Rethinking the factuality of "contextual" factors: Towards a reflexive understanding of action-context dynamism in the theorisation of coaching

Paul K. Miller and Colum Cronin

Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, University of Cumbria

Abstract

This paper aims to add to the body of work designed to add clarity to the theoretical understanding of coaching processes. Recognising that academic understandings of coaching have progressed from a simplistic view of the activity as mechanical and broadly bio-scientific, the paper initially explores extant literature addressing coaching as a complex process influenced by a myriad of psycho-social contextual variables (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2006; Cushion, 2007; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995; R. E. Smith & Smoll, 1997). It is noted, however, that much of this work adopts a largely monodirectional stance regarding the relationship between action and context; essentially static contextual "variables" are seen to influence coaching activities while little account is provided of the alternate flow. Despite some key literature (for example: Jones & Wallace, 2005; Mageau & Vallerand, 2007) acknowledging that contexts are to some extent shaped by actions, it is centrally contended that the broad contemporary concept of "context" in the academic study of coaching remains somewhat oversimplified and underdeveloped. Drawing particularly upon the seminal work of Harold Garfinkel (1967; 1970) and more recent developments in Discursive Psychology (Edwards, 1997; Locke, 2004; Potter, 2005b; Wiggins & Potter, 2008), it is argued herein that current understandings of the pragmatic situations of coaching can be advanced by viewing context itself as a highly dynamic and, crucially, intersubsubjective construct which is ongoingly realised, interpreted and transformed by coaches and athletes alike. This is, fundamentally, to claim that coaching practice and its contexts exist in a *reflexive configuration* which requires further investigation before truly effective models can be generated. The paper concludes by exploring the pertinence of a range of practical methods which are sensitive to these concerns, but have as yet found little articulation in the study of coaching.

Keywords.

Context; coaching process; ethnomethodology; indexicality; reflexivity.

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Over the past decade, governing organisations such as the International Council for Coach Education (ICCE), European Coaching Council and other national organisations across the globe have worked extensively to advance the development of professional coaching practice. Sports Coach UK, alongside other national sporting bodies and regional/local agencies (such as county sport partnerships), has consonantly outlined the need for a formal profession involving "…a cohesive, ethical, inclusive and valued coaching system where skilled coaches support children, players and athletes at all stages of their development." (Sports Coach UK, 2008, p.11). Supporting much of the development work, and in response to a call from Lyle (2002), academic research has been progressively tasked with the improving the understanding of coaching both as a practical profession and also as a social phenomenon. In particular, increased attention has been paid to theoretical understandings of coaching (i.e. the need for strong conceptual frameworks to guide practical intervention). Key topics recently examined include coach decision-making (Abraham, Collins, & Martindale, 2006; Vergeer & Lyle, 2009), coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2007; Jowett, O'Broin, & Palmer, 2010; Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011) and coach education (Young, Jemczyk, Brophy, & Côté, 2009). This work has come from a variety of perspectives in sociology, psychology and pedagogy, which reflects the fact that multidisciplinary knowledge and expertise is required to ground the understanding of a complex and multifaceted activity. Although at pains to stress that there remains no "closure" on the issue, Cushion, Armour and Jones (2006, p.95) provide an extensive review of such research, summarising the core precepts of extant knowledge thusly:

"1. The coaching process is not necessarily cyclical but is continuous and interdependent.

2. The process (and the practice it engenders) is continually constrained by a range of 'objectives' that derive from the club, the coach and the athletes involved.

3. The process is a constantly dynamic set of intra- and inter-group interpersonal relationships. These relationships are locally dialectical between and amongst agents (coach, player) and structure (club, culture).

4. The coaching process is embedded within external constraints, only some of which are controllable...[and]…

5. A pervasive cultural dimension infuses the coaching process through the coach, club and athletes, and their interaction."

Cushion (2007) similarly suggests that, despite the range of research completed, a sound and widely-acceptable theoretical model of coaching remains elusive.

It is against such a backdrop that this paper explores the particular matter of "context" in coaching, with a view to challenging the some particular *assumptions* embedded within the prevalent orthodoxy. As recognised in the first section below, dominant academic understandings of the coaching process have progressed from a simplistic view of the activity as mechanical and broadly bio-scientific to the acceptance of a more nuanced social-cognitive paradigm that accounts for complexity and the influence of a myriad of psycho-social contextual variables (Cushion et al., 2006; Cushion, 2007; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995; R. E. Smith & Smoll, 1997). It is also noted, however, that much of this work adopts a largely monodirectional stance regarding the relationship between action and context; essentially static contextual "variables" are seen to influence coaching activities while little account is provided of the alternate flow.

Despite some key literature (for example: Jones & Wallace, 2005; Mageau & Vallerand, 2007) acknowledging that contexts are to some extent shaped by actions, it is centrally contended herein – and drawing particularly upon the seminal work of Harold Garfinkel and more recent

developments in Discursive Psychology (Edwards, 1997; Locke, 2004; Potter, 2005b; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) – that:

1. The broad contemporary concept of "context" in the academic study of coaching remains somewhat oversimplified and underdeveloped.

2. Current understandings of the pragmatic situations of coaching can be advanced by viewing context itself as a highly dynamic and, crucially, intersubsubjective construct which is ongoingly realised, interpreted and transformed by coaches and athletes alike. This is, fundamentally, to claim that:

3. Coaching practice and its contexts exist in a *reflexive configuration* which requires further investigation before truly effective models can be generated.

The paper concludes by exploring the pertinence of a number of practical and well-established research methods (particularly ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography, conversation analysis and discursive psychology) which are sensitive to these concerns, but have as yet found little articulation in the study of coaching. It is argued that the employment of such methods could inform a more sensitive approach to the modelling of coaching processes that does not risk defining key environmental phenomena "by fiat" (Cicourel, 1964)[1], nor overlooking the manner in which they are locally organised, in the drive to discover causes and consequences.

Models of context and coaching: A critical review

Some early academic representations of coaching assumed a systematic and task-focused process geared almost exclusively to the improvement of athletic performance. Franks (1986), for example, reflecting a time-prevalent positivistic drive in coaching research, grounds process-modeling not only

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[1] In short, using predetermined, and therefore to some extent arbitrary, deductive categorisation in the analysis of situated activities.

in the broad goal of performance-outcome, but in that of *statistically measurable* performance-outcome. Fairs' (1987) coaching model (see Figure 1), meanwhile, actually embeds specific stages of data collection and assessment of quantifiable athletic performance indicators.
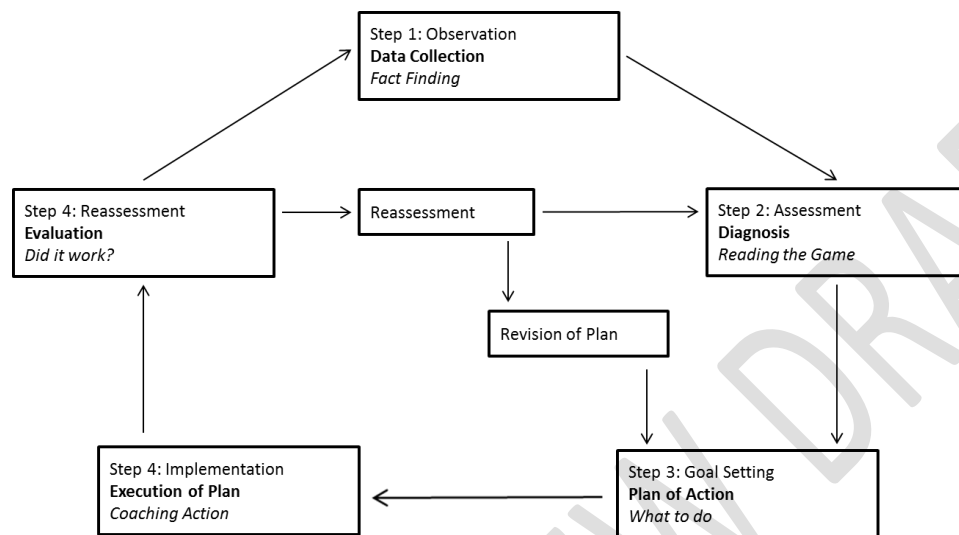
Step 1: Observation
Data Collection
Fact Finding

Step 4: Reassessment
Evaluation
Did it work?

Reassessment

Step 2: Assessment
Diagnosis
Reading the Game

Revision of Plan

Step 4: Implementation
Execution of Plan
Coaching Action

Step 3: Goal Setting
Plan of Action
What to do

Figure 1: The coaching process (Fairs, 1987)

The pure goal-focusing in this model accords little consideration to issues of social and cultural organization in any particular circumstance. In many respects the model is summarily *decontextualized*, abstracted from real situations to facilitate adherence to the dominant bio-scientific paradigm active at the time. The core assumption evidenced herein is that effective coaching is a relatively linear, performance orientated process to which a "one-size-fits-all" approach can be taken. Although recognising that coaching is a staged process, both Franks and Fairs necessarily over-simplify (Lyle, 2002) in order to abstract.

In contrast with the models above, Chelladurai's (1978; 1990)[2] Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MDML) presents a more complex picture of the sporting processes, embedding explicit

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[2] Drawing on Fred Fiedler's 'contingency theory' (1964).

recognition of the influence of social context (group size, location, norms and so forth) on leadership

practice. The MDML also assimilates other typically social-cognitive concerns (e.g. actual, preferred

and required behaviours, and so forth) in arguing that success is predicated upon the interactions

between personal characteristics of a leader, the social-psychological characteristics of the

participants and the contextual / environmental factors endemic to the situation. Moreover,

Chelladurai's work also marks a break with the pure instrumentalism of Franks (1986) and Fairs

(1987) in its drawing of a distinction between the goals of *performance* and *satisfaction* (see Figure
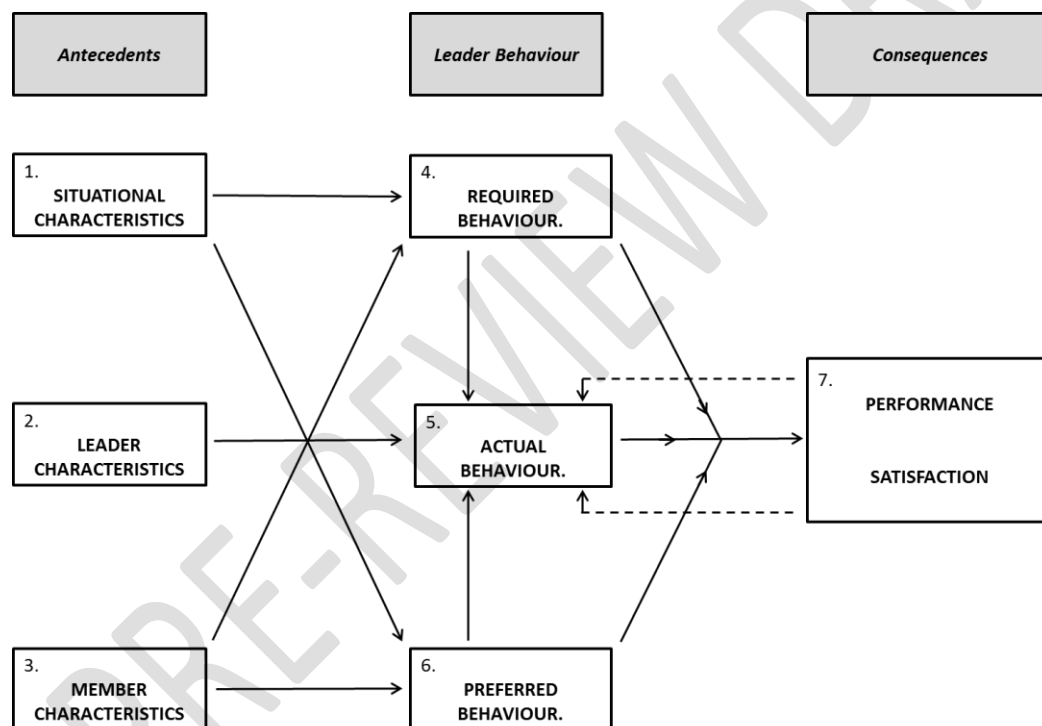
2).

Figure 2: Multidimensional Model of Leadership in Sport (Chelladurai, 1990)

The MDML (and the associated Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS)) is thus underpinned by a

recognition of the fact that leadership of all kinds in sport is centrally influenced by the "…dictates of

situational characteristics." (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980, p.35) and has, unquestionably, provided a

significant contribution not only to the theoretical understanding of coaching, but also to its methodological toolbox (Cumming, Smith, & Smoll, 2006). As is typical of social-cognitive modeling *in general* (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2003), however, what constitutes a "situational characteristic" is presupposed to be self-evident[3], and the relationship between context and (required, actual and preferred) behaviour is taken to be monodirectional. This core conceptualization of the action-context relationship is also apparent in the Mediational Model of Adult Leadership Behaviours in Sport (Smoll & Smith, 1984), developed shortly after the MDML (see Figure 3).
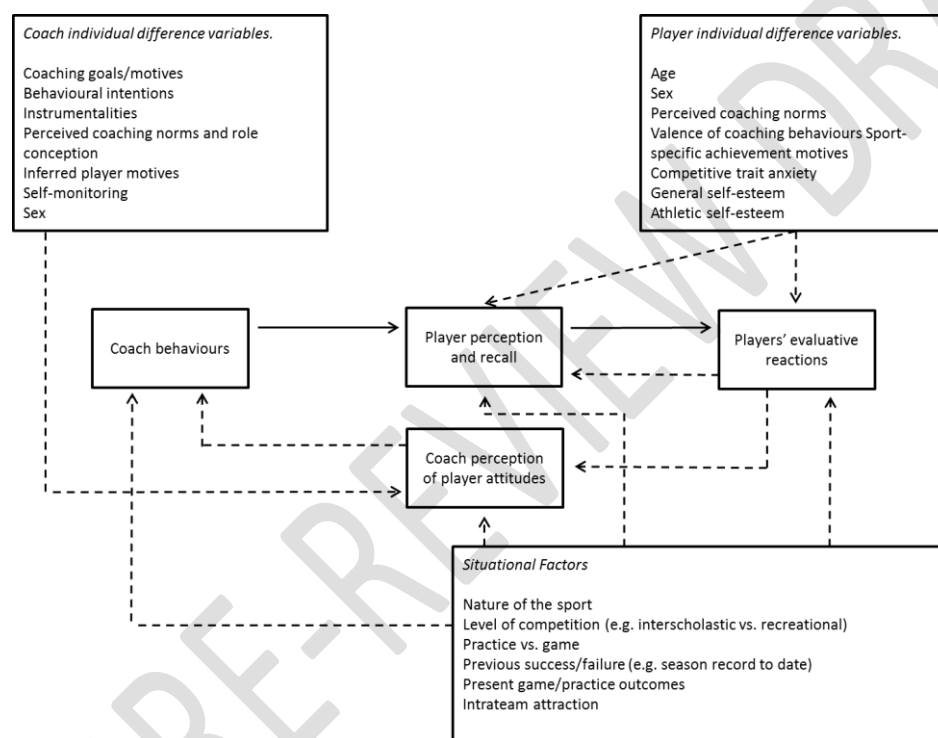

Figure 3: Mediational model of adult behaviours in sport (Smoll & Smith, 1984).

The Mediational model is primarily grounded in observations of concrete coaching practice, utilizing the twelve operationally defined categories embedded in the Coach Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) devised by Smith, Smoll and Hunt (1977). While this provides for a richer

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[3] Which is to say: "objectively readable."

"taxonomy" of sport-specific situational factors than may have been apparent in the MDML, the basic valence of the theoretical apparatus remains the same. Issues of environment in the model are (a) boxed away from those pertinent to individuals and (b) linked to practical behaviours only by outwardly-radiating arrows. Methodologically speaking, the use of *a priori* analytic categories requires that features of any empirical situation are necessarily decoupled from the context of their occurrence in order to fit said categories (Silverman, 1994; 1997), which deflects attention from the complex manners in which they might be meaningful to the persons actually involved. Equally, deducted findings based on pre-categorisation can only reflect social-psychological configurations assumed *within the tools of measurement* (Cicourel, 1964). In the case of the CBAS (and thus the Mediational model), one such assumption relates to the Cartesian-cognitivist configuration of action and context also evident in the LSS (and thus the MDML), which John Heritage (1984, p.132) elaborates thusly:

> "The situation of action is a stable object of consensual identification prior to action. Such identification is essential if normatively co-ordinated conduct is to occur. Such situational identification is essentially a transcendent product of shared substantive knowledge of 'matters' of fact known in advance."

Derek Edwards (1997, pp.65-66), moreover, elaborates how cognitive *psychology*, as a specific discipline, has advanced these precepts and:

> "…typically taken particular specifications of the external world not only as consensual and prior to action…but as *unproblematically known by the analyst*, such that the nature of the 'given' world can be placed into the Methods section of reports." [Original Emphasis]

In short, the "nature of the sport" is known (and knowable) in advance of any unit act, "practice" is practice and a "bad season record" is exactly that. All participants interpret the external contexts in which their activities will take place, and use said information (accurately or inaccurately, effectively or ineffectively) to direct their behaviours. In many respects this approach to the action-context relationship is rather academically intuitive to psychologists, providing us with optimal conditions for the use of elaborate variable analysis. As evidenced by the models above, it is recurrently assumed that only once the external "situational" factors/characteristics have been reliably measured that can we draw firm conclusions about cognitions and behaviour at all. Are the behavioural outputs, we can ask, consistent with the environmental inputs? Are coaches' perceptions, therefore, "accurate?" Are the subjects' representations consistent with what is "really" going on? It is not until the objective character of external reality is known to us that we can accurately evaluate how someone else is processing it, and/or what impacts it is having upon their actions. As Henri Tajfel (1981) famously notes, however, any treatment of the social world as mere "information to be processed" does scant justice to the complex and fluid organisation of social phenomena. In the models above, the actual, practical and contextually-complex phenomenon that is "coaching" is to some extent displaced from centre stage by elaborate and abstract schematisations focused upon cause and consequence. Coaches and athletes are, in this sense, analytically reduced to "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel, 1967), vessels through which face-sheet variables (such as "intrateam attraction") can be seen to operate.

Although the MDML and Mediational models have been subsequently criticised for a failure to recognise the true contextual complexity of coaching (Strean, 1995), and for not according sufficient attention to the interpretative processes influencing coach behaviour (Abraham & Collins, 1998), more recent attempts to schematise coaching activities have ultimately been more concerned to "refine the detail" than to scrutinise any potentially problematic assumptions within the social-cognitive orthodoxy itself. Côté, Salmela, Trudel and Baria (1995), for example, use a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), drawing on in-depth interviews, to induct a model that

takes into account the coach's perception of an athlete's "potential" across three discreet component

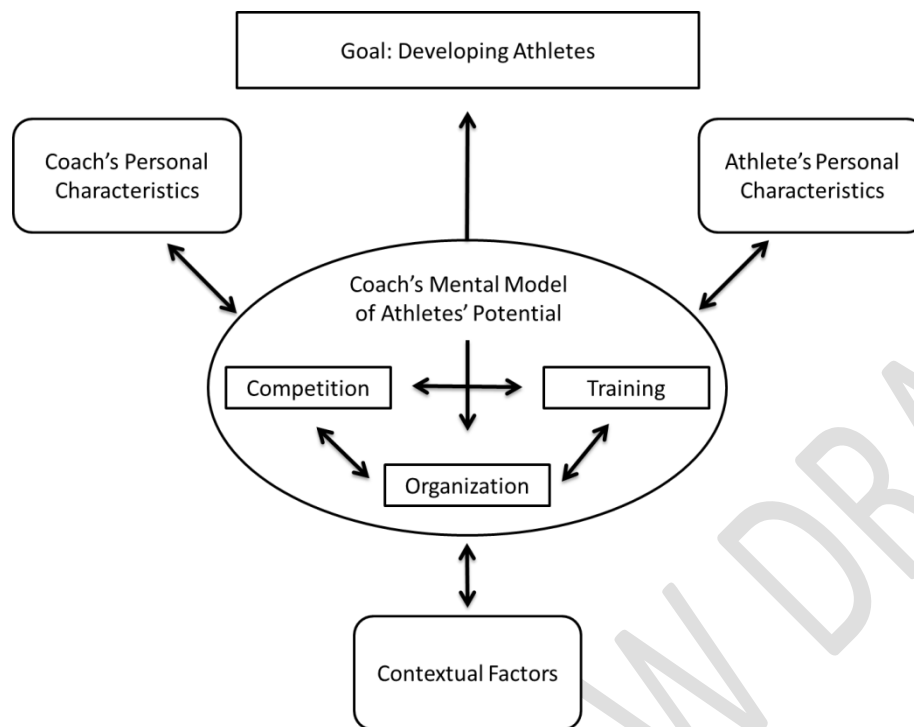zones; training, competition and organization (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Coaching model (Cote et al., 1995).

This model, although further subdividing the cognitive realms of coaching, is consonant with the

work of Smoll and Smith (1984) and Chelladurai (1978; 1980; 1990) in that it attends centrally to the

influence of "peripheral components" (Côté, Salmela, Trudel et al., 1995, p.11) – in the form of

individual and contextual factors – upon mental representation and, by extension, upon tangible

outcomes. While affiliated studies flesh-out the key constructs (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995; Côté

& Salmela, 1996), the core model remains beholden to the axiomatic position that (a) intrapsychic

schemata administer the flow of sensory data acquired from the (measurable) outside world, which (b)

adjust/distort perception, and (c) the individual then acts on this information to produce (measurable)

behaviours. Furthermore, although the link between context and mental processing is represented as

reversible in the diagrammatic schematisation (Figure 4), little account is provided of this. Rather, the linearity typical of prior models is ultimately preserved. As the authors explicitly argue:

"The contextual factors component, just like the athletes' and coach's personal characteristics components, can positively or negatively affect the coaching process." (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995, p.12)

A further (and related) issue of note here is that, while the work of Côté and colleagues laudably aims to induct accounts of coaching practice without recourse to the kinds of abstract operational definition utilized by Smoll and Smith (1984), their mode of *data collection* is decontextualized. As Silverman (1997) compellingly illustrates, interviews, by their very nature, require that participants answer questions that seldom (if ever) arise in the natural course of the activities they are being interviewed *about*. So rather than, in this instance, inducting models from naturally-occurring evidence relating to "coaches doing coaching," models are instead grounded in *post-hoc* reflections upon it (this is also true of the CART-Q (Jowett, 2007)). This is wholly unproblematic if what is actually sought is a model of coaches reflecting on coaching. The danger in proposing that it is a model of the coaching process in-action, however, is that the complexities of "coaching" itself, as a practical and – above all – coordinative activity, are now obscured by schematisations of individual representation, perception and response. The subjectivism inherent in the approach of Côté et al. (1995) places great weight on personal experience, but in doing so runs the risk of reproducing "…tales of a subjective world without bringing us any closer to the local organization of the phenomena concerned." (Silverman, 1997, p.25). What is not captured is the manner in which coaches and athletes work *together* to establish common meanings and goals; in short, to define the situation, and each other, *within* their coordinated activities. Coaching, it is fair to say, is something rarely accomplished in isolation from other people.

In a seminal text authored a decade ago, Lyle (2002) argued that coaching should be seen primarily as a social enterprise, foregrounding the importance of relationships, organisation, geography, structure and process. Since this call, work in coach education has progressively highlighted the importance of a nuanced understanding of social context in the development of coaches. Most, however, has addressed this issue via the generation of discreet categorisations identifying different domains of coaching – usually linked to what Smoll and Smith (1984) term the "level of competition" situational variable – and describing complex normative imperatives characteristic thereof. Lyle (2002) himself, for example, classifies three different broad "forms" of coaching (participant, development and performance), which are taken to be characterized by aggregating aspirations, performance standards and intensities of preparation and degree of planning, with competition structures and commitments as major differentiators between them (Figure 5).
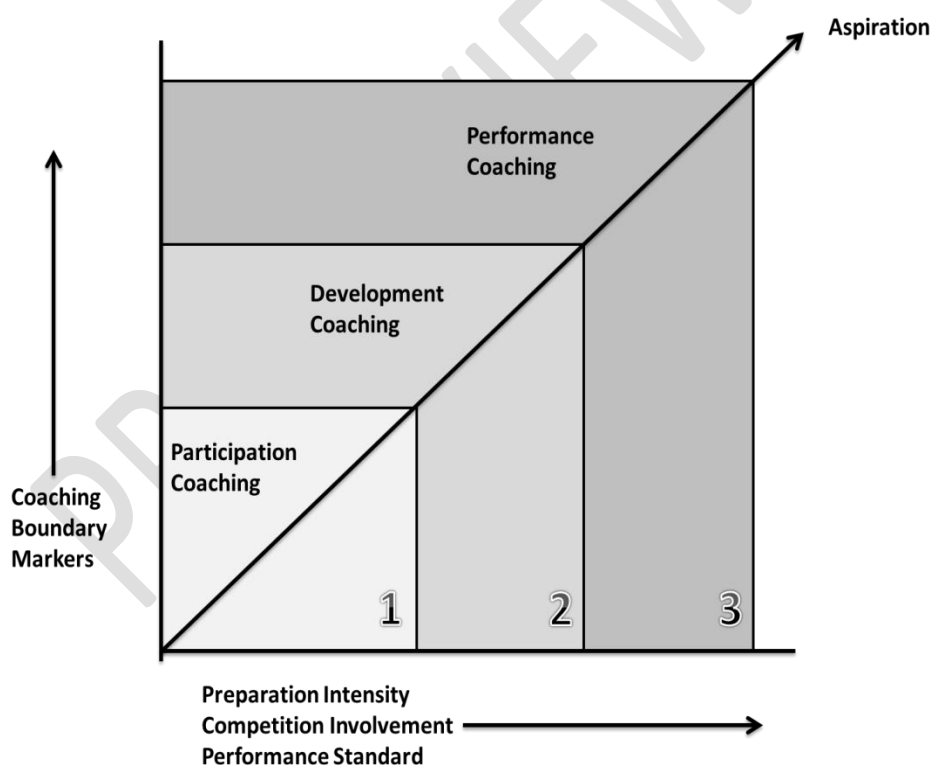

Figure 5: Participation, development and elite sport (Lyle, 2002).

The three forms of coaching are herein represented on a continuum implying that, while each form is distinct, performance coaching is a "fuller application" of the coaching process which, in contrast with participation coaching, may involve the application of techniques from other stages (episodes). In a similar vein to Lyle's model, Young, Jemczyk, Brophy and Côté (2009) propose *four* distinct coaching domains, segregated by differences in coach education, hours contact with athletes, experience of coaching, time spent with assistants, time spent in competition and athletic experience. This work, in turn, draws on the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP - see Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008), which describes a range of social influences on athletic participation (such as the family, sport programming, peer influences and the potential positive and negative influences of the coach upon athletic experiences) and identifies several different age-dependent stages of athletic participation including sampling (6-12 years), specialising (13-15 years) and investment (16 years plus).

It is thus widely acknowledged in contemporary literature that coaching, as a social practice, is dynamic, contexted and complex, and that fully satisfactory models of the contexts of coaching remain elusive (Cushion, 2007; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Potrac & Jones, 2009; M. Smith & Cushion, 2006). While the most recent models explored above have moved away from a simplistic notion of context as ostensibly "a place and/or time" in which coaching activities happen and embraced a much wider range of phenomena as being potentially context-relevant (such as competition level, or behavioural task), the core imperative to generate *prima facie* categorisations of contexts/domains has remained a constant. It is contended here, however, that in order to move the understanding of coaching-in-context forward, what is needed is not an exercise in category-refinement (as executed in, for example, Erickson, Côté, Hollenstein, & Deakin, 2011), but a re-examination of the core conceptualisation of the action-context configuration itself. For all of its intuitive (and practical) appeal, the view of context as a relatively stable entity that exists in a monodirectionally causal relationship with thought and action begins to unravel when one takes account of the manner in which

coaches and athletes *themselves* coordinatively orient to empirical situations. In order to elucidate this point, it is valuable to consider two core propositions regarding the relationship between the individual and social reality that found their first rounded empirical articulation in the perspective of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967).

Coaching, ethnomethodology and context.

In developing the ethnomethodological perspective, Harold Garfinkel drew upon a complex and varied system of intellectual influences, though most transparently on the work of phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1967). Consonant with its phenomenological forebears, ethnomethodology does not treat social reality as pre-existing the members of a society; rather it is taken that the former is ongoingly constructed, reconstructed and maintained by the latter in the course of practical social interactions. The apparent intransigents of any society (norms, structures and so forth), should not be seen as objective, self-identical realities, but '...the accomplishment of [its] members...' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970, p.353). The skills and techniques employed by individuals in the business of making sense of their social situations, meanwhile, Garfinkel termed "ethnomethods" (literally meaning "folk methods"), the form and use of which he designated as his primary realm of empirical research. In these terms, an understanding of social life and the way that people operate in social situations can only proceed from observation, identification and description of ethnomethods. Rather than assume that people follow *prima facie* contextual norms in definable situations, analytic focus should fall upon the practical ways in which the norms are themselves "actualised," rendered visible, in the activities of people themselves.

Embedded in this general approach are two specific propositions relevant to the core argument presented in this paper. These are outlined, in turn, below.

Proposition 1: All action is "indexed" in and to its context.

Appropriated by Garfinkel from general linguistics and analytic philosophy (see Bar-Hillel, 1954), "indexicality" is a term which denotes a context-dependent quality in the meaning of a particular expression; i.e. the words spoken require contextual knowledge to make appropriate sense (Burke, Sparkes, & Allen-Collinson, 2008). Contextual influences on such meaning can include the biography of the speaker, the immediate prior exchanges, previous conversations, the nature of the relations between two speakers and so forth. So, in its simplest terms, when person A refers to "my head," a different head is being referred to than the head indicated by person B when *they* say "my head." The single phrase indicates entirely different objects depending on *who* speaks it. We might, meanwhile, suspect that we understand what a coach has "meant" when addressing a player as "moron" (it would, to many, suggest aggression and disrespect, or at the very least displeasure). Only, however, through sharing the contextual knowledge that (a) the athlete's surname is 'Moran' and (b) the coach has an accent that produces similar "a" and "o" vowel sounds can we effectively interpret what is *actually* meant here in the same way that the coach and athlete themselves invariably do.

The exact meaning of words as-said is, therefore, in both cases above, "indexed" in and to the particular situation, and from this the words themselves will derive the mass of their significance *to participants therein*. While in conventional analytic philosophy the 'problem' of indexicality is viewed as an obstacle to intelligibility (Fele, 2008), the simple fact is that people in everyday life manage to "make it work" the vast bulk of the time, despite these theoretical hurdles. It is only social scientists engaged in the business of doing social science that are concerned with the objectification and classification of indexical expressions, i.e. the surmounting of an ultimately imaginary problem, so that theories and models can be built (Garfinkel, 1967).

Taking the argument a step further, Garfinkel himself asserts that not only are there "indexical expressions" in language, but that *all* social activity (both verbal and nonverbal) is ultimately indexical. Any action *only* has definitive meaning in terms of the pragmatics of its contextual transmission, and this actually facilitates rather than obstructs real mutual understanding. If the same "thing" (be it a word, phrase or gesture) meant the same "thing" to all people in all circumstances,

then our capacity for creative communication would be far more limited than it actually is (Potter, 1996). Players in team sports, however, "gel" by developing shared biographies, by learning to interpret the given actions their teammates in different game-contexts as indicative of different intentions. Coaches develop elaborate systems of gestures that, while utterly meaningless in and to wider society, constitute explicit directives to the athletes with whom they regularly work in specific sporting situations. Indeed, in competitive sports, the broader meaninglessness of said gestures (particularly to the opposition) is often highly desirable commodity – a competitive edge.

People involved in real-world activities (including off-duty social scientists) are, thus, constantly engaged in interpretative work to accomplish the specific meaning of any given utterance or gesture, and this accomplishment is based upon situated interpretations of very *particular* contextual matters. As Douglas Benson and John A. Hughes outline, social individuals:

"…are interested in the particular, not in idealised, standardised or typical meanings as such. They want to know what that guy meant by that particular remark; what that gesture was I made to you yesterday; what that notice on the common room door means, and so on. And to make sense of these and other communications [they] pay artful attention to the available contextual features to achieve an interpretation.' (1983, pp.101-102)

The extra-situational generalisation of meaning (i.e. objective abstraction) is therefore, from an ethnomethodological point of view, neither feasible nor even desirable: a concrete action can only be interpreted and effectively described in terms of the situation of its production. The generation of abstract frameworks for the understanding/classification of "coach behaviours" (Smoll & Smith, 1984) , "leader characteristics" {{609 Chelladurai, P. 1990/a;610 Chelladurai, P. 1978;}} or "coach/athlete characteristics" (Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995) – and particularly "contextual factors" – runs the risk of, at the very least, overlaying a gloss on particular phenomena that is only meaningful to some participants and, at worst, providing an interpretative frame that is meaningless to

all of them (Potter, 2005a). To assume otherwise is to fall into the trap of what David Silverman terms a "Divine Orthodoxy," an analytic stance which presumes that, relative to that held by the psychologist (or sociologist), participants' knowledge of their own lives is fundamentally flawed:

> "It makes the social scientist into the philosopher-king (or queen) who can always see through [individuals]…and know better than they do." (1997, pp.23-24)

To return to an earlier example, if we presume that in hearing a coach call an athlete "moron" we have clearly heard an insult, we may find ourselves bemused by the athlete's lack of negative reaction. We might, indeed, deploy reasoned explanations such as the athlete having been desensitised to abuse from the coach, the athlete caring little for the coach's opinion or the coach fostering a culture of indifference among athletes. What we are doing, however, is imposing a *de facto* conceptual frame upon the actions in question that takes no account of the meanings they holds for the coach and athlete themselves; thereby, we provide no adequate explanation of their behaviour. This "Explanatory Orthodoxy" is an incumbent academic attitude that Silverman describes as being "…so concerned to rush to an explanation that it fails to ask serious questions about what it is explaining." (1997, p.24), and addresses the asymmetry between *presuming* the meaning in real actions and actually exploring it. Research founded on this orthodoxy (as discussed above) risks obscuring the real object of interest – how coaching itself works as an activity – in the pursuit of causes and consequences, or perceptions and responses.

In sum, and in line with these ethnomethodological imperatives, it is proposed herein that the study of language and gesture in coaching be moved away from attempts to formulate transsituational frameworks for the understanding of situated actions. Instead, it is advocated that the target of analysis be the rich variety of *ways* in which athletes and coaches do things, and *how* they make sense of things done by others, by employing indexical actions in a routine way.

Proposition 2: Action and context are reflexively configured

Proposition 1, regarding the indexing of meaning in-context is, however, itself only part of the argument herein. Crucial to the ethnomethodological approach is the allied proposition that actions themselves are not simply "related to," or "influenced by," social contexts; *rather, they are constituent features of those contexts* (Burke et al., 2008; Coulter, 2005; Garfinkel, 1967). The prime corollary of this observation is that contexts themselves are not static, but exist in a state of continuous (though socially navigable) flux. Every action that takes place during any interaction provides a new set of contextual features for individuals to interpret and act upon (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). For a facile but nonetheless illustrative example, a soccer coach throwing the proverbial teacup during a team talk does not simply "act" in (or because of) "a team talk," but radicalises that context *through* the action. Indeed, it is likely that this is the very purpose of throwing the cup in the first place. The act itself furnishes the players with interpretative resources from which to infer that, whatever they were doing, they might now consider doing something else or risk an escalation of hostilities. Whichever course of action they choose will then provide the coach with further resources that can be used to inform subsequent player-directed acts. Once again, however, the specific meanings of the coach's actions are indexical. Some players may interpret *from context* that the cup-throwing is not directed at them, while others may reason (given what has previously been said, done, thrown and implied) that they are indeed the targets-designate of the airborne china. As such, wholly different contextual "factors" are available to the two groups when they work to reason-out the most practical strategies for future action.

This is *reflexivity*. Don H. Zimmerman (1974, p.25) explores the principle in terms of single words, providing a graphic means for its understanding. Consider these three shapes:
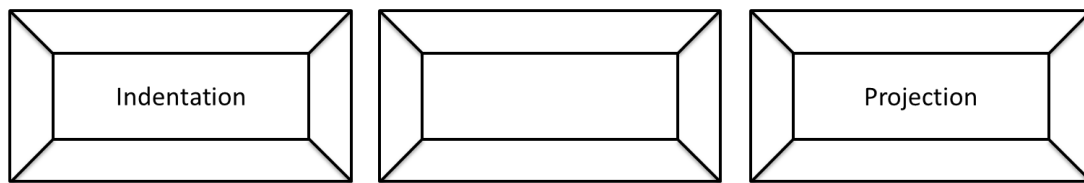
Figure 6: Reflexivity in action (Zimmerman, 1974).

The first and third boxes differ from the second in that they each contain a single word. The words and boxes interact to produce meanings regarding the nature of the boxes themselves. The word "projection" appearing in a different setting would not have the meaning that it has here and the box would not have the same nature without it. The word does not simply describe a projection and thus take its meaning from the context of its appearance. It further *creates* a "projection" that does not exist in either of the other two boxes, which are identical bar for the word itself. Likewise the word "indentation" both creates and describes the context in which it appears. The words reflexively create the reality of which they are a part. Of course, most social actions are more complex than single words, and social contexts are more intricate and ambiguous than simple boxes. The principle remains the same, however. As Heritage (1984, p.242) summarises, all social activity is ultimately "…context *shaped* and context *renewing*." [Original emphasis].

Consider a penalty shootout in soccer. This might well be considered a set-piece "situation" or "context" with given features, mandating particular player behaviours and attitudes with which the coach can endeavour to forearm his/her charges. The players' performances therein we might then examine in terms of their outcome-defined capacities to adapt to key "contextual factors" such as pressure, competition level, the player's prior success/failure record (Smoll & Smith, 1984) and so forth. Each penalty missed or scored, however, *renews* the context; each player to step up to the penalty spot is potentially in a wholly different situation to the last. Moreover, it is not as simple as previous penalties being "missed" or "scored." Non-scores due to glaring misses by teammates do not necessarily provide the next penalty taker with the same set of contextual concerns as, for example,

the opposition goalkeeper having spectacularly saved good shots, and so forth. Coaching within a "penalty shootout" does not, therefore, hold a stable set of action-influencing contextual/situational factors for consideration, but is highly fluid.

In contrast, thus, with social-cognitive stances towards context, the ethnomethodological approach stipulates that:

"The situation of action is essentially transformable. It is identifiable as the reflexive product of the organized activities of the participants. As such, it is on-goingly discovered, maintained, and altered as a project and a product of ordinary actions. Situational constitution is essentially a 'local' and immanent product of methodic procedure rather than a result of 'pre-existing' agreement on 'matters of fact'." (Heritage, 1984, p.132)

Ostensibly, it might appear that this proposition regarding the fundamental fluidity of social contexts might present a problem for participants in social life. Observation of everyday social interaction, however, tells us that this is simply not the case. Indeed, as Garfinkel (1967, p.8) notes, individuals "…know, require, count on, and make use of this reflexivity…" in making sense of the world at all. In short, we *expect* – and require – that our actions will change the world around us in some small (or, indeed, larger) way, and establish new contexts suitable to our salient needs. As Mehan and Wood (1975) demonstrate, even in the everyday, mundane act of greeting someone, the greeter can well expect that a context of mutually-reciprocated recognition (and possible sustained interaction) will be established where previously it did not exist. Should the greeting not be returned, contextual resources will be drawn-upon to make sense of this (indexical) non-action; "they didn't see me," "they are in a hurry," "I must have previously offended them," and so forth. By making a player substitution, or a team formation change, a coach generally intends to *change* a game context from a losing one to a winning one, or a precarious lead into a stable one, which will in turn provide the

players themselves (on both sides) with new situational resources to interpret and assimilate when making their own decisions about what to do at various junctures.

In these terms, the fluidity of social context – like the indexicality of expression – is only a hurdle to the *abstract theorisation* of coaching processes, not to the actual practice of them. Models of coaching grounded in the currently dominant paradigm for such theorisation, however, given their (highly laudable) focus upon explanation, often neglect to fully explore the mechanics of "what is actually going on" in any unit event prior to the categorisation of key phenomena. As Wittgenstein (1981, p.244) famously noted:

'The difficulty- I might say- is not that of finding a solution but rather of recognising as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it...This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.'

This is not to suggest that modeling is in any way "wrong," but rather that theorisation without a full emic account of how (indexical) actions and (transformable) contexts operate is at the very least *premature* (Garfinkel, 1967), and liable to result in exactly the problems of accounting for context recurrently noted above.

Conclusion: Towards an ethnomethodological account of coaching-in-context

In order to advance our understanding of coaching as a contexted social practice, thus, the following key issues are drawn from the discussion above;

1. Actions are only fully meaningful to participants within the contexts of their occurrence, and;

2. Actions are also *features* of those contexts, therefore;

3. Models *of* coaching processes themselves need to be based upon naturally-occurring data gleaned *from* coaching processes themselves, and;

4. Models need to reflect phenomena involved in such processes not as "cases of abstract variable," but as coordinative realities for the coaches and athletes involved.

Ethnomethodologically-informed study has a long history of providing strong accounts of activity within such diverse organised practices as laboratory work (Garfinkel, Lynch, & Livingston, 1981), call centres (Martin, O'Neill, Randall, & Rouncefield, 2007), television production (Broth, 2008; Broth, 2009) and doctors' surgeries (Heath, 1986) and, to date, has also found application in the broader study of sport (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Allen-Collinson, 2011; Kew, 1986). In particular, the nuanced approach adopted by Burke, Sparkes and Allen-Collinson (2008)[4] would seem highly apposite to the investigation of coaching, being, as it is, a system of practices involving verbal, physical and organisational components. However, as of yet, little inroad has been made. Discursive Psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) and its "parent" discipline Conversation Analysis (Sacks, 1992a; Sacks, 1992b), meanwhile, provide highly detailed reflexivity-sensitive investigations of the use of natural language in people's construction of meaningful situations. Both have also been applied in sport research (see Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2008; LeCouteur & Feo, 2011; Locke, 2004; McGannon & Mauws, 2000), though their impacts in coaching have been similarly negligible. This is, perhaps, a little surprising given that their focus on the practical use of constructive, task-focused talk would seem to

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[4] …in examining the procedures through which a group of high-altitude climbers make sense of their own cognitive dissonance while attempting to scale Mt. Everest.

have great relevance for the investigation of some primarily verbal aspects of coaching activity – not least team talks and performance review meetings.

At the time of writing, research is in progress by the authors to examine the methodic procedures through which student coaches make sense of training sessions *in situ* (using ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography), and the negotiation of coach expertise (using discursive psychology). It is clear, however, that in the quest to develop the general understanding of real coaching processes, a greater a body of work exploring reflexive configurations of action and context in empirical circumstances can only add depth to the academic enterprise.

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