of well-established cognitive comfort zones to confront the contested and problematic reality of coaching, making a degree of resistance inevitable (Jones, 2007). Taking our lead from earlier writings (e.g., Jones, 2006b, 2007), we make no apology for this. Coaching is full of problems, dilemmas and tensions, so it should be portrayed as such. To do otherwise would be a disservice to both coaches and students of coaching. A retreat into common-sense superficiality may make us feel better in the short term, but 'it is false comfort' (Stones, 1998b: 5). The challenge, then, is to engage and embrace the social complexity of coaching; a goal towards which we hope this book will make a progressive contribution. Like Ball (1991), who also questioned the 'if . . . then' predictable-relations approach to understanding social life, our end points are complexity and interrelatedness rather than simplicity. It is a position which 'rebels against and distrusts easy conclusions in academic knowledge' (Ely *et al.*, 1997: 11). It is also a stance which has led us into conflict with (more than a few) colleagues who continue to cling desperately to the security of clear-cut distinctions; of seemingly painless ways to do hard things (Ely *et al.*, 1997). Nevertheless, the hope is that, like DiPardo's (1993) teachers who initially feared the abstract discourse of graduate school, readers, once they get past the 'language barrier', will experience powerful new ways of conceptualising and expanding on the familiar.

This book, then, is premised on the view that we have much to learn from the presented range of sociological thinkers who 'have taken the time and made the effort to think long and hard about a whole variety of social aspects most of us would have barely sensed' (Stones, 1998b: 1). They give us more than concepts, though: rather, a new grammar and everyday language with which to communicate and think; a fresh vocabulary through which to reflect on new ideas that are often compatible with hitherto unarticulated beliefs (Ely *et al.*, 1997). Although the

information presented here might be novel to many, the purpose is as much to do with ‘ordering the stuff we know’ as with giving ‘new stuff’ to coaching students, educators and coaches (Stones, 1998b). This is another reason why we need to engage with theory and thinkers, because doing so helps us make sense of what we know so we can make better use of it. In the words of Elliot Eisner (1993: viii), theory can ‘make coherent what otherwise appear as disparate individual events’, while being ‘the means through which we learn lessons that can apply to situations we have yet to encounter’. It was a point made by O’Sullivan (2005: 6) in her British Educational Research Association inaugural lecture when she stated that we need to link our thinking ‘to some conceptual frame [otherwise] we can’t advance the field. If we can’t understand what is happening and explain why it may be so, we are not in a position to inform our stakeholders (and practitioners) as to how to forward their agendas.’ It is important to note here, however, that we are not calling for some ‘Grand Theorising’ of coaching, a singular ‘truth’ or a holy grail of practice to resolve all debate. We certainly want to avoid any ‘tyranny of ideology’. Rather, we hope that the theoretical positions outlined might be used as scaffolds and frameworks with which to think, as they have the potential to inform about different social dynamics at work (Powers, 2004). They can be viewed as a set of eye-glasses to ‘bring into focus, sharpen and angle our understanding of what might otherwise be a blurred stream of perception’ (Ely *et al.*, 1997: 228). Good theory, then, echoing the point made earlier, can liberate one’s sociological imagination to explore why things are as they are and how they can possibly be done better. In this respect, we agree with Madison’s (1999: 109) sentiment that, although ‘I would surely lose myself without performance, I cannot live well without theory’.

## Structure

The book is divided into three principal parts. Following this Introduction, in which the scene is set, the second part (Chapters 2–10) outlines the principal theories of nine established social thinkers, and how such work can be related to sports coaching. Each of these chapters follows a broadly similar four-section or thematic format. This involves: (i) a short biography prefacing a brief introduction to the theorist in question; (ii) a description of the principal tenets and works of that theorist; (iii) an outline and some examples of how such work can be used better to inform sports coaching; and (iv) a commentary by a practising coach related to how he or she might benefit or has benefited from the knowledge presented. More specifically, Chapter 2 explores Erving Goffman’s theories on interaction, the dramaturgical perspective, impression management and front. Chapter 3, on Michel Foucault, discusses his work on discipline, discourse, knowledge and power; while Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field, capital and the complicity of the dominated are examined in Chapter 4. Arlie Hochschild’s writings on emotion management, feeling rules, deep and surface acting, and the inauthenticity of self are considered in Chapter 5, followed by Anthony Giddens’s work on structuration theory and its modalities – namely interpretative schemes, facilities

or resources, and norms – in Chapter 6. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's ideas on communication, complexity, systems and environment are discussed in Chapter 7, while an examination of Etienne Wenger's thinking on knowing, meaning and identity generated through communities of practice is examined in Chapter 8. Peter Blau's (1964: 91) notion of social exchange as a relationship between specific actors 'contingent on rewarding reactions from [each] other', inclusive of the concepts of dependency and alternatives, is considered in Chapter 9. Finally, the work of Jürgen Habermas (Chapter 10) on moral consciousness, the discourse of ethics, and communicative action concludes Part II. As stated, in keeping praxis high on the agenda, each chapter ends with a commentary from a practising coach in relation to the relevance of the concepts discussed to their everyday practice.

Part III (Chapters 11–14), drawing primarily on the theories presented, focuses on certain themes deemed particularly relevant for a social analysis of sports coaching. Here, we take our lead from Guttman (1992: 158), who, in asserting that 'no key turns all locks', depicted the craft of sociology as requiring imaginative engagement with different theoretical constructs to explain social phenomena (Guilianotti, 2005). We acknowledge that an inescapable element of overlap exists between the chapters here. This, however, is not taken to be altogether a bad thing, as the resultant conceptual blending makes it possible clearly to identify and grasp the most illuminating and consistent of sociology's ideas as related to coaching. These include power (Chapter 11), social interaction (Chapter 12) and learning (Chapter 13). Each of these chapters is also organised along similar lines, exploring the presented themes from the viewpoints of coach, athlete and context. Specifically, this is done by examining the micro-everyday actions of both coaches and athletes, before placing such actions within their wider macro-context. For example, within Chapter 11, and building on French and Raven's (1959) work, the analysis of coaches' power is principally based upon Goffman and others' work (e.g., Kelchtermans, 2005) on the micro-political presentation of the self, and Foucault's ideas relating to the authoritative gaze. These notions are discussed in light of recent coaching literature. The chapter then switches to explore, from a power-full perspective, why athletes behave as they do within the coaching context. The discussion here is framed by Bourdieu's work on false consciousness and the compliance of the dominated, Giddens's writings on ontological security and the dialectical nature of power, and Nyberg's (1981) ideas on consent and resistance. This final notion is to do with power over power, where the seemingly subservient still hold considerable sway because they assent to power being exercised over them. Following this, an exploration of how power operates at a contextual level in coaching is undertaken. Here, Foucault's work on discourse and institutions, Bourdieu's notions of fields and the 'space of the possible', and Blau's social exchange, among others, are utilised as theoretical pegs to guide thinking.

In Chapter 12, Goffman's conceptualisation of roles, performances and impression management, in addition to Giddens's notions of social norms and social positioning, are used to illustrate how and why coaches and athletes interact

as they do. In addition, exchange theory, through the work of Blau, is applied to exemplify how an exchange of symbolic goods between coach and athletes might find expression in coaching situations. A particular aspect engaged with here is the use of humour within coaching interaction, again exploring how and why it is used as it is. The latter part of the chapter tends towards macro-sociological concepts to examine how face-to-face interaction is embedded in societal contexts that impress the coaching situation in different ways. Here, Bourdieu's work on field and habitus is used to guide understanding of similarities and differences in recreative as opposed to professional, competitive sport. Similarly, Luhmann's concepts of communication and complexity are employed to describe how social systems represent constraining and enabling forces of importance to actors in the coaching process. Finally, it is suggested that a deeper understanding of face-to-face interaction, as well as the contextual factors that influence these interactions, can provide coaches, athletes, administrators, and coach educators with valuable tools for guiding critical reflection on coaching practice.

Chapter 13 argues that a sociological analysis of learning and knowledge has much to offer a broader understanding of coaching. In keeping with previous chapters, coaching is regarded as a contested space where social thought and theory can serve to problematise taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and learning, for both athlete and coach. The case is made that engagement with the given theories not only holds the potential for raising awareness and understanding, but provides opportunities for reflection and a subsequent fertile ground for meaningful change. The chapter centres on the relationship between coaching as a social practice, identity construction, learning and knowledge. This is principally examined through Wenger's notion of communities of practice, supported by Lave and Wenger's ideas on situated learning, Luhmann's selective observations, Bourdieu's habitus and Blau's concept of exchange, among others. The chapter draws to a close with a discussion of the value of this analysis to developing a more critical tradition in coaching through challenging current modes of thought and practice, and suggests that the development of coaching as a profession, particularly in regard to coach education, is dependent upon a theoretically driven body of knowledge.

Finally, a concluding chapter (Chapter 14) summarises the main points made throughout the book, in particular the structure–agency debate which lies at the heart of much sociological enquiry, before providing recommendations for future research directions.