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Sustaining the unsustainable: meaningful longevity and the doing of coaching

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to propose a reconceptualization of coaching as a more sustainable profession. This is not to merely claim that current coaching practice, complete with its anxiety and compulsive tendencies, is unproblematically unsustainable. Rather, it is to position coaching, inclusive of such inclinations, as viable and workable for those who do it. It is subsequently argued that change needs to occur at both individual and institutional levels. The former declares for greater critical consciousness, meaningful experiences, and occupational value for coaches, while the latter argues for a recognition that the perceived structures of coaching are socially configured considerations arising, in essence, from agential practice. In addressing the question of ‘how can coaching be considered sustainable?’ the paper thus argues for a change not in the nature of coaching itself, but through developing its ‘professional meaningfulness’ from within.

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Introduction

The principal seed of this paper can be traced back to a journal reviewer’s comment over 15 years ago. One of us had submitted an autoethnography for publication related to coaching nervousness, anxiety, and professional concern (Jones 2006); a picture both echoed and built upon in subsequent work (Potrac et al. 2012; Purdy and Potrac 2016; Ives et al. 2021). The comment, in response, read; ‘If coaching is so traumatic and troubling, why on earth do you and others continue to coach?’ Despite the timid reply loosely connected to self-actualisation being enough to secure publication, a nagging suspicion and doubt has persisted. Similarly, although work has tentatively investigated coaches’ identity construction and the related concept of ‘self-in-role’ as motivations to ‘do’ coaching, (see Jones, Armour, and Potrac 2004; Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022) the question of ‘why coach?’ continues largely unanswered.

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A second rationale for this paper stems from the need to present an alternative perspective of coaching as a sustainable profession. The case here, echoing the sentiment above, lies upon the growing portrayal of coaches as vulnerable actors subject to prolonged emotional, physical, and mental stress (Olusoga and Kenttä 2017; Olusoga et al. 2010; McNeill, Durand-Bush, and Lemyre 2017); pressures principally stemming from professional ambiguity, the need for visibly immediate outcomes, allied with (or leading to) insecure employment prospects (Jones and Wallace 2006). It is important to clarify that in some respects, coaching already appears as a sustainable profession, with a constant stream of personnel readily replacing those who leave for whatever reason. Alternatively, the case made in this paper is for coaching to become more sustainable for coaches themselves, with such practitioners being viewed less as easily replaceable commodities than valuable assets worthy of investment.

The subsequent requirement then is to build from a basis of understanding the phenomenon or the essential structures of coaching, to one of change; what has been termed a reconstructive agenda (Jones 2019). Taking account of coaching's portrayal as contested, endlessly demanding and, hence, a 'greedy institution' (e.g. Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022), the challenge is to help coaches (and those who employ them) better contend with the uncertain and vulnerable nature of their work (Jones and Wallace 2005, 2006). Not to be confused with unproblematic stability (Knockaert and Maillfert 2004), professional sustainability in this instance refers to the coaching role as both creative and meaningful for practitioners.

The purpose of the paper thus, is to address these dual concerns in the separate interests of both and, through their merging, to achieve a larger whole. In doing so, we firstly better articulate the compulsive nature of coaching through engagement with the work of Fraleigh (see McLaughlin and Torres 2011) as related to the 'sweet tension of uncertainty'. The case made is that the (uncertain) nature of coaching generates an addictive, pleasurable anxiety that enables a sharpening of the senses in terms of one's own potentialities. The anxiety we refer to here is not a common parlance anxiety that might be deemed 'disordered', but rather, and borrowing from the phenomenologist Heidegger (1962), a disclosure of the totality of coaching in the face of uncertainty. In this respect, it represents both the attachment to and the detachment from others and things within the activity. Although not always leading to heightened consciousness, the greater awareness and attention to the everyday world stemming from such angst results in an intensity of existence (e.g. Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022) found only in select other professions where uncertainty, a sense of meaningfulness, and intense possibilities are almost always at stake (e.g. police patrol officers, surgeons, paramedics). Hence, the unaddressed conscious question of 'why do coaches coach?' is somewhat addressed.

Secondly, through positioning such angst as potentially generative, as opposed to a destructive force, the paper is also concerned with presenting coaching as a sustainable occupation. This is not to merely claim current coaching practice is simplistically unsustainable, but rather, following some re-conceptualisation work, to position coaching as more workable and maintainable for those who do it. Here, it is argued that change needs to occur at both individual and institutional levels. The former declares for greater critical consciousness and meaningful experiences of the everyday including a degree of agential existentialism (e.g. Mead 1967) and occupational value for coaches (Evetts 2011). The latter, meanwhile, makes the case for institutional recognition of the temporal elements within athletic

developmental processes as being what the core business of coaching is actually about (or should be about). In this respect, a call is made to stop dealing with symptoms and consequences of current practice, and to alternatively look ‘up stream’ to a much greater degree at the policies and culture produced. Being situated at the intersection of the twin issues of ‘why coach?’ and ‘how can coaching be considered sustainable?’ the paper argues for a change not in the motivation to coach, but to relocate coaching’s stimulus, impetus, and drive within a framework of sustainable practice.

The compulsive nature of coaching

Inspired by a more general social turn, a flourishing body of work related to sport coaching has seen notions of power, compliance, care, and interaction come to the fore. A touchstone within this literature has been the development of a critical knowledge of the everyday within coaching, where the complexities associated with the practice are considered through intersubjective and culturally sensitive means (e.g. Potrac et al. 2017). Here, rather than locating it as self-centred practice within a highly explicative process, coaching is considered as a ‘detailed site of work’ that encompasses issues of identity, roles, contextual pressures and opportunities (e.g. Corsby & Jones, 2019). While not explicitly addressing coaches’ motivations for professional engagement, a feature of this work has suggested that coaching demands, or perhaps results in, a state of engrossment (Jones, Bailey, and Santos 2013); that is, coaching mandates a physical and emotional commitment not often seen in other professions. Borrowing from the work of Blum (1994), Jones, Armour, and Potrac (2004) had suggested that a ‘giving of oneself’, or the readiness to ‘spend oneself’ (Noddings 2003), is evident in coaching, principally resulting from a self-actualisation through the occupied role. Although providing some signposts towards coaches as ‘conspirators’ in the construction of social norms and expectations, the issue of ‘why coach?’ remains confined within an established value framework. Thus, how coaching is encountered, the commitment to possibilities, and realisation of ‘what makes coaching so apparently compulsive?’ has remained unexplored territory.¹

Recent work by Corsby, Jones, and Lane (2022) into how professional coaches contend with vulnerability during the course of their work (features found to be associated with increased symptoms of mental health disorders, for example see Gouttebauge et al. 2019; Reardon et al. 2019 for discussion) concluded that the intense hyper-busyness claimed ‘to do’ the job, where work-related breadth and possibilities appeared all consuming, was just necessary. Hence, the long, unsociable working pattern(s), which often impacted on familial relationships and general well-being, were thus considered a price worth paying (Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022). In turn, the overwhelming response in relation to the question of ‘why coach?’ spoke of excitement, ‘the buzz’, ‘adrenaline rushes’, and a great sense of achievement from positive results (i.e. performing well and winning games). It was a sentiment recently articulated by West Ham United F.C. Manager, David Moyes, in describing the work as a ‘drug, despite the pressures’ (BBC, April 7th, 2023). Even when things had not gone ‘their way’, the dominant sentiment present was an urgent optimistic looking forward to the next session or game, to ‘put things right’ as soon as possible.

No doubt, such agitated or stimulated restlessness contributed to coaching’s recent portrayal as a ‘greedy profession’ (Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022; Galea et al. 2021), which demands substantial commitment from practitioners. Indeed, it is this depiction or reading

of coaching which makes us consider it in its present guise as unsustainable. The pressures signified here refer to coaches problematically performing according to others' expectations (not as they think they should) (Partington and Cushion 2012), with a sole focus on results (Cushion and Jones 2006), whilst always operating under the shadow of so-called 'burn out' (e.g. Bentzen, Lemyre, and Kenttä 2014; McNeill, Durand-Bush, and Lemyre 2017; among many others). To a considerable degree, however, the insatiable pressured professional greed reported by Corsby, Jones, and Lane (2022) and manifest in the work cited directly above, was willingly fed, with a continuation of, or a return to, the fray being considered not so much unavoidable as almost impulsively attractive. When questioned as to what compelled them to do so, the coaches within the aforementioned work answered in rather unreflective terms about being in charge of their own destinies and doing things 'their way'; responses which appeared to give them an important sense of self and status. This was not so much in terms of some unbridled ego, but an element of thrilling existence and importance (Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022).

In turn, we contend that it was the so-called 'sweet tension of uncertainty', a notion first coined by Fraleigh (see McLaughlin and Torres 2011) and later developed by Kretchmar (1975), which compelled the coaches to coach. Acknowledging that Fraleigh's (1984) attention here was not directed towards coaching per se, but to the aesthetic of the sporting experience, we nevertheless assert that coaches are not just peripheral to the contest (as some interested onlookers), but rather are central, heavily invested participants, within it. Relatedly, according to Kretchmar and Elcome (2001, p. 183), the 'aura of uncertainty' produced by testing and contesting (sporting) possibilities possesses a 'power to [both] seduce and delight'. Hence, it was the compulsive attraction of engaging in events deemed neither impossible nor easily achievable, as manifest through the sporting contest's dramatic possibilities, that captivated the coaches to continually invest much of themselves in a vulnerable, demanding profession. Of considerable significance here is the notion of possibilities. This is because the sweet tension or anxiety referred to not only involves an ambiguous feeling of 'may-I' or 'may-I-not succeed' (Standal and Moe 2011), but also a thrilling hope and drive that the sporting challenge faced *can* be successfully addressed (McLaughlin and Torres 2011). It is this hope driven tension of possibilities that is interpreted as the pleasurable 'sweet' experience. Although such a feeling may have compelled the coaches referred to above to coach (and to keep coaching), the 'sweet anxiety' was experienced or engaged in in an unreflective manner; that is, it did not particularly lead to a critical consciousness. Hence, although it made them 'live' more vicariously, it did so in an unsuspecting, unauthentic sense (Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022).

Similarly, from previous coaches' accounts (Jones, Armour, and Potrac 2004), it was obvious that, despite being engrossed and excited by what they did, the coaching work carried out was done so in largely inattentive and undiscerning ways. Although a degree of 'reflection' was evident, this was often limited to clichéd considerations of 'good practice', (often failed) attempts at achieving a 'work-life balance', and a heroic justification of the need to do coaching 'their way'. The absence of a deeper reflexivity was even more obvious. This was particularly in relation to a social and discursive deconstruction of the narrative(s) provided (Finlay 2002). It is an account which somewhat differs from earlier rational choice theories (e.g. Becker & Murphy, 1988) and Denzin's (1993) symbolic interactionist perspective on addiction, both of which include a conscious voluntarism in terms of actions undertaken. In contrast, rather like 'moths to a flame', despite (rhetorically) professing an awareness

of the dangers of ‘burn out’ and the potential cost to family life, the coaches cited above appeared unproblematically and compulsively attracted or drawn to the job no matter what the cost. It appears then that coaching is meaningful to people in ways that cannot be easily reduced to particular pedagogies, means of ‘decision making’, or of merely establishing ‘functional’ relationships with contextual actors. In short, coaches have learned how to be affected by coaching, in that they seem habituated to something (a ‘sweet anxiety’) that ostensibly overrides personal faculties of judgement. Without wishing to dilute or destroy this undoubted thrill and attractiveness provided by coaching possibilities, the question emerges of how can coaching work be made more sustainable, thus not allowing such attractive features to be personally damaging for practitioners?

Perceiving coaching as sustainable practice

In recent times, ideas surrounding sustainable employment and careers have increasingly come to the fore (e.g. Knockaert and Maillfert 2004; van der Heijden et al. 2020). According to van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), sustainable careers refer to ‘sequences of (occupational) experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time... characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual’ (p. 7). Such thinking has given rise to ‘protean’, ‘boundary less’ and ‘predictor’ models, where dynamic careers are seen to be managed by individuals more than any particular organisation (Hall, Yip, and Doiron 2018; Arthur 2014; Heslin, Keating, and Ashford 2020).

Although giving good material to think with, we consider such research and explanations as not addressing the particular needs of coaching, in terms of making it a sustainable career and profession. This is because coaching is inherently unpredictable, relational, and dependant, thus characterized by various degrees of collaboration, struggle and negotiation (e.g. Jones and Wallace 2005, 2006). The agency as defined in the above cited work then, is (realistically) not so available to coaches, who are alternatively (or additionally) subject to a myriad of unique structural constraints (most obviously, sporting results) (Bowes and Jones 2006). In this respect, coaches are better defined as optimistic professionals doing the best or all they can with what they have (Santos et al. 2013).

A recently published paper worthy of mention here is that by Barker-Ruchti and Purdy (2023), who borrowed from the ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ perspective to create and evaluate a ‘Sustainable Sports Coaching’ university course. Although such a project can be considered a definitive progression, certain aspects of the ‘case method pedagogy’ utilised within it could be accused of lacking a degree of critical analysis. For example, issues of ‘ethics’ and ‘agency’ in addition to the gestalt competencies featured, were engaged with in a rather power-less fashion. Similarly, the concept of sustainability, appeared more concerned with achieving a ‘balance’ between performance enhancement and athlete health, thus re-casting or ignoring what the doing of coaching actually means for those who coach. The same could be said for a paper by Dohlstén, Barker-Ruchti, and Lindgren (2021) who claimed that a more democratic model, including giving more credence to athletes’ ‘voices’, would also result in more sustainable coaching. Alternatively, and perhaps building on such work then, our paper emphasises meaningfulness, through a critical awareness of the intentionality of coaching to create a picture of sustainable practice. In doing so, it gives primacy to

relational agency, while respecting the nature of the practice itself as the thing that make it so attractive for coaches.

Not to be confused with structural stability, or personal resilience, what we are alternatively advocating here is a form of human sustainability associated with developing a critical consciousness of doing or acting. It is for coaches to have a better understanding of professional intentionality, progression (of self, others, and context) and agency, thus making for an increasingly meaningful experience. However, such agential action is considered in light of coaching's particular norms and structures; including those of the need for positive outcomes, a limited amount of resources (for most), and accompanying vulnerability.

We contend that developing such an awareness holds the potential to (firstly) enlighten coaches of the possibility that they may experience compulsive 'problems' simply as a result of how they had implicitly learned the doing of coaching. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, it could (secondly) result in a more authentic and generative model of coaching, protective of its compulsive thrilling attraction, whilst making it a more maintainable profession in the longer term. Not only should such a conceptualisation enable coaches to work more productively for longer, but also respects coaching's traditional location within a so-called 'performance paradigm'; a site that allows or even facilitates the 'sweet tension' that makes the work so compelling. In more detail, we believe this sustainability can be examined and developed at two complementary levels; the individual and the structural.

The individual level

What we are calling for here is, to various degrees, both an emancipatory and (perhaps more importantly) an elaboration project. This is not in terms of naïve recourse to 'self-centered' decontextualised theorisation (e.g. Duda 2013) or to some idealisation of objectified freedom (e.g. an unproblematic empowerment agenda), but to developing a critical knowledge of the everyday (Gardiner 2000). Such a routine or mundane perspective includes recognising and engaging with the real politik of coaching (Jones and Hemmestad 2021); from gaining and holding the respect (and subsequent) compliance of other contextual actors (e.g. assistant coaches, administrators, owners, parents as well as athletes among others) (e.g. Potrac, Jones, and Armour 2002; Potrac et al. 2012), through to ensuring the employment of 'practical wisdom' (Jones & Hemmestad, 2019) to make the context work as desired. It is a relational, emotional, and political consciousness (e.g. Magill et al. 2017; Jones 2019) which marks a movement towards a 'dis-alienation' and 'dis-idealisation' of the coach; a humanism which believes in the person of the coach him/herself precisely because s/he 'knows it'. Such an abstraction equates to educating coaches about the importance of culture, ideology and other superstructural factors not easily perceived in the immediacy and busy-ness of daily life. Similarly, it involves a bringing to consciousness the embodied and emotional urges felt by many coaches to, and whilst, coaching; urges that speak, in particular, to the construction of the 'coaching self' (see Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022). A critical objective here is to avoid reproducing a set of given professional practices and terminologies that become part of oft-quoted 'essential' frames of reference and, subsequently, uncritically institutionalised.

Gardiner (2004) likens such an awakening process to 'that of becoming', tied to a better appreciation of a person's position in the world. Again, this is not in terms of individual tendencies or occupational specialisations, of a life split into distinct roles and poles, or subject to overpowering structural forces. Rather, it refers to an emphasis on considered

agential imaginary practices grounded in the affective realm, whilst being cognisant of social power (e.g. Potrac and Jones 2009). It is a process of self-realisation whereby knowledge of the everyday, what created it and what it creates, is transformed into generative development. As opposed to an uncritical acceptance of 'facts' or evidence, such a development also comprises a reflexive self (and contextual) appreciation in the pursuit of a meaningful life. Although existing value and social hierarchies, in addition to moral concerns, are considered, sustainability in coaching goes towards what Heller (1984) described as 'rationality of intellect' where imagination and satisfaction, be it emotional or intellectual, are given credence. In many respects, such a development echoes Jones's (2019) recent call for coaches to develop a 'quality of mind' through critical reasoning to better survive and thrive in their work. Such a quality refers to the ability to critically evaluate habit-bound norms before acting in a reasoned yet enlightened imaginative manner (Gardiner 2000). It is a need to develop personal sense making over investments and constructions, and in the subsequent related production of individualised action (Jones 2019).

According to the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, the concept of *Dasein*, of consciously 'being in the world', is necessary for the development of an authentic self. Such authenticity relates to determining one's own 'potentiality-for-Being' (Magrini 2006), thus awakening from an unreflective existence. *Dasein* then, in quite a simplistic sense, refers to being engaged with the world; to continuous practical commitment with, and absorption in, one's situation(s) (Collins and Selina 1998). For Heidegger, however, such experience of the world involved others and, therefore, was always 'with-world' (*mitwelt*). In this way, being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) was considered as being-with-others; that is, to make sense of the world is to already know other people are there; in this case, coaching as a world full of others. Having said that, echoing the coaching related findings referred to, it is acknowledged that most of the time, *Dasein* exists in an inauthentic manner, expressed through the taken-for-granted everyday discourse and actions (Heidegger 1962). In turn, it (i.e. *Dasein*) is manifest in superficial, injudicious ways, apparently 'unconcerned with its own unique possibilities' (Magrini 2006, p. 77).

Rather than merely suggesting that our self becomes absorbed in activity, Heidegger introduces the idea of 'the anyone' (*das Man*). Here, 'the anyone' is the vague, elusive mass of everyone (and no-one), which shape the norms that govern meaningfulness. On the one hand, the anyone is productive in the sense that the skills we need to disclose the world are public and, therefore, help to reveal an array of competent ways to deal with others. Yet, on the other hand, the anyone can also have the effect of 'levelling down' (Käufer and Chemero 2015), resulting in anything exceptional or alternative being silently suppressed.

Analysing human existence in this way, Heidegger highlighted a distinction between the anyone self and the authentic (or genuine) self. The former related to a treatment of any person as a rather complicit subject, exposed to various experiences and events. The latter authentic self meanwhile exists in the face of the unproblematic propagated by the anyone. Thus, authenticity requires an owning of self-construal in a way that embraces the contingencies and openness of the world (and others). Hence, it has been claimed for it to exist in an authentic manner, *Dasein* must actively 'choose to choose itself' as opposed to moving along passively within the wider ebb and flow of things (Magrini 2006). The purpose here is to bring the engagement within the everyday into greater critical consciousness. According to Magrini (2006), a primal factor which brings *Dasein* into itself and, therefore, into a state of authenticity, is anxiety. This relates to the capacity of anxiety or angst to make *Dasein*

aware of its own potentialities, thus being an enlightening experience (Magrini 2006). In making explicit Dasein's possible (or inevitable) initial 'nonexistence', angst is positioned as enabling an understanding of difficult aspects of life, thus bringing an adjustment or acclimatisation to those aspects. Hence, as opposed to existing in an inauthentic manner (in terms of choosing-not-to-choose-itself), through a state on anxiety, Dasein, is brought back to face its own possibilities.

Of course, and emphasising a point of difference from Heidegger, what we are not advocating here is for coaches' personas to be completely broken down by anxiety before a critical consciousness of their being-in-the-world can emerge. Neither do we toe the line of anxiety reduction so prevalent in the sport psychological literature as somehow necessary for objective optimal performance. Alternatively, the case made relates to a liberation from the absorption of the everyday through provoking Dasein 'to reflect upon that which matters most in its existence' (Magrini 2006, p. 79); that is, realising things that matter for coaching to happen, and being competent in relation to them in coherent ways. Doing so, can resist the temptation to work in inauthentic ways through unthinkingly 'fleeing into daily tasks' as so often witnessed (Käufer and Chemero 2015, p. 84; Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022). In addition, it can also position the angst coaches invariably deal with, and often find exhilarating, as manageable and sustainable.

What can further the conceptualisation here are Mead's (1967) foundational ideas of 'me' and 'I'. The 'me' was that learned in interaction with others, before being internalized in the self. In this respect, it was considered that the individual was not 'something that he (sic.) invented, but rather what his significant others have come to... treat him as being' (Goffman 1972, p. 327). The inherent social nature of humans was thus assumed, with every self taking place, or coming into being, in a social context. Alternatively, the 'I' was considered to be the response to the 'me'; that is, a response to others' perceptions. Although it was deemed that existence and participation in a community come before individual consciousness, the 'I' was nevertheless viewed as acting creatively, albeit within the confines of the 'me' (Mead 1967). Our subsequent case here is to loosen those confines a little, whilst allowing for a sociality and historicity of self, thus emphasising the case for human agency (Jackson 2010). It is where sociality connects to self and, through reflexive imaginative analysis, enables it to become a better sustaining self. Mead's work then, as opposed to a tendency towards individualism, allows us to understand what it is to be social, and to creatively participate in social practice. The critical point, whilst rejecting any notion of a decentred or fixed core identity, is to advocate for a vision of the self as consciously fashioned through reflexive acts of self-construction (Jackson 2010). Likewise, it is not a call to some hyper-introspective reflexivity by which an individual is continually inwardly reflecting. Rather, it is a social reflexivity incorporating inter-subjectivity, critique, and collaboration which situates the individual in relation to others; not only to other persons, but also other ideas, beliefs and intentions (Finlay 2002). The latter is crucial here in terms of carefully considering the intentionality of practice (Jones and Ronglan 2018), and the raising of critical consciousness as mentioned earlier. Doing or developing so, is more likely to produce an increasingly grounded, sustainable (coaching) self, as opposed to the individualised, self-referential persona, complicit in his or her own vulnerability, that we currently witness (and encourage) (Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022).

At a structural level

A grounding rationale for this paper was to avoid a naive optimism regarding coaches' agency within coaching. This refers to an uncritical belief that individual coaches can do what they want in terms of their practice, thus making any recommendations for improvement simply not credible or possible if such constraints as organisational expectations are not considered. Subsequently, this penultimate section of the paper discusses how coaching could be made sustainable at a structural, and not just an individual, level. As mentioned, a principal and natural issue to be addressed here is that of career insecurity, largely because coaching is characterized by high levels of uncertainty resulting in coaches, by and large, having to manage their careers themselves.

Whilst considering the individual as focal, De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans (2020) advocated a systematic and dynamic approach to career sustainability. This required organisations to focus on indicators rather than on discrete outcomes, claiming this would bring mutually beneficial consequences for the person and context (De Vos, Van der Heijden, and Akkermans 2020). While agreeing with the sentiment, and particularly with the longer-term perspective advocated, the question of getting employing organisations to adopt such practices, could inevitably remain difficult. After all, if the coaching undertaken is plainly not getting the desired results (particularly over the intermediate or longer terms), then the nature of the work demands a change. An interesting distinction to consider is that making coaching more sustainable as a profession does not necessarily mean making it more stable (Knockaert and Maillefert 2004). Indeed, Knockaert and Maillefert (2004) case here surrounds the quality and meaningfulness of the job in hand as opposed to its security.

The issue of evolving or changing institutional expectations and obligations inevitably leads to a discussion of structure, agency, and structuration (Cheng 2012; Giddens 1984); that is, that individuals cannot be helped but be influenced by an imposing social structure, or that they are essential parts that constitute that structure. For Giddens (1984), social practices cannot be simply considered as 'brought into being by social actors', but alternatively as 'continually recreated by them *via* the very means whereby they express themselves as actors' (p. 2). Taken as such, and seeing that institutional structures already exist within coaching, the case made here, is for individuals to recognise their reflexive practical logic in maintaining social order (Cheng 2012); in this way, structure is continuously sustained and reproduced in and through people's actions. In doing so, the view of individuals and structure as independent of each other is overcome (Cheng 2012).

Although it could be argued that what we are referring to here are social systems as practices as opposed to institutional structures, which comprise rules and resources, they nevertheless both emanate from, and consist of, norms, legitimation, and authority (status) (Giddens 1984). Consequently, as structures essentially relate to patterns of practices, they always hold the possibility of changing, as their reproduction can never be guaranteed; a view that gives more credence to agential action than previous structural theories. Of course, what is required here is 'discursive consciousness' on behalf of individuals (Giddens 1984), where a critical reflection on practice and its intentionality is realised. This is distinct from 'practical consciousness' where an individual acts without much thought or awareness. Not only is it a perspective that positions structures as having no inherent stability outside human action because they are socially constructed but, similar to Bourdieu's concept of

‘skilled’ players of the game, allocates an agent’s capacity to carry out personal practices albeit influenced by access to existing resources (Inglis and Thorpe 2012).

Accepting that the operation of a sustainable work system must be carried out at multiple levels, being principally aimed at regeneration and enriching the resources utilised (and produced) (Costanza et al. 2007), we believe that an authentic sustainability cannot come from the top alone. Rather, it needs to be understood and internalised by all involved in the doing of coaching. Hence, merely to wait for, or accept the necessity of, a top-down change is a recipe for inertia. Alternatively, and echoing the argument presented above, coaches themselves can be influential as advocates or agents of required change. As opposed to burying themselves in the busy, immediateness of work (e.g. Corsby, Jones, and Lane 2022), positioning coaches as reflexively tied to context, coaches could thus be catalysts for organisational change in terms of better securing for themselves meaningful professional lives (as outlined earlier). Doing so, could help not only the process but also the product of coaching through greater insightful and imaginative related actions. In addition, such a development carries possibilities for greater organisational consciousness through exposing the arbitrariness of social arrangements, thus suggesting or demonstrating alternative paths for ‘better practice’ (Wacquant 2005). In this way, coaches, through viewing coaching itself as object, hold the power to illuminate social determinants ‘that bear on current predicaments and future promise’ at an organisational level (Wacquant 2005, B14). Without putting too much emphasis on the ‘heroic role model’, the solution to managerial change then can be said to lie at the personal as well as the organisational plane (Brint 2012). What could further the project in this respect, is for coaches to establish an advocacy group for themselves, thus forming a subject-based critical collective. In addition to being a supportive ‘community of security’ (Jones and Allison 2014), such an association could also be an authoritative source for the communication of the doing of coaching to better deal with the vulnerability and anxiety experienced within the role. Such a potentiality was outlined by Lemert (2012), who, although commenting on structural rearrangements as opposed to individual challenges, nevertheless outlined the potential power of new groups to disturb and reconstruct a given social order. It is important to note, however, that such an initiative as referred to here should be practice-referenced and not practice-driven (Armour, Jess, and Kirk 2005). The focus then should be placed on a sustainable reconceptualization of coaching (as outlined in the previous section), and not a dissolution into the overwhelming immediacy of the everyday. This is because employing organisations need to have the confidence in the quality and sincerity of what is being proposed if they are to take such initiatives and their recommendations seriously. Still, this is where attention to local matters can influence institutional policies.

A further notion to engage with here in terms of defining a humanist coaching sustainability is that of occupational value (Evetts 2011). Occupational value referred to by Evetts (2011) is founded on the belief that expert judgment and professional discretion are aspects worth guarding and preserving. Its constituent features include among others; a high degree of control over work processes and priorities, lengthy periods of shared education, collegial authority and mutual support, a sense of purpose and contribution, the utilisation of discretionary judgement and, relations with employers characterised by trust and confidence. The crucial aspect of concern here, however, is that of meaningfulness; a term often associated with working for the greater good as opposed to the self (e.g. Harding 2019). Although no doubt it has to be embedded in the mindset of

individuals, it also has to be woven into the fabric of organizational contexts. Again, perhaps the lead here should come from coaches themselves in demonstrating, through the individual case made earlier, the value of building slower and not always exclusively driving for the immediate quick fix. In doing so, coaches can potentially construct and demand a professionalization ‘from within’.

Relatedly, policy making organizations should create the conditions that allow, and not restrict, professionals to do their job effectively and creatively. For coaching, this means moving away from a culture of managerialism and competencies, to fully accept, embrace and further develop the nuance required to behave with considerations of enabling structures and agential flair simultaneously in mind. It is a call for organisations to create (or respond to) the conditions of trust that allow coaches to do their jobs effectively. This is where the appeal for cultural change is made and used by the occupational group itself, and from where the returns can be substantial (Jones 2019). These proceeds include the development of a particular discourse which, in turn, can be used for constructing coaching’s agreed occupational identity, in the interests of all (Evetts 2011).

Conclusion

Sustainability for coaching means protecting and explicating the richness and the ‘sweet anxiety’ that make coaching so exhilarating, whilst ensuring that such an addictive attraction doesn’t destroy coaches themselves. Thus, the case presented in this paper is not for changing the nature of coaching, but to make it more sustainable through developing its ‘professional meaningfulness’. In turn, this equates to further conceiving it as a relational human endeavour, thus giving more credence to the evolutionary feel of genuine development as opposed to the easy, fast conclusions currently on offer. To be humanly sustainable then, coaching cannot be so focused on short term quick fix efficiencies (despite the adrenaline rush sometimes claimed), but should also pay attention to longer term dynamic processes such as learning and innovation. However, although more long-term thinking needs to be applied to coaching by all concerned with it, the case for greater sustainability does not linearly equate to greater stability or simple longevity. Rather, it is better captured through developing a critical consciousness and a related intentionality in respect of coaches’ work; a greater respect for what Jones and Ronglan (2018), in borrowing from Garfinkel, recently termed the quiddity or ‘just whatness’ of coaching. Doing so, would give coaches greater focus and meaning to, and within, their work, being more secure in what they were able to influence when and where and, hence, where to invest their efforts in both the short *and* longer terms.

What we are arguing for here is cultural change, the responsibility of employing institutions and organisations as much as it is directly for coaches themselves. In this respect, unlike other professions, a sustainable conceptualisation of coaching cannot rest on individual agency alone (i.e. unilaterally achieving a work life balance, or developing idiosyncratic ideas of meaningfulness etc). Neither can employing organisations and institutes simply reconceptualise sport as an activity where results don’t matter. Rather, at the macro level, as opposed to an attitude of commodification, organisations need to question and carefully consider how they can best ensure the continued functioning of positive processes and results through their human resources; a regard that inevitably reaches into issues of professional development. At the micro level meanwhile, sustainability speaks to coaches

consciously and critically reflecting upon how best to optimise their capabilities without being expended in the act(s) of doing so. In this way, coaching capital can be maintained and further developed, with sustainability being equated to advancing the condition of coaches whereby aspirations are realistically addressed. Without recourse to the 'heroic role' model of coaching, we nevertheless consider practices as enduringly having the possibility of change, with individuals similarly always having some reflexive opportunity to transform a situation. In this regard, (regular) activities are brought together into social systems which could, in turn, be manifest as particular organisations.

What are proposed then, are considerations that take account of both priority and progressive features of coaching, thus being credible and workable recommendations for practice. Doing so, takes issue with a prevailing assumption within sustainability politics and theory that the phenomenon under study needs to be somehow radically changed in order that it is preserved. Whilst agreeing that some change is necessary, our case is alternatively based on protecting the thrill and essence of coaching (a primary reason why coaches coach), while trying to alter aspects that cannot or should not be sustained.

Note

1. Although the case presented in this paper does not provide an empirical explanation to illustrate the wider argument, the inspiration for it developed both from literature and a broader project funded by UEFA. The focus of this latter work was upon the everyday challenges, struggles and opportunities of professional coaches. In doing so, specific attention was paid to how and why coaches willingly and compulsively endured the inherent insecurity and uncertainty of their respective roles. Being thus grounded in both empiricism and concept, this paper can be said to loosely reside in both and strictly in neither.

Disclosure statement

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