Title: 'Coach, or female coach? And does it matter?': An autoethnography of playing the gendered game over a twenty-year elite swim coaching career

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Abstract

Women are under-represented in high-performance head coach positions throughout global sport. To shed light on why this under-representation exists within UK swimming, an autoethnographic account of the first author's experiences as a woman who competed and coached in high-performance swimming over a thirty-year career is presented. Critical reflexive conversations with the second author, coupled with sourcing artefacts such as memories, photographs and emails inspired four evocative personal stories that chart the voyage of: 1) a child entering and aspiring in the sport, 2) the transition from a retired female athlete to novice coach; 3) progression in becoming an international coach, and; 4) reaching the pinnacle of a coaching career and then beginning a coach tutor role. Accounts of how gender as a relation of power was exercised and navigated during the inauguration and progression as a woman who coached in a patriarchal profession are offered. In the pursuit of winning Olympic medals, an unrecognised double bind was revealed to have been negotiated throughout the entirety of the coach development pathway whereby masculine ideals were uncritically reproduced within the cultural landscape of elite UK swimming. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, field and doxa offer analytical insight for how masculine norms were socially reproduced. This double bind is argued as having and continuing to impede women coaches' progression towards achieving equality within high-performance settings like

UK swimming. The study highlights the value of acknowledging socio-cultural factors in coach education to address gender imbalances at an elite level.

Keywords: Bourdieu; capital; evocative; women coach; double bind

Introduction

Despite global research-led attempts to promote careers in elite coaching and sports leadership to women (Robertson 2016), their representation at the highest positions remain disproportionately low compared to men (Evans and Pfister 2021; Hovden and Tjønndal 2019; LaVoi 2016; Sisjord et al. 2020). Globally, men outnumber women 10 to 1 in accredited coaching roles at the Olympic Games (Norman 2014). Across many nations, when women do attain head coaching responsibilities there is a trend where they are positioned into roles in what are considered feminine sports, like netball, synchronised swimming and gymnastics (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al. 2018; Kamphoff 2010; Reade, Rogers, and Norman 2009; Robertson 2016). Furthermore, Norman (2014) reported that less than 25% of coaches across all sports are women and there are very few who are selected for elite national teams. For example, only 13 of Great Britain's 129 accredited coaches at London 2012 were women (Norman 2014). Currently in the UK, despite improvements in legislation and social attitudes towards equality and diversity, there remains a significant challenge for governing bodies to move towards actual increases in women leaders rather than superficial number counting and 'tick box' exercises (Norman, Rankin-Wright, and Allison 2018).

Empirical analyses on this subject has frequently identified assumptions that women do not have the 'right stuff' to be leaders and coaches, leading to 'blame the women' narratives as a reason for the under-representation (LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Norman 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012). Phrases like 'women do not apply for open positions,' 'women lack the experience,' 'women are not confident or assertive enough,' 'women with children are less committed,' and

'female athletes prefer male coaches' are terms habitually and openly applied in the sporting world. LaVoi (2016) surmised these misconceptions under the umbrella term of 'damaging narratives' when conducting her research on sports coaching. This ultimately contributes to the perception of a 'glass ceiling' that prevents women from reaching the very highest positions (Hancock, Darvin, and Walker 2018; Norman et al. 2018).

Conversely, however, other researchers have favoured the 'leadership labyrinth' metaphor (Eagly and Carli 2007) because the glass ceiling implies that women are unable to progress into leadership positions due to one final sticking point. Indeed, some women have succeeded in becoming elite coaches, irrespective of having faced hostility, intimidation and a constant pressure to prove themselves as effective and worthy of appointment at this level (Norman 2010a). International and national governing bodies have also responded to help address the under-representation of women coaches. Several affirmative action strategies to enhance the provision of equality in supporting coaches of all genders have recently been implemented, such as women only coach education courses (e.g. Allen and Reid 2019; Carson et al. 2020) and more dedicated mentoring processes that support women coaches (e.g. Banwell, Stirling, and Kerr 2019). These support structures have arisen from empirical analyses that have brought to prominence the pervasive power laden socio-cultural aspects of sports and how this affects coaches' learning, development and behaviours in general (Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2017), but also specifically their effects on restricting women's pathways for attaining elite level coaching roles (LaVoi 2016; Norman 2010a, 2010b; Norman and Rankin-Wright 2018).

Positioning the coach/researcher

Building on existing narrative research which have analysed the distinct culture of swimming and its associated toxic practices (Book, Henriksen, and Stambulova 2020; McMahon and Penney 2013; McMahon, Zehntner, and McGannon 2017; Zehntner and McGannon 2014), what follows, therefore, is an autoethnography of the first author's coaching career. I (the first

author), am one of the few women in UK sport who has succeeded in navigating the leadership labyrinth by achieving accreditation as a Team GB Paralympic swimming coach. Having worked with swimmers from the age of six to thirty-three, I have experienced coaching at all stages from county level to the international podium in both able bodied and para swimming. Despite having not experienced any of the recently introduced women's only coach education and dedicated mentoring support structures, I have been selected onto various coach development programmes with the national governing body and UK Sport. Indeed, I was one of the 13 women coaches who represented Great Britain at London 2012. In total I have represented Great Britain as a national team coach on eighteen occasions and my swimmers have won around thirty international medals, breaking national and world records along the way.

At this point of my career I have begun to step back from coaching duties and have assumed more responsibility mentoring the next generation of coaches after having attained accreditation as a swim coach tutor. To this end, I have recently become critically reflexive on my career in respect of what I have achieved, my coaching practices and how I had broken through the glass ceiling and negotiated my way through the leadership labyrinth. My intention for 'pausing' and being critically reflexive on my career was initially so I could identify the support mechanisms and barriers I respectively utilised and overcame in attaining my position (LaVoi 2016). The opportunity to undertake an autoethnography of my experiences as an athlete and coach was seen to help with this process when transitioning to become a coach mentor. If I am to tutor and inspire other coaches to discover their true potential, especially other women, then first I must fully comprehend my own journey so that I identify poor practices in the hope that these will not be uncritically adopted and recycled by my protégés (McMahon et al. 2020; Zehntner and McMahon 2014).

The objective of this study, therefore, was threefold. Firstly, the findings arising from this were intended to contribute further insight into the socio-cultural aspects of why women are under-represented in elite level coaching, specifically within UK swimming. Although autoethnographic accounts have been utilised in swimming (e.g. McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020; McMahon and DinanThompson 2011; McMahon and McGannon 2017), these have not focussed on the latent gendered issues women coaches negotiate and which contribute to the underrepresentation of women in elite coaching roles. Secondly, I hope by sharing my experiences in such a reflexive mode will prompt further critical reflexivity being employed by current and aspirant women coaches in understanding not only the issues which can potentially affect them as coaches within the contexts of elite sports, but of the subconscious practices that I employed which further perpetuated the masculine culture of elite swimming. Moreover, raised awareness for coaches of all genders concerning the cultural dynamics which women coaches negotiate can be achieved in the hope of improving working relationships and inclusivity. Thirdly, conducting a reflexive account offered me the chance to explore how gender as a relation of power was exercised and navigated during my inauguration and progression as a woman[1] who coached in a patriarchal profession. By examining genuine encounters, I have determined how socio-cultural factors may have influenced my emergence in the profession and my future directions as a coach mentor.

Methodology

Autoethnography and narrative research

Autoethnography is a form of narrative research which as a methodology is positioned within the reformist social science community and is the study of personal accounts and reflections

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[1] I have used the gendered term here of 'woman' to indicate the more inclusive and non-binary noun that I identify with. Later in the analysis of my evocative stories, I use the term 'female' when detailing how I believed others saw me in a pejorative way.

told in the researcher's own unique style (Polkinghorne 2007). A valuable feature of narrative research is the intricate and indefinite nature of examining and interpreting the subject's stories (Smith, 2010). For example, when reflecting with a colleague and recounting stories of what happened in any given scenario, the researcher constructs the story based on their experience, using language and descriptives that personally mean something – *your* narrative (Fivush 1991). As a research subject, focus on aspects of the story that resonate with you is naturally made which are then automatically interpreted, envisaged and anticipated within reflections based on an understanding of the world and your place within it (Carless and Douglas 2012). The reason narrative methods have such value in sports coaching is that we all have a unique experience and interpret the environments we work in differently, thus, our highly personal experiences should not be downplayed or over-simplified (Jones 2011). The "nuances, mysteries, and complexities of human interaction in coaching" (Potrac and Jones 2009, 564) allow us to gain multidimensional insights from listening to evocative personal stories of success and failure (Carless and Douglas 2012). As such, an autoethnography for me at this point of my life helped me uncover my true self and further develop my ability to understand others as I progress to become a coach mentor (Ellis 1999; Mills 2015).

Although autoethnography has been criticised as "self-indulgent," its ability to "capture multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (McMahon 2016; 304) afforded me to identify latent socio-cultural issues that shaped my coaching, which at the time I was unaware of. As LaVoi (2016: 17) affirms, "coaching is a social process that is inherently laden with power." I have therefore utilised a life history approach for this autoethnography (Drummond 2010) to highlight the ways in which power interrelated with my coaching practices as a consequence of my entry into swimming and through to my role as an elite swim coach.

Procedure for developing an evocative autoethnography

To move beyond providing merely an autobiography but an autoethnography, I have weaved together my interpretation of my story with theory so that I invite readers to feel connected with my career journey. Through the delivery of recounting my experiences in an evocative piece like this, I also invite the readers to connect with my lifeworld by feeling how the double bind of my actions as a coach created an internal conflict with my sense of self as a coach but also as a woman (Anderson 2006; Sparkes 2020). The evocative stories were induced for the most part by memories, in addition to archival resources such as photographs and emails akin to Ellis and Bochner's (2000: 752) "emotional recall strategy" (see also McMahon and McGannon 2017). This initial process was iterative. At the culmination of each iteration, the second author acted as a critical friend to facilitate the fine-tuning procedure (Cronin et al. 2018; Sparkes and Smith 2014) challenging the way I framed specific incidents to ensure the integrity of the narratives and their discussion (Sparkes 2002). As an insider member of the elite swimming community whose identity was shifting from an elite coach to becoming an elite coach mentor, I was able to be reflexive on my career within the context of elite swimming and suspend some of my own previous assumptions about its sub-culture (McNarry et al. 2020). My continued journey through a post-graduate degree in sports coaching helped me to become ever more cognisant to some of these taken-for-granted assumptions and engage in more critically reflexive practices (Cushion 2016). The second author had never been involved with or associated to the sub-culture of elite UK swimming, and therefore served as a sounding board when forming a collaborative autoethnographic community after regularly querying my interpretations of recollections and the language I used when first recounting my experiences (Allen-Collinson 2012; McMahon and DinanThompson 2011).

The study received ethical approval based on utilitarianism and aspirational principals (Sparkes and Smith 2014). To uphold these principles, the stories presented focus solely on my own

actions and do not implicate blame onto others who have contributed to my career. When individuals have been mentioned as part of the narrative for these stories, pseudonyms have been used. Other identifying features such as club names, specific dates and locations where events like training camps and coach courses happened have been omitted to protect other peoples' identities (Anderson 2006). I have also refrained from including events within the final manuscript that would have made others easily identifiable, like, for example, during specific periods of my career at notable clubs. Nevertheless, in the earlier iterations when clarifying my narratives and holding critically reflexive discussions with the second author, although these stories have not been included here, they were vital for the process of refining my understanding of my experiences.

By conducting this life history autoethnography, I have chronicled four key stages of my thirty-year career, charting my voyage as: 1) a child entering and aspiring in the sport, 2) the transition from a retired female athlete to novice coach; 3) progression in becoming an international coach, and; 4) reaching the pinnacle of a coaching career and then beginning a coach tutor role. After detailing these vignettes of my life history as a swimmer and coach, I have then employed social theory into the analytic process. This attempts to conceptualise the latent socio-cultural mechanisms underpinning my experiences (Sparkes 2020) and allowed me to occupy a position that coalesced as the "informant insider and the analyst outsider" (Atkinson 2016: 53). This offered me emancipatory opportunities to become more self-aware of my past actions but also add to the "scholarly conversation" for the scientific and coaching community (McMahon 2016: 305). Throughout this process, however, there was some divergence between mine and the second author's reading of the data. Yet, through further reflexivity and dialogue, as well as engagement with the scholarly literature, including attendance at academic conferences, conceptualisations of my experiences have been made with Bourdieu's praxeology. In this instance, I hope that using Bourdieu's sociological framework to theorise and conceptualise

my experiences and emotions illuminates to the reader the subconscious actions I practiced whilst navigating the swim coach environment that were attached to my gendered self. As such, before the four stories are presented, Bourdieu's concepts have been outlined in the following section.

Theoretical framework

Theorisation of how socio-cultural issues affect women's developmental coach pathways (Sisjord et al. 2020), their experiences on formal coach education courses (Barrett, Sherwin and Blackett 2021) and the formation of their gendered identities (Mennesson 2012) has been increasingly made through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Indeed, Bourdieu's theorisation of the practices social agents employ and embody was based on their socialisation and immersion to the cultural surroundings; "one must remember that, ultimately, objective relations do not exist and do not really realize themselves except in and through the system of dispositions of the agents, produced by the internalization of objective conditions" (Bourdieu and Zanotti-Karp, 1968: 705). My own socialisation and continued practice in the sub-culture of elite swimming meant that Bourdieu's praxeology served as a valuable theoretical instrument to engender greater awareness of my actions, beliefs and dispositions.

Central to Bourdieu's (1985, 734) analysis of the social world is the concept of capital: "the structure of the social world is defined at every moment by the structure and distribution of the capital and profits characteristic of the different particular fields." Individuals strive to maximise their own personal capital as they jostle for position in social space by acquiring a variety of species such as social, physical, cultural and symbolic capital that manifest in the embodied, institutionalised and objectified forms. Capital acquired in this manner can determine the heights to which an individual may reach in each social space that Bourdieu (1989) termed as 'fields.' Fields are the bounded arenas in which individuals compete for their

social position (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus, which is an element of embodied cultural capital, is a long-lasting, subconsciously acquired disposition, integral to who we are and includes our character, traits and accent (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural norms such as dispositions and practices which are valued and therein legitimised within a given field become considered as essential. For Bourdieu (1977; 167, original emphasis) "what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*" and constitutes as the concept of doxa: the logical acceptance of the field's cultures and values.

Capital can be both profitable and unprofitable. For example, a woman who has accrued symbolic capital as a successful coach by having a more masculine than feminine disposition, could find herself losing capital as a 'woman who acts like a man' and consequently subjected to a parallel social sanction (McCall 1992). According to Bourdieu, women don't *acquire* capital per se, rather women are capital-bearing objects rather than capital-bearing subjects (Lovell 2000). In Bourdieu's (1984) text entitled '*Distinction*' he mentioned that women are aware of the market value of beauty capital and often use their charm and attractiveness to acquire value in the labour market, meaning they can in fact be capital-bearing *subjects*.

Autoethnographies

Autoethnography 1 – Habitus: Passionate about winning and success, clueless about life and careers

Swimming for me happened by accident. My first swimming experience was when I nearly drowned in a foolish attempt of following my elder brother - who I followed *everywhere* when I was a child. Ironically, that episode signalled the start of a thirty-year love affair with swimming that still impassions me to this day. The reason why I jumped in after my brother was that I didn't want him to get 'one over me.' This sibling rivalry was the ever-present drive I had when growing up in a white, working class family in the North East of England. The

adulation I also received from my dad, an ex-shipwright who ended up working in security, whenever I 'got one over' my big brother or in any sporting capacity was always a motivation too. I had a much younger sister who also followed me everywhere, and mam was a fantastic mother and caregiver who did part-time work at the local school when dad was not working. My family and childhood collectively fostered a love of sport and a love of winning which always felt great.

Quickly forgetting my reckless entry into swimming, the passion for the sport grew. Imbued with self-assurance and confidence, I embarked on a challenging journey as a swimmer and endeavoured to qualify for the Olympic Games. For the most part, my days at secondary school were spent sitting in class, eyes hazy from the chlorine fumes percolating from my skin, wistfully daydreaming of stepping out in front of the world to swim in an Olympic final. I was sure I would make it. I had to. I had this all-consuming and blinding ambition to make it. I set about achieving this unquestionable dream and become the most dedicated swimmer I could be. Over a ten-year competitive career, I was the epitome of an athletic machine in the pursuit of this dream, devoted, compliant to every demand made by my coaches. I must have swum more than a million lengths of a standard twenty-five metre pool in search of glory. Training ten times a week for forty-eight weeks of the year, going through the painstaking monotony of swimming for six kilometres each session, that is two hundred and forty lengths, *every* session. My body and soul ached, and ultimately it was not enough. I did not make it to the Olympics. Unlucky with untimely injuries or maybe I just was not good enough, but I quit at nineteen. I was devastated. Reality soon set in. There was no hiding from the need to recalibrate my focus for the next step so I could once again be consumed by my instinct to once again be ahead and 'get one over' my brother and receive my dad's adulation. There was an emptiness, however, a loss of self, rudderless even, I just didn't know what *this* next step was or *should* be.

My career plans had never included coaching through my adolescent years. I once told my coach it would be the last job I would *ever* do. He asked me one day during land training and I snapped back before he even finished asking, "NO way! Not me, I'll be *done* with swimming when I finish competing". My teammates gawped reticently. He was just being his usual self, trying to single me out and put me on the spot to get all the lads laughing along with him. As it turned out, I retired from swimming earlier than expected and accepted a head coach role at my home club. It filled the void and I absolutely loved the fact they asked *me*. I dived in at the deep end and began my pursuit of sporting excellence, although this time I was wearing clothes, holding a stopwatch and unbeknown to me, I knew a lot less about how to be a fast swimmer than I thought! In fact, I was clueless. There was only one other full-time coach in our region who was a woman, so most of the time I was operating around men as I began my quest to find Olympic glory. Fortunately, I was unperturbed around men, that sibling rivalry had meant I'd grown up as a 'tomboy' and spent a lot of my youth 'being one of the lads.' I had fun with my brother and his friends whilst brashly demonstrating that girls could do stuff too, like run fast, catch and kick a ball, and climb trees.

My upbringing undoubtedly shaped my character and beliefs. I thrived on praise from my father and recognised that the way to please him was to be more like my older brother. Whatever he could do, I wanted to do it better, and if there was ever an inkling that I could not do something just because I was a girl, then that just made me indomitable. I welcomed the label of 'tomboy,' after all, I was a girl who liked sports and other boy-typical activities. Historically, girls and women were excluded from sport and physical activity due to opinions about fundamental physical limitations and frailty (Paechter and Clark 2007), yet I could never accept that boys and men were automatically assumed to be more physically powerful and capable, or more deserving. The notion of it enraged me.

Autoethnography 2 – Capital: Ex-international athlete turned coach – "eyes on the prize"

At nineteen my plan was simple: do well, get noticed, learn and develop as quickly as possible, become a great coach, and coach some Olympians. I started coaching just after Sydney 2000. Athens was in four years. Probably too soon. Beijing was eight years away. That was a possibility, but if I had not made it by 2012 my career and family plans would collide as I hit my early thirties. The biological clock would be ticking loud and clear so what would I do? Carry on regardless, or stop and have children? Choices, choices.

I was instantly a hit and quickly progressed from my home club taking a fixed-term contract at one of the biggest and best clubs in the country. I felt bad about leaving as they had backed me as a novice coach. I would miss my swimmers. But the anticipation and excitement of this being my next chance after failing as a swimmer was electric. I was in the 'goldfish bowl' and knew I would be noticed at my new club.

I wanted people to be impressed by my swimmers. I could then take the credit and be celebrated as a good coach. I had a thirst for the attention. I would turn up to swim meets with my squad and we would dominate the poolside. We would strut around with chests puffed out and shoulders pulled back in our bright shirts and pristine tracksuits. We were the ones to watch.

As expected, within my first year at a bigger club I was noticed. The invites onto national programmes were soon incoming. I was jubilant. I was selected for countless foreign trips for the national team over the next four years, sometimes with my club swimmers, sometimes without. I rarely paused to question why I had been selected in the early days; it was *obviously* because I was a great coach. I vainly attempted to exhibit modesty when in public, I bashfully denied loving the accolades, but I secretly craved being the centre of attention and 'on the team.' It was never about my swimmers standing on the podium, it was about me.

Autoethnography 3 – Field: The maturing GB Coach and a huge wake-up call

I spent days, weeks, months, chasing the big one. A chance for selection onto a UK Sport programme specifically designed to develop Olympic coaches. I knew they would only put two people forward from swimming, so I made sure I coached my socks off. I toed the line, nodded when I needed to and said all the right things, and I never refused a trip – even when it caused arguments at home. I was supposed to be the loving spouse, staying home to support my husband, but I also knew that if I ever said "no" just once, I would be off the radar. Mercilessly dropped. Once I received that nomination, I *knew* I was on track for the Olympics. I was totally elated and called home straight away to tell my dad, "there's no way I won't make the cut Dad, this is my chance". Sure enough, I made it into the final ten at the selection event and would spend the next three years developing alongside coaches from other sports. Admittedly, I was not so sure of myself in this new learning environment, my insecurities hissed from within. I was the youngest and one of only two women in the group. Would she be better than me? Was she more articulate? Her accent was 'posher' that was for sure. Was she more intelligent? More popular with the others? Why am I concerned with *her* so much though? And what about the men? What would they think of me? And her? Would they and her see through my façade and realise I did not know as much as I said? I found myself doubting my credentials a lot, and often wondered how I got there. The introspection was exhausting. Things that I had never been concerned with now became fundamental to who I was and wasn't as a coach. I had never been to university. I had a thick north east accent, and I had never really coached any 'big hitters' yet. Was I there off the back of my strutting around the poolside *imagining* I was a great coach?

Providentially, the metaphorical penny dropped quite early for me in the course. First residential course, I pulled into the carpark in my Porsche, looking slick in 'smart casual' attire

and swaggered to the boardroom. A quiet man sat before us, he talked about winning the Olympics as both an athlete and a coach, he was a coaching guru. He went through the dynamics of his teams, the stages they went through, and just before he finished his lecture the words that struck the biggest chord: 'the coach doesn't stand on the podium and win a medal; you will work tirelessly, you will make huge sacrifices, and the most you will get if you are lucky, is a 'thank you' from your athletes.' WOW! Really??!! I reeled.

On subsequent courses, both in that environment and back with my swimming fraternity, I had an ever-increasing sense of self-awareness and would often reflect. Sometimes that was good, it meant I could manage and manipulate my behaviour, other times it left me dejected and hesitant. Now, every single time I was selected for a squad without my own athletes on the team I contemplated why, and worried that my peers would too, was I good enough or just in the clique?

Autoethnography 4 – Doxa: Realising a dream and realising the cost

Although the insecurities increased the more I progressed as a coach, overall the plan was working. Do well, get noticed, learn and develop as quickly as possible, become a great coach, and coach some Olympians. Simple. Ultimately, I did well, I got noticed, I went on all the courses and convinced myself I was becoming a great coach, I had my first Olympian and Paralympian and I was selected for the team. Mind-blowing. But at what cost?

The London 2012 Olympics felt like an amazing experience from start to finish and twelve years of hard work and determination seemed to have been worth it. I still look back through my photographs with equal amounts of pride and melancholy, I was on the front of a national newspaper with Prince Harry's arm around me, I was snapped supporting from the stands with

the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, and I have hundreds of pictures alongside the athletes sporting our red, white and blue. Proud times indeed.

Before the start of the morning heats and evening finals, I had a set routine. I would make sure I was parading around the pool deck, immaculately presented in my team GB kit at the very end of the warm-up period. I did that on purpose. I watched the crowds filtering into the stands, thousands of people sporting Union Jacks and huge smiles. They looked at me, I looked at them; they wanted to be where I was, or at least that's what I thought.

The post-Games slump was an unexpected decline. I sprawled on my sofa, totally drained, and reflected on the last couple of months and everything that had gone before. I recapped and tallied up: Missed family gatherings? *Too many to recall*. Squads left behind while I pursued *my* destination? *Several.* Failed marriages? *One*. This *wasn't* how it was meant to feel. Guilt-ridden. Alone. Down. Then 'tick, tick, tick.' There goes that bloody body clock again! A training camp conversation in my mid-twenties suddenly springs to mind and resonates clearly now with how I felt on my destination to becoming an elite coach:

Penny (pseudonym): Do you want a family at some point?

Louise: I think so, but I'll have to achieve something in coaching first. Maybe after London, I'll be 32 then, so that's not too old really, it just depends.

Penny: On what?

Louise: Well if I want to get back into coaching after becoming a mam, I'll need to have achieved something otherwise I won't be able to get a good job after a break.

Penny: How long do you think you would be off?

Louise: Well I'd hate to think my kids turned round as teenagers and said I was never there, so if I'm ever a mam, I want to be there for them while they need me and they're

> young, so the lifestyle I have at the moment is no good, working every weekend, phone
>
> calls late at night, and trips abroad. I'll have to take a step back for a few years, at least.
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> Penny: I suppose so."

I uneasily recall another conversation. We were in the hotel bar after a long day of workshops, there was a relaxed ambience as we sipped our drinks and courteously massaged one another's egos. One of the delegates, another female coach, gestured me over to the table she was standing at with several male coaches. I approached, pint of lager in hand, and she asked me a question:

> Julia (pseudonym): I was just discussing some of the challenges we face as women in
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> coaching. How do you find it dealing with parents and committees, as a woman? Do
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> you ever find it an issue?
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> Louise: I don't consider myself a female coach. I'm just a coach. Being a woman
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> doesn't affect my ability to coach so I don't even think about it when I deal with parents
>
> and committees.

I had callously abandoned her. She was seeking my support, someone to verify the point she was making, and I had deserted her. I did not do it intentionally, I really did not. I honestly think that was what I believed at that time, largely because when I did find barriers and difficulties, I refused to believe that being a woman could possibly be the reason why. How could it?

Discussion

Habitus and Doxa

Throughout the stories it is evident that I always did my best to prevail, no matter how much effort and sacrifice was required. I wanted recognition as a young girl from my father, and I

wanted respect and adulation from my peers as a winner in the swimming pool and at school. Then at work, I strived for recognition as a good coach and I pursued credibility.

Reflecting on my socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions (my habitus) in addition to the way I viewed the world (doxa), on one hand I was encouraged to strive for excellence and aim for the top in every endeavour. Nothing was impossible. Equally, my female role model was personified as primarily a mother and carer who did not pursue such ambitions. Something which caused inner conflict when I considered starting a family:

> Autoethnography 2: …but if I had not made it by 2012 my career and family plans would collide as I hit my early thirties. The biological clock would be ticking loud and clear so what would I do?"

> Autoethnography 4: Penny (pseudonym): Do you want a family at some point?

> Louise: I think so, but I'll have to achieve something in coaching first. Maybe after London, I'll be 32 then, so that's not too old really, it just depends.

I had a conscious awareness that becoming a mother was something I would have to carefully consider in my career plans, and the timing of this would be paramount. There was a connection in my mind between the timing of 'making it' (onto Olympic teams) and becoming a parent, something I have not seen men grappling with. Kamphoff (2010) examined why women left the coaching profession and cited becoming a mother as a major influence over the decision to leave due to inflexible working patterns and perceptions about how well a woman could fulfil both roles and this was something I clearly felt.

Research on why women are under-represented in coaching has indicated how there was, and remains, a common perception at a structural level that women cannot be both good mothers and effective coaches (LaVoi 2016; Norman 2010a) which then translates into women not entering and sustaining their involvement in the role (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al. 2018; Kamphoff

2010). I saw my own mother doing humble part time work around her obligations to look after the family and I thought that once I became a mother, I would be unable to do either of my roles well simultaneously. During the last story I reflected on my thought process of becoming a mother and how it all had to be planned around my career. This was something that I always thought was my own premeditated decision, but my habitus and the immediate adherence to the field's accepted norms had made me think this way instinctively (Bourdieu 1990). The memory of my discussion with Penny (pseudonym) demonstrates how I unconsciously came to accept this supposedly legitimised, unwritten rule in my own beliefs and experiences; I had a feeling I would need to achieve something notable before pausing for children to enable me to return to coaching afterwards. This was never an explicit rule for women coaches, it was *my* unquestioned truth. I anticipated that impressive accomplishments would have amounted to symbolic power (Bourdieu 1989) and this would assist my re-emergence in the field.

Another significant embodied trait for me as I transitioned from athlete to coach was my 'tomboyish' nature. I consciously projected masculine traits and interests initially to assimilate with my male colleagues, conforming to and accepting the masculine environment that I knew sport to be. As a swimmer I experienced first-hand that coaching discourse placed men as the norm and women as the weaker, deviant 'other' who possessed less capital (Norman and Rankin-Wright 2018). I spent my athletic career racing against the boys in the fast lane and struggling to outperform them in the gymnasium, bidding to prove my value to male coaches. This cultural value, that boys were better than girls and that was just how it was, had unconsciously become doxa, even though I resisted the notion:

> Autoethnography 1: "spent a lot of my youth 'being one of the lads.' I had fun with my
>
> brother and his friends whilst proving that girls could do stuff too."

Interestingly, in story two I felt dejection when leaving my old club, and a deep shame that I 'secretly craved being the centre of attention.' Inner struggles may indicate a softer feminine side I resisted as I endeavoured to project the hard-nosed image of who I was as a coach (McMahon et al. 2020). I also remember feeling desperate for people not to see me as an 'egotistical' coach, something I personally related to male coaches. This was an example of the 'double bind' I struggled to negotiate (LaVoi et. al. 2007). I wanted to appear competent so deliberately displayed male behaviours to demonstrate my effectiveness, but it was also important to me to be 'nicer' and 'kinder' than the men, corresponding to female stereotypes (Hovden and Tjønndal 2019).

Habitus typically operates at a subconscious level unless individuals encounter situations that cause them to question themselves (Reay 2004). I never struggled with self-confidence or self-belief in the early days, evidenced at times by my arrogance:

> Autoethnography 2: "I was selected for many foreign trips for the national team over the next four years, sometimes with my swimmers, sometimes without. I rarely paused to question why I had been selected in the early days, it was obviously because I was being noticed as a good coach."

During the third story, however, I encountered a new field as part of a prestigious development programme which may have disrupted this instinctive approach. Hence, I began to experience doubts about my abilities and question meritocracy:

> Autoethnography 3: "Admittedly, I wasn't so sure of myself in this new learning environment. I started to doubt my ability as I paid more attention to my faults."

> Autoethnography 3: "However, at times the introspection was crippling, the unnerving realisation that I didn't know as much as I thought and that people would find me out."

> Autoethnography 3: "Now, every single time I was selected for a squad without my own athletes on the team I questioned why, and worried that my peers would too, was I good enough or just in the clique?"

In the swimming environment I obviously had what Bourdieu (1990, 66-68) calls "a feel (habitus) for the game (field)" and my exposure to a different field had caused me to start questioning my ability. Thus, I became more consciously aware of my habitus as I jostled for position and capital in a new social space (Mennesson 2012).

Capital and Field

According to Bourdieu (1989), capital is what we need in order to triumph, and deep down I knew it. Starting out in coaching I was already in possession of a certain amount of embodied and institutionalised cultural capital from my days as an international swimmer. This was clearly the reason I was offered a full-time head coach position with only a level two qualification and limited coaching experience (McMahon et al. 2020). I was known around the swimming community. I therefore had institutional social capital (connections), and I had worked with a lot of the coaches, albeit as an athlete, but this meant they knew what I was made of, which made me seem credible via the transferral of cultural and social capital into embodied symbolic capital (Sisjord et al. 2020). My experiences as an athlete had led to the perception that I would be respected by coaches and athletes alike, and that I possessed the necessary qualities such as leadership and practical coaching skills to be an effective coach.

Multiple studies, however, have reported how the pathway between elite athlete and high-performance coach can be problematic, with such coaches having socially reproduced cultural norms that include recycling poor coaching practices (Blackett, Evans, and Piggott 2017; McMahon et al. 2020). After I followed this pathway, I was keen to further strengthen my capital and power within this patriarchal field to help legitimise my position. Therefore, my

developing identity as an elite coach within this patriarchal field intersected with my coaching practices as I was complicit when subconsciously reproducing values and coaching behaviours (Denison et al. 2017), which, in this instance, were considered to be associated to masculine norms (LaVoi & Dutove 2012). I prioritised myself over my athletes. It was about me and not them. For example, in the second story it is apparent I was seeking to maximise my personal capital and consequently my available choices, evidenced by deliberately wanting to do well and be 'noticed.' The way for me to acquire more symbolic capital, or prestige, I believed, was through my athletes, and ultimately this would also bring the economic and social capital I so desired as well as the opportunity to reach the elite level. I consciously *used* my athletes to get further up the career ladder as it were (Lovell 2000), hoping to generate capital when my swimmers became champions.

> Autoethnography 2: "I wanted people to be impressed by my swimmers, and I could then take the credit and be celebrated as a "good coach"."

> Autoethnography 2: "It was never my swimmers standing on the podium, it was me."

Inevitably, my social capital also expanded as a by-product of working with more reputable coaches when I moved clubs. My new boss was an Olympic gold medal coach and his number two, the best GB junior coach at the time who was my direct line manager, automatically 'opened doors' for me due their status in the sport. They advised and mentored me and promoted my involvement in national talent squads that provided further opportunities to be noticed. In turn, this enabled me to accumulate not only embodied cultural capital but institutionalised social capital. Yet those who facilitated the extension of my social networks and access to social capital were all men. They acted as custodians and power brokers in shaping the culture of elite sports and legitimised elite sport as a patriarchal and masculine

space (Norman 2010b). This furthermore exacerbated my inclination to abide by *their* rules and to coach in *their* way (Mennesson 2012).

Thus far I had convinced myself and others that I was in fact credible and knowledgeable, which brought embodied symbolic power, or so I thought. According to Bourdieu (1989), symbolic power is what results from transforming the various types of capital you possess (economic, cultural and social) into power. The turning point in terms of my career, was during the third narrative where I had been selected onto a prestigious national programme away from swimming. Here I finally realised that my athletes would gain the recognition I sought, and it would be *their* symbolic power, not mine. The significance was that I now recognised I would need to earn the capital for myself, rather than simply assume it (Lovell 2000). I had begun to question meritocracy, whether I deserved to be selected for those teams, or whether I was selected due to my social capital. With all the symbolic power I had accrued in becoming an 'identified' future Olympic coach, this feeling of uncertainty was surprising even to me. I possessed invaluable cultural capital in terms of my embodied (traits) and institutionalised assets (qualifications) in the field to this point, along with other tangible assets such as my Porsche to illustrate my objectified cultural capital, so why did I now feel insecure? This was all introspective self-dialogue and it was crippling.

According to Bourdieu (1993), fields are the various social arenas in which capital and power may be appropriated. My social capital in this new field appeared non-existent, I had never met any of these people before and knew nothing about them, their accolades or their social connections. My institutionalised state seemed irrelevant as the only coaching qualifications I held were sport specific, so my lack of institutionalised cultural capital by not possessing higher education qualifications became an internal cause for concern. I concluded that they were more intellectual than me because doxa told me that qualifications equate to intelligence. Additionally, I had a North East accent which I suspected identified me as working class (which

I was), with less economic capital which placed me lower down the hierarchy, highlighting how doxa can make one uncritically accept socialised norms. Whilst not one of Bourdieu's original concepts, several feminist writers have argued the existence of gendered capital (Lovell 2000). McCall (1992) proposed that the embodied dispositions that comprise the habitus may in fact serve as gendered cultural capital. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's conceptualisations can be utilised to highlight how subtle messages and nuances from my life have shaped my view of the world and may indicate how I consciously and unconsciously battled to acquire and accumulate capital as a coach.

My strategy to maintain and accumulate capital was to react to this anxiety and examine the differences I had with the most similar person, the *other* woman, to establish where I was in the hierarchy of this group. I saw her as a threat rather than an ally, in an action that could be analogous to "queen bee" syndrome. Queen bees high up the hierarchy distinguish themselves from other women, lower down, by accentuating their masculine characteristics such as dominance and independence, and by emphasising that they are different from other women (Ellemers and van den Heuval 2004). Ordinarily, I had amassed social and cultural capital, and therefore symbolic power, by emphasizing masculine traits and being 'one of the lads' so I looked for ways in which I could seize the position of dominant woman in this particular field and accrue more social and symbolic capital with the men.

Research into the queen bee phenomenon has suggested that women who experience success in gender-biased settings often rebuff the notion of sexism in the workplace, leading to further legitimisation of inequalities between men and women in the workplace (Faniko et al. 2017). I can genuinely, and remorsefully, admit to this from my earlier days in coaching. In a Bourdieusian lens, I was aligning myself to the forms of capital in which I perceived the men associated to my field, those with power, to what I considered to be the legitimised masculine hard-nosed ideals. I did not want to show any signs of weakness.

The response of shame and regret after this incident exhibits that despite my denial that gender-bias existed, maybe I was in fact aware of inequalities and chose instead to downplay them (Faniko et al. 2017). It is feasible to say I was merely 'playing the game' (Norman 2010b) to protect the social, cultural and symbolic capital I had accrued with my colleagues who were men (Bourdieu 1986). Although I knew women faced more challenges, I wanted to preserve my own status and identity as 'coach' rather than 'female coach.' Having often felt like I was being judged and having to prove myself to men who always were placed in positions of authority, it became routine to conform and submit to this masculine dominance, a theme which was reported by Norman and Rankin-Wright (2018) in their study of the sociological impact of being in the minority. My complicity at these junctures served to intensify the double bind (LaVoi et al. 2007) and reinforced my tendency to "bargain with patriarchy" (Kamphoff 2010, 370) to preserve my hard-fought capital.

During the final narrative, my desire to acquire prestige (symbolic capital) was apparent once again as I describe the thoughts, feelings and emotions of being a national team coach at the Paralympic Games. I paid particular attention to my appearance each day at London 2012 and ensured I was in place, showcasing my achievements (and therefore, symbolic capital and power) to the thousands of fans (strangers) who I assumed would be envious of my position. I was an exhibitionist and in a similar way to story two, I puffed out my chest and posed. As evidenced throughout my stories, I often modelled my behaviour to shape how others viewed me, and linking this with Bourdieu's concepts, my cultural capital was a significant factor in how I projected myself in a male dominated profession in order to thrive.

Conclusion

This paper contributes a unique analysis of my coaching journey as a woman from ex-athlete to elite coach and outlines the socio-cultural factors involved in navigating my career.

Consistent with other research, I have highlighted the ways in which power struggles are often out of sight, but not out of mind. Equality continues to be high on the agenda. Yet systemic failings within sport that allow a male hegemony to linger must be challenged and revolutionised so that future generations may experience fairness. I unwittingly and uncritically practised in a way that socially reproduced what can be considered as an immediate adherence to hegemonic masculinity. I downplayed the existence of inequality after having been socialised to masculine norms amongst the culture of elite swim coaching. Whilst constantly battling the double bind of acquiring capital and power, I embodied these hegemonic norms (LaVoi et al. 2007), projecting a masculine image to be deemed worthy and effective whilst hushing my feminine qualities to maintain acceptance (Hovden and Tjønndal 2019). This was after my coaches as an athlete, coaching peers and mentors were principally men. Although I was encouraged to be reflective in coach education courses, I never employed critical self-reflexivity to problematise these cultural norms (Cushion 2016). As such, after having examined my own coaching journey, what I have now learnt in the hope of becoming a better mentor is that I need to encourage my learners to be more self-aware, helping them remove some of the limits of their own taken for granted assumptions that forms their habitus. For me as a mentor alongside coach education structures to facilitate critical self-reflexivity that utilises sociological theories such as Bourdieu's and others is recommended. This is to help coaches penetrate their true socio-cultural identities and enable greater understanding of coaching cultures in the pursuit of equality. Further ethnographic studies conducted with elite women swimming coaches are recommended to broaden the field's awareness of the barriers and challenges others have encountered and surmounted. Recognition of the intersectional identities that women coaches possess, such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, would be valuable to examine how alternative double binds can be managed and conquered.

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