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Athletes as 'sites of normative intersectionality': Critically exploring the ontology of influence in sport coaching.

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Athletes as 'sites of normative intersectionality': Critically exploring the ontology of influence in sport coaching.

Abstract

Social structure remains an equivocal term in (sport) sociology. Our understandings of its constitution and role in causally influencing behaviour are arguably underdeveloped. Using a critical realist approach, this paper examined how structural entities and reflexive agency combined to influence behaviour in an elite youth cricket context (e.g., athletes, coaches). A methodological bricolage was used to generate data and Elder-Vass' (2007, 2010) theorising provided the principal heuristic device. The analysis illustrated how coaches acted on behalf of *norm circles* in their attempts to shape dispositions of athletes. In turn, athletes engaged in a process of dialectical iteration between reflexive deliberation and (intersectional) dispositions, which influenced their social action in this organisational context. This study holds significance for researchers and practitioners concerned with social influence.

Keywords: influence, ontology, norm circle, emergentism, sport coach.

Introduction

Understanding social influence (i.e., how people develop or modify their opinions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours through interaction with others) is perhaps the *raison d'être* of sociology (Elder-Vass, 2010). This topic has been an especially important one for scholars examining the sociological dimensions of organisational life (Adler, du Gay, Morgan, & Reed, 2014). Indeed, research in this area has richly illustrated how individuals and groups may be influenced (or not) in a variety of ways. This includes, but is not limited to, being persuaded by convincing arguments, seeking to be similar to others, having a strong sense of confidence in, and respect for, those leading and making decisions, feeling a pressure to conform with social norms, or mobilising agency within complex power dynamics to work toward desired ends (e.g., Empson, 2020; Kempster, 2006; Maitlis, 2004; Weitzner & Deutsch, 2015).

In recent years, scholars in the sociology of sport have increasingly illustrated how sports workers (e.g., athletes, coaches, administrators, and policy makers, among others) are both tacticians and targets of influence (e.g., Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008; Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2014; Denison, 2007; Nelson, Potrac, et al., 2014; Potrac & Jones, 2009; Potrac, Mallett, Greenough, & Nelson, 2017; Roderick, 2006). For example, those adopting the theorising of Bourdieu have illustrated how powerful cultures of control, obedience, and respect for authority are produced, reproduced, navigated, and resisted in sporting organisations (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2014; Purdy, Jones, & Cassidy, 2009). Similar insights have also been provided by those using Giddens' structuration theory to examine how sports workers variously construct and negotiate their relationships with others (i.e., how they are simultaneously influenced and influencing) (e.g., Purdy & Jones, 2011; Purdy et al., 2008). Other researchers have respectively utilised poststructuralist (e.g., Foucault) and interactionist/dramaturgical (e.g., Goffman, Hochschild)

theorising to examine the process of social influence. In terms of the former, Denison and colleagues (e.g., Denison, 2007; Denison, Pringle, Cassidy, & Hessian, 2015; Mills & Denison, 2013; Mills, Denison, & Gearity, 2020) have, for example, examined the influence of power and discourse on the experiences and behaviours of coaches and athletes. Meanwhile, those using interactionist and dramaturgical frameworks have illustrated how, in order to influence others, sports workers actively manage the version of the self that is presented to others inside and, indeed, outside of the workplace (e.g., Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Ives, Gale, Potrac, & Nelson, in press; Jones, 2006; Nelson, Potrac, et al., 2014; Partington & Cushion, 2012; Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002; Roderick & Allen-Collinson, 2020).

While the literature cited above represents important and high-quality contributions to our understanding of social influence in sporting organisations, we believe that there is scope for developing our ontological, theoretical and empirical understandings of this topic. Indeed, it is important to recognise the limitations, as well as the strengths, of the principal theories that have been used to examine the process of social influence in our sub-discipline. For example, while allowing a role for social structure, Bourdieu, Giddens, Goffman and Foucault are arguably vague about which specific entities at a level of ontology are responsible for influence, and, in some cases, how these entities might play a role alongside agency in influencing our action (Elder-Vass, 2010)[i]. This reflects a wider problem in that social structure is itself a particularly polysemic, widely debated and ambiguous term. It is, in other words, a black box. Something which is assumed to be influential, but something that we are yet to open, look inside of, and critically consider. As Elder-Vass (2010, p. 116) explained: "Conventional sociological accounts of normative institutions… have tended to assume that normativity is produced by *society*, but they have rarely been precise in defining the concept of *society*".

One possible way of addressing the issues outlined above, and subsequently augmenting our understanding of social influence and relations in sporting organisations, is to draw upon the critical realist theorising of Elder-Vass (2007, 2010). Specifically, his work provides a unique position to theorise the existence, development and causal influence of 'norm circles'. These are social entities (i.e., groups of people) which are viewed as being responsible for causally influencing behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2012). A key strength of Elder-Vass' theorising is its articulation of social structures-as-relations *and* social structures-as-wholes. Indeed, as humans who form 'parts' of social structures (norm circles) we, in and through our (inter)actions/relations, socially construct and often endorse/enact specific normative cultures (e.g., share a commitment to denounce racism), which can influence the behaviour of others. However, Elder-Vass (2007, 2010) argued that stopping our sociological explanations of social influence here would be insufficient in adequately recognising the causal influence of this social structure. Specifically, he noted that, while we would be able to recognise the relations (i.e., commitments between people) which form the 'whole' (i.e., norm circle), we would ignore the existence and causal power of the whole itself; something Elder-Vass refers to as the 'redescription principle' (Elder-Vass, 2010). Consistent with a key tenet of critical realism – emergence (i.e., the view that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts) – Elder-Vass' theorising suggests that it is the whole (i.e., norm circle) which possesses the causal power (emergent property) to influence action, and that this is a power which the parts would not possess if they were not structured into this particular set of relations (Elder-Vass, 2010). In line with realist ontology, the social structure (norm circle) is therefore materially real: it is capable of causally influencing. Similarly, as a result of the way in which our parts (i.e., networks of neurons) as humans are related to one another, we possess the causal power to be reflexive, consciously deliberate and co-determine action (alongside structural influences) (Elder-Vass, 2007).

In this study, then, we utilised Elder-Vass' (2007, 2010) thesis to develop our *ontological* and empirical understanding of social influence in a specific sporting organisation. In this case, that which occurred between coaches and players in an elite youth cricket environment. Importantly, his framework enabled us to build upon existing understandings of social influence through its focus on the specific entities (i.e., groups of people) at a level of social structure responsible for influencing action, and how these entities interact with conscious agency (i.e., the ability to deliberate and shape our own behaviour) (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). The specific questions addressed in this study were: a) What are the precise social entities at a level of social structure which are responsible for influence and how? b) How do coaches play a role in shaping these entities? and, c) How does the agency of individual athletes interact with these entities to develop dispositions and co-determine action in practice? Data were generated using a bricolage of qualitative methods (182 hours of observational data and 46 hours of interview data). The significance of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it provides novel theoretical and empirical insights regarding the specific entities at a level of social structure which are responsible for influencing action alongside agency. In short, this paper takes a critical view of social influence in sporting organisations which uniquely considers the (often subtle) role that organisational actors (e.g., coaches and athletes) play in shaping their own and others' actions. Such knowledge may support policy makers, educators and practitioners in critically engaging with the topic of influence: a critical facet of everyday organisational life. Secondly, this paper provides a rare (ethnographic/field-based) application of Elder-Vass' theorising. Indeed, our work is among the first to connect his ideas regarding philosophical ontology and social ontology to empirical evidence (D. Elder-Vass, personal communication, June 4, 2020).

Philosophical underpinnings and conceptual framework

7

This paper was underpinned by the meta-theoretical assumptions of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975). Although critical realism is becoming an increasingly diverse school of thought, those within this philosophical position generally agree on four core pillars: a) ontological realism, b) epistemic relativism, c) methodological pluralism, and d) judgemental rationality. Put simply, realists conceptualise entities or 'things' as possessing real causal powers or properties (e.g., to speak, serialise access to goods or fly) as a result of the way in which their parts are related to each other (also known as a mechanism; Elder-Vass, 2010). The job of the realist, then, is to understand and explain issues, events or behaviours through employing a range of relevant research methods (methodological pluralism), accounting for the (complex) sets of relations and mechanisms which have caused them (Elder-Vass, 2010). There is an inevitable gap between this ontological reality and our understanding(s) of it, meaning that different individuals can come up with divergent understandings of the same phenomena (i.e., epistemic relativism) and sometimes be wrong in these understandings. Therefore, there sometimes a need to be judgementally rational and decide between conflicting accounts or explanations to arrive at the best possible (albeit inherently fallible) explanation (Elder-Vass, 2012; Porpora, 2015).

The principal heuristic device for this paper was provided by Elder-Vass (2007, 2010). His contemporary theorising addresses the causal power of social structures and the emergentist nature of social action. This body of work utilises, and builds upon, realist ontology, epistemological relativism and the concept of emergence (Bhaskar, 1975). For Elder-Vass, emergence refers to entities possessing causal powers as a result of the set of relations that structure their parts into a whole (Elder-Vass, 2010). Indeed, he argues that, if entities were not organised into such a specific set of relations, they would not possess the respective causal power. Further, individual parts of such entities do not possess these causal powers alone[ii]. For instance, the properties of water are different to those of its parts

(hydrogen and oxygen) when they are not structured into a set of relations that constitutes

water (Elder-Vass, 2010). It is this very concept of emergence which is used by Elder-Vass

(2010) to pinpoint the specific entities responsible for influence at a level of social structure.

Norm circles

For Elder-Vass, it is *norm circles* which are the specific entities that are responsible for

influencing action at a level of social structure (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012). A norm circle is a

group of people who tend to enact, endorse and enforce a particular norm (e.g., to queue).

There is one norm circle for each different norm (Elder-Vass, 2010). In line with

emergentism, because of the way in which people are related to one another (i.e., the

commitment that they share to endorsing and enforcing a norm through interacting with each

other), people develop dispositions which *tend to* produce action which conforms to the

norm[iii]. In other words, as a result of the way in which individuals are related to one another,

the norm circle possesses a causal power to store or shape dispositions within individuals

(Elder-Vass, 2012). To this point, we can see how this account is compatible with, and

extends, Bourdieu's account of habitus earlier identified. It does so, and also augments

Giddens, Foucault and Goffman's work, by identifying the specific entity at the level of

social structure responsible for shaping dispositions and the mechanism through which this

shapes our habitus. If we apply this theory to coaching, we could say that coaches act on

behalf of norm circles to shape sets of dispositions within athletes which, in turn, shape

athletes' actions. For example, coaches might act on behalf of a norm circle by endorsing the

view that athletes should display respect towards officials at all times. This, in turn, may

create or shape a disposition within individual athletes who come to believe that it is the

norm to be respectful to officials and act in a manner consistent with this practice when in the

presence of those who they believe to endorse this norm (i.e., the norm circle). However, in

organisations such as sport teams we must also consider the specialised roles and authority

relations present which play a role in shaping these norms (Elder-Vass, 2010). It can therefore be said that through power relationships which exist *between* head coaches and others, (head) coaches are often responsible for shaping the roles (bundles of norms expected) of other individuals (i.e., assistant coaches, athletes, and support staff, among others).

An emergentist theory of action

Importantly, norm circles do not deterministically condition action. In the process of shaping our dispositions their influence enters into a permanent dialectic with the conscious agency and deliberation of individuals (Elder-Vass, 2007). While some of our experiences may be learned more or less unconsciously through social experience (e.g., how we move or our accent), many actions are produced as a result of both dispositions and conscious reflexivity. Here, for instance, we (may) reflect upon our social experiences and interactions with others before making decisions which co-determine our actions alongside our already stored dispositions (habitus). Our conscious deliberation may indeed refine our (pre-existing) dispositions. Further, up until the point in which we implement an action, we are capable of consciously thinking about and refining or aborting such actions, which are co-determined by our dispositions (Elder-Vass, 2010). For example, we may be holding a conversation with our friends and be unconsciously producing a particular accent or dialect which has been learned through our social experiences and stored in our habitus. Our grandparent may then enter this conversation and we may consciously decide that we need to adapt or refine our accent to appease a different set of normative expectations (e.g., by reflecting on and thus deploying other sets of dispositions which have been developed). We can say that our actions have been influenced by both dispositions and conscious reflexivity, but these influences operate over different time frames. It is such agential deliberation within this dialectic that makes change possible; action is not a solely reproductive process whereby social structure acts as a

conveyor belt of perpetual influence (Elder-Vass, 2010). This example also presents an important consideration for the theory of norm circles: we may be simultaneously influenced by the presence of many normative pressures (norm circles) at any one time, and sometimes be required to decide between such norms if they are conflicting (Elder-Vass, 2010)[iv]. Here, "individuals become the sites of normative intersectionality and *society* becomes a patchwork of overlapping or intersecting normative circles" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 133). In such cases *indexing norms* – norms which help to establish which objects or actors regulative norms apply to – are often important for agents to comprehend and act in specific situations (Elder-Vass, 2012). For example, to understand what is expected in terms of the behaviour of a coach we also need indexing norms (e.g., the coach is the person employed by the organisation for this role and marked by wearing different clothing) to define which individual *counts as* the coach.

What should now be apparent is that Elder-Vass' (2007, 2010) work provides us with (possible) solutions to the critiques identified earlier in this paper; it provides ontological answers to our research questions. Indeed, we have a tenable solution to the problem of how social structure and agency can influence the actions of agents (e.g., athletes) together. Further, this social ontological approach helps to augment Bourdieu's account by identifying the role of agency in the *development* and *operation* of habitus: something which scholars have previously argued his writing is vague about (Crossley, 2001; Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010; Jenkins, 2002). In the remainder of this paper we apply this theory to explore its utility in, and implications for, understandings of social influence in sporting organisations.

Methodology

Participants and sampling

The emergent, dialectical and relational influence(s) of coach-athlete interaction were explored in a representative level under-17 cricket squad (Nettleton) in the UK over an 11-month period. This squad was purposively selected in order to generate rich insights in line with the research questions (Emmel, 2013). The lead author is an active cricket coach in a similar domain, which afforded him access to an environment typically "off-limits" to the uninitiated outsider. The squad was comprised of one head coach (David), one assistant coach (Sam), one team manager (Douglas), and 26 players (all male) who participated in training and competitive matches. The project received full institutional ethical approval and pseudonyms were generated to protect the anonymity of all participants and the organisation. All participants provided written informed consent.

Data collection

Critical realist ethnography afforded a unique opportunity to explain the underlying mechanisms that shaped human agency and the relations that such agency could in turn transform or reproduce (Rees & Gatenby, 2014). Data were generated through three principal methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall interviews.

Participant observation

The first author's role as research instrument (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) fell somewhere between that of a 'play participant' and 'focused participant observer' (Tracy, 2020). In practical terms, this meant that I (the first author) became an active member of the community, positioned to gain access to detailed observations and participant accounts, while being mindful to not become acculturated to the point in which I became blind to the values and cultures forming the fabric of the context (Davies, 2008). In total, I spent 182 hours observing and being immersed within the context. During the fieldwork, field notes, video footage and interviews with coaches and players focused on identifying and then further

exploring critical incidents related to the temporally emergent negotiation of influence between 'agents in relation'. In recognition that different events may be constructed as being influential by different stakeholders, such critical incidents were identified by the researcher, coaches and players (Angelides, 2001). In this study, critical incidents were defined as moments in sessions or matches where participants or the researcher felt that (inter)actions had been influential (or not) in shaping subsequent action. They were selected by: a) making field notes in the context, b) analysing footage retrospectively, and c) by conducting casual conversations with participants in the field and at the start of interviews. These data then informed the focus of subsequent episodes of data generation.

Semi-structured and stimulated recall interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after training sessions or matches with the coaches and players. These probed the participants' personal motives and intentions, as well as their perceptions of their experiences in this environment and the consequences participants attached to them. Stimulated recall was integrated into semi-structured interviews where coaches and players watched a series of their videoed interactions and were asked to introspectively recall their experiences, describing the intentions and influences that shaped their actions, as well as their subsequent perceptions and reflections (see Lyle, 2003). These videoed interactions were selected by both participants (i.e., coaches and athletes) and the researcher on the basis that the interaction was perceived to be influential in shaping future actions of others (or not). Importantly, this alleviated common limitations of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) whereby participants often struggle to accurately recall events (Angelides, 2001; Bott & Tourish, 2016). In total, 12 interviews were conducted with coaches and 22 with players, culminating in 46 hours of interview data. Depending upon availability and the identification of critical incidents relevant to participants, coaches and athletes were interviewed on multiple occasions. Multiple interviews allowed concepts to be

explored in greater depth, by analysing the same incident from multiple perspectives and posing new questions in light of ongoing (theoretical) sense making. Several interviews with the same participant also afforded the opportunity to explore a wider range of critical incidents and their temporal nature (i.e., how they connected to previous incidents and fed into participants' sense making for future interactions) in line with the central research questions. An iterative approach was adopted to data collection and analysis, whereby existing data generated through multiple methods were integrated through comparing, contrasting and building upon previous analysis in order to 'know more' about the phenomena they concerned (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). This inter-meshing of research methods provided a basis to probe and generate information-rich data on specific incidents (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Data analysis

Throughout the process of analysis we critically and systematically considered the following topics: (a) what was *causing* events to occur? (b) Which entities (e.g., individuals and social structure) were interacting? And, (c) how were they interacting to explain the event? Alongside the researcher's field notes and observations of events, participants were encouraged to highlight instances where they felt that an (inter)action had been influential (or not) in the field, and at the start of interviews. Triangulating critical incidents in this way allowed data to be generated on specific events which were both routine/rare and had high/low significance to coaches and athletes (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Engaging with critical incidents in this manner allowed the research to critically explain regular events and also unearth unexpected, emergent findings. These instances became the main focus of interviews and thus the CIT drove both data collection and (ongoing) analysis.

Identifying and analysing data using the CIT helped to organise and make sense of a large data set in relation to the research questions (Angelides, 2001). Data from multiple sources (i.e., field notes, video recording and interviews with multiple agents) were coded in an emic and etic manner (Tracy, 2020). Initially, reflexive thematic analysis was employed to generate situational and contextual meaning around the incidents most relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). A flexible theoretical framework (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010) was then adopted to generate (fallible) readings of the empirical material and challenge conventional discourse (e.g., by posing new questions about the ontological nature of social structures and their relation to individual agency in sporting organisations). In this way, we reflexively and iteratively moved between data generated through multiple methods and interpretation in the light of theory (Charmaz, 2003; Tracy, 2018). Importantly, data were allowed room to drive forward our understanding of influence in this context, before being compared with existing literature to challenge conventional understanding, to provide new explanation of observed phenomena, and to consider fresh theoretical development.

The research team adopted a reflexive approach, where members remained self-aware of their own theoretical predispositions and open to alternative theoretical positions (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Reflexivity was fostered in the following ways: a) the set-up of the CIT (incorporating multiple perspectives), b) the adoption of multiple methods, and c) by inviting critical friends and participants to offer thoughts and alternative explanations on the empirical data and associated theorising (Smith & McGannon, 2018). We also explored how *practically adequate* the data and associated theorising was for the participants (i.e., how well it explained their situated experiences of physically being within the context and experiencing (non)influence). This then enabled the team to employ judgmental rationality; where we made an assessment of the most appropriate explanation and theorising of the

empirical. Of course, this is something that we recognise is inherently fallible and open to further or different (re)interpretation (Bhaskar, 1998 [1979]). In line with such a stance, we feel that the potential generalisability of this work depends upon critical consideration of how findings might apply (or not) to different contexts (Smith, 2018).

Analysis and discussion

The purpose of this section is to put the theory outlined earlier in this paper "to work". Rather than deductively shoehorning data into the theoretical frame, the CIT permitted an iterative and recursive process of analysis (Bott & Tourish, 2016), toing and froing between philosophical ontology, social ontology and empirical evidence. Many critical incidents were unearthed and explored in this wider ethnography. However, in order to provide sufficient detail and theorisation to address the research questions within the confines of this paper, this section focuses on one series of pertinently interconnected critical incidents. We begin the following section with an extract from field notes taken from the third match of the season.

Acting on behalf of norm circles to (attempt to) influence the dispositions of others

> Nettleton are now beginning to build a commanding position in this two-day (rain affected) match. However, Sam and Douglas air their concerns that Nettleton may not be scoring (runs) quickly enough in a spell before the interval. The head coach (David) is away, and Sam has taken the lead. Just as the coaches are speaking, one of the players, Jamie, plays another defensive shot and blocks the ball.

> *Sam:* [Clearly frustrated] "See, there - that's the one there… this is where we fall down, Douglas, isn't it…?"

At the interval, the mood among players appears to be high, they are currently 148 runs for the loss of only two wickets after 46 overs. Sam, the assistant coach, addresses the squad – in particular Jamie and Roger who will bat again after the interval.

Sam: "We're maybe 12 runs short of what we would have liked to have been… but we've got wickets in hand, I just think we've got to show a little bit more intent, we've got to double that [score] and a bit more in the next 40 overs… we've got to look for some gaps – get a few fielders pushed back, mid-on, mid-off back so it opens the field up a little bit".

Jamie: "would you say to go over the top [hit over the opposition]?"

Sam nods and endorses Jamie's suggestion, encouraging the players to use more aggressive shots after the interval by hitting over the top of the opposition.

Field note extract: Match 3, during the interval of the batting innings (17 July 2018).

Here, Sam had asked the players to use more aggressive shots, as this would force a change to the field settings and open up gaps to score more runs.

Towards the end of interval, David, the head coach, returns, reads the score line and is briefed by Sam on the messages he has delivered to the players. Addressing the players, David immediately advocates a conflicting message to that delivered by Sam earlier in the interval.

David: [addressing the squad] "We're talking 40 overs – that's going to take us close to 300 [runs] isn't it – so I wouldn't worry too much about scoring – you'll score naturally enough. Feel alright [directed at Roger]? Alright [directed at Jamie]? Start again".

Amid the uncertainty faced, Sam monitored and responded to the evolving context by *noticing* the (inter)actions of players and a chance to influence the behaviour of Roger and Jamie (Mason, 2002). Specifically, he spotted an opportunity to hit the ball over the top of the opposition, before planning and instigating an attempt to manage some of this ambiguity by suggesting a particular strategy: to play more attackingly after the interval (Jones & Ronglan, 2017). David also (inter)acted amid the ambiguity of not having been able to monitor how the team (and opposition) had played, after speaking to Sam. Thus, Sam and David's actions in noticing did not simply relate to their visual perception of events. Their noticing was instead a 'locally organised achievement', which was constructed with, and made 'knowable' or 'observable' to others, through inter-action in team talks (Corsby & Jones, 2020).

Drawing upon their specialised organisational roles and authority relations that accompanied these, Sam and David sought to endorse or enforce certain role norms of batters (Elder-Vass, 2010). They acted on behalf of a wider norm circle (and on behalf of the organisation) in attempt to influence/shape the dispositions of their athletes about norms that "you should adapt your batting approach to the match circumstances" and that "you should bat in the style recommended by your coach in response to the current situation" (Elder-Vass, 2010). In doing so, they also both attempted to take a step towards teaching the batsmen about how this norm could be applied in-situ (i.e., which specific approach they should use). Through agential decisions made by Roger and Jamie to act in alignment with these norms over time, the norm circle had stored dispositions or a tendency to act in conformity with these norms (Elder-Vass, 2012). It could therefore be said that the norm circle/organisation acted through its incumbents to causally influence behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2007). However, by not collectively coordinating their own actions as coaches in this example, or lacking what Goffman (1959) described as sufficient discipline of a performance team, their individual

attempts to manage some of the ambiguity of their shared contextual circumstances, also (unintentionally) *created* further ambiguity for the players. Specifically, should they (the players) respond to the suggested style of play for batters advocated by Sam (i.e., to play in a more attacking manner), or to the style of play proposed subsequently by David (i.e., to not get out, or worry about increasing the scoring rate)? In determining this, and, as will be discussed in greater detail in the forthcoming sections, this required players to consciously deliberate on a number of complex and conflicting norms (e.g., about who was in the position of head and assistant coach and what this meant for who was able to shape the suggested style of play or not). This reinforces the point that coaches "are themselves part of the complexity processes they manage. They cannot differentiate themselves from it by exerting stable, purposeful influence on others" (Tourish, 2019, p. 221). Indeed, reflecting back upon his own and Sam's interactions with the team, David acknowledged that the message he delivered was different to that of Sam's, and this was an intentional (micro-political) act to alleviate some of the pressure that had been placed on the players (Jones, Bailey, & Thompson, 2013):

> Sam has obviously said quite a bit [to the players], but my job there was to kind of analyse what he is saying, and obviously what you'll notice is the fact that I have never mentioned the fact of what he [Sam] has said, because I probably haven't liked what he has said, in terms of we're a little bit short [of runs]. So my natural instinct is to try and keep away from that… but it's also kind of contradicting [what Sam has said] at the same time. Cos, they [the other coaches] said lets be here for then [set a target for a specific time]. You know and I'm not really big on that, because that then limits the players to a target…They [the players] have already identified that mid-off is the worst fielder so that shows that they are thinking at quite a high level and in my eyes that shows they have got the

game under control if they are able to bat sensibly. So there is not really much that needs to be said at that point, apart from: start your innings again; don't get out straight after tea; keep going; get yourself back in, you'll score freely enough; don't worry, off you go.

<div align="right">Stimulated recall interview with David (07 August, 2018)</div>

Athletes as 'sites of normative intersectionality': The permanent dialectic between reflexivity and dispositions

Upon restarting play, Jamie immediately played more aggressive shots. This was something that Jamie had not attempted previously in the game; he had played much more conservatively. Conversely, Roger continued to play in the same conservative manner as he had done before the interval.

<div align="right">*Field note extract: Play resumes after the interval (17 July 2018).*</div>

During subsequent stimulated recall interviews, Roger highlighted how he had been more strongly influenced by David (head coach) than Sam (assistant coach):

Roger: "It was good to have David back… just a bit of like reassurance: we don't really need to worry about scoring too much and that kind of takes the pressure off me and Jamie. Knowing that we don't have to go out all guns blazing, we can just take our time…

What Sam was saying was maybe a bit different to what David was saying, so we kind of took more on board what David was saying. Sam was saying try and maybe push the opposition out, manipulate the opposition, whereas David was saying just don't worry about scoring and just take your time. I think we took David's words a bit more on board than Sam's words".

This example extends previous understandings of influence by proposing that athletes'
decisions are influenced by both social structure (i.e., dispositions shaped by norm circles)
and conscious reflexivity. Despite being influenced by the norms (dispositions) to adapt their
batting style to the context of the match and to bat in a style recommended by their coach,
Roger and Jamie required conscious reflexivity to "fill in" some of the ambiguities and
uncertainties which remained about how to act in this specific set of circumstances (Elder-
Vass, 2007). In other words, their dispositions did not fully account for or explain their
actions. Such decisions made by athletes were clearly also informed by (changeable) levels of
power afforded to coaches, perceived role identities and assessments of suitability. Both
Roger and Jamie appeared to have developed a disposition (through interactions with the
norm circle) over time which normatively implied that David was the head coach of the
squad and Sam was the assistant coach. Relatedly, indexing norms about these roles were
also developed to imply (and store dispositions) that David was responsible for suggesting
specific game plans and styles of batting to be implemented, whilst the role of Sam was to
provide humour, confidence, and reminders of the plans which had been set in motion by
David:

> *Roger:* "Sam's role is just reminding us what we need to do…to achieve the
> goals, not maybe how we are going to do it… It sounds bad but I wouldn't take
> Sam's words as maybe seriously as David's, because that's not his role as
> [assistant] coach. I think his role is just – be there, a bit of humour, constant
> reminders of what we need to do basically… you lean towards the senior [head]
> coach… I spoke with Jamie and we said we were just gonna take our time and be
> patient, which is kind of exactly what David was saying".

Jamie: "I think they play different roles, slightly so David is kind of the head coach obviously and he takes more of a hard role in kind of speaking to people – telling them what they have done wrong. Whereas Douglas is more of an upbeat character I would say. Erm, helping with players' confidence at the time and stuff, if they are not in form or something. And then Sam is around helping with the coaching as well – he's probably more similar to Douglas, again. And David is probably more technical/tactical than the others, I'd say. I don't think David is like a bad cop – you know, he still gets on well with the players, and what not. Err, and he's, he just kind of tells it as it is and will tell you, you have played a bad shot there, or something, you know – someone has got to do it, so. I think that's what David's role [is]".

<div align="right">*Semi-structured interview with Jamie (22nd July 2018)*</div>

Roger and Jamie's words here underline the point that organisations (e.g., sports teams) can be demarcated from simpler social forms (i.e., associations) on the basis that they have specialised roles and authority relations between members (Elder-Vass, 2010). Both these role specifications and the allocation of capital – the different forms of power that determine the (ascribed) position and influence of an actor in a social network (Bourdieu, 1986) – afforded to individuals within these roles contribute to such authority (Elder-Vass, 2010). When referring to the *more senior* coach in this instance, Roger highlighted that he afforded greater social, cultural and symbolic capital to David in comparison to his assistant coach, Sam. As Elder-Vass (2010) explained: "role incumbents only accept and follow instructions from their managers to the extent that those managers have, through their role incumbency, the right to make such a request" (p. 159), and "the differential influence of competing norms

depends on the influence of power" (p. 29). Here, coach and athlete identities did not exist as a stable "innate dualism between those with agency and those with less"; instead, they were evolving, and communicatively co-constructed through dynamic processes of (situated and historical) interaction between organisational actors (Tourish, 2019, p. 221). Indeed, the agency of athletes played an important role in the development and maintenance of coach identity and influence (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Potrac et al., 2017). Thus, the differential influence of competing norms and power relations was felt, and required resolution, by both athletes when performing at the crease.

Interestingly, Roger also alluded to himself and Jamie coming together in an effort to resolve the competing norms (given that Sam had utilised agency and had acted in a manner which was not consistent with his role norms) and strategies (about which style of play to use) espoused by their coaches in order to collectively coordinate their intentions for action on the pitch. This valuably reinforces the notion that athletes too "have agency in the constructing of" coaching (Jones & Ronglan, 2017, p. 9), and points to the possibility that it is not just coaches who orchestrate, but also athletes. In this case, the players instigated, planned, organised, monitored and responded to evolving circumstances through (inter)active acts (Jones & Wallace, 2005). This positions coaches less obtrusively. Instead of rationalistically controlling the actions of others, they push, pull and cajole in *attempt to* improve performance (Jones and Wallace, 2005). That is, both "leaders and followers act to co-construct their understandings of these issues and each other" (Tourish, 2019, p. 221). Despite both players apparently agreeing to follow the strategy promoted by David, Jamie actually appeared to respond more closely to Sam's plan of playing more aggressively. Suggesting why this might have been, and further highlighting the complex context(s) in which coaches attempt to be influential and athletes attempt to perform, Roger drew attention

to the mediating role of players' skills and abilities in consciously resolving the competing styles of play being advocated:

> *Roger:* "Jamie – he's a lot different a player to me – like I wouldn't have done that [hit over the top of the opposition], but he knows he can… I thought, that's maybe not my game so I'm not gonna try and do that, but Jamie – that is exactly his game. I think it was different for Jamie – I think he would have taken more… to what Sam was saying than David, whereas for me I think it was more David than Sam… I've played a lot of cricket with Jamie, they're his strengths, so I knew that if I could stay with him [not get out], he'd be going at six [runs] an over, something like that. I was never gonna try and belt it over the top [play aggressive shots] until I was in and set. Whereas Jamie knows he can. I think Jamie would have reacted really differently to what I would have."

> *Player stimulated recall interview (23 July 2018)*

Jamie and Roger's divergent responses to their coaches' instruction underscores an important but often ignored consideration in much of the existing coaching research: that the practice of coaches will seldom have a homogeneous, consistent and deterministic influence on all athletes. Indeed, we put forward that the skilled social performances of athletes are dependent upon detailed noticing of (inter)actions by members who act on behalf of the norm circle, *and* the judicious deployment of conscious reflexivity (consciously thinking and reflecting before acting). Reinforcing this point, and confirming Roger's assessment (above), Jamie commented in a recall interview:

> *Jamie:* "That [Sam's suggestion] influenced the way I batted – that – when he said hit it over then I was thinking if I hit it over [the fielders] I can probably push the opposition back and start milking singles [taking run opportunities]…"

When asked if he would have done this without what had been said by the coach, Jamie replied:

> *Jamie:* "Probably not – no – because hitting over the top can be reckless. I'd have probably tried to pierce the gaps along the floor if that wasn't said. It gave me more of a *license* to be attacking and play with more intent, which I like."

These excerpts show that the styles of play suggested by Sam (i.e., to increase the run-rate and score faster), differed from another style of play (i.e., suggested by David), in which getting out by playing in a more aggressive manner might have been considered to be poor performance. David's espoused suggestions aligned with Roger's playing style, but the strategy advocated by Sam better fitted Jamie's preferred playing style. Jamie was clear that Sam's (inter)action was influential because it reassured him that he would be less likely to be accused of 'reckless' play, a label that would have been problematic for him in this context. Consequently, despite creating some conflict and uncertainty, the coaches' interactions also afforded each player greater agential freedom to decide how best to play in response to the various strategies being endorsed at the time. As such, in *assessing the suitability* of claims made by coaches, athletes had accounted for the way in which the claim matched their own skillsets, as well as the perceived consequences of acting with (or against) the content of the claim. This finding resonates with recent work in leadership which suggests that, rather than being inherently problematic, ambiguity can in fact serve as a facilitator of effective leadership (Empson, 2020). Indeed, arguably, the conflicting approaches advocated widened the capacity for athletes to make use of their agency (i.e., through consciously reflecting on how to perform in the current set of circumstances). As such, this work connects closely to

wider debates about contemporary coaching practice and the need for a greater critical scrutiny of the increasingly dominant rhetoric suggesting that coaches ought to be autonomy-supportive and athlete-centred (e.g., Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac, & Groom, 2014). Indeed, despite adopting a highly structured and 'coach-led' approach, the two coaches in this example unintentionally created uncertainty for players. Here, the players became actively engaged in problem solving activity and subsequently developed their own responses to the ambiguous situations in which they found themselves. Arguably, this finding challenges the simplistic dichotomy that has primarily associated positive athlete development with autonomy-supportive/empowering coaching practices, and constrained athlete learning and decision making with highly structured, coach-led approaches. Indeed, further examining the occurrences and consequences of ambiguous experience in the learning process remains a fruitful area for critical inquiry.

In this instance, both players were causally influenced by norm circles which had shaped their dispositions that they should adapt their style of play to suit the circumstances of the match and that they should implement the style recommended by their coach in response to the current situation (Elder-Vass, 2007). However, the athletes were required to navigate and negotiate a range of complex norms (i.e., about who was permitted to suggest strategies of play based on their role – head coach and assistant coach) and contextual circumstances (e.g., whether you are batting first or second, and hence what you know or don't know about the other team's score, how long you have left to bat, how many wickets you have lost, how good the batsmen further down the order are, the state of the pitch), and used conscious reflexivity to do so. What the current study adds, then, is a novel understanding of the ways in which ambiguity is able to be successfully negotiated in and through (inter)action by athletes. Specifically, athletes had themselves noticed (inter)actions which enacted (conflicting) normative behaviour (i.e., Sam acting against his role norms by advocating a

specific batting strategy) and had consciously reflected to decide upon and enact what they considered to be the most appropriate course of action (i.e., to play according to Sam's suggestions or not). Building from the work of Townsend and Cushion (2020) which highlighted individuals engaging in reflexivity when 'crossing fields', this study presents novel insights into instances where agents in the same field are often influenced by different dispositions and engage in conscious reflexivity before acting.

Exercising their agency within structural limits, Roger and Jamie had simultaneously conformed to (and variously transgressed) differing role norms and suggested strategies of play presented by the head coach and assistant coach. Here, coach influence was dialectical; rather than athletes wholly conforming *or* resisting, they worked with tensions, ambiguities and contradictions to do both. However, in navigating the uncertainty and pathos of these contradictory goals, the players had conformed to a more general norm (to score runs), which had sufficiently satisfied the coaches to avoid negative sanctions associated with violations of these local norms (to bat in the style recommended by your coach in response to the current situation) (Elder-Vass, 2012). By doing so, they each executed skilled social performances in the face of normative intersectionality (Elder-Vass, 2010). Such capable inter-action depends upon "the possession by the individual of a sophisticated practical consciousness of the diversity, applicability and extent of the normative circles in which they are embedded, and indeed of others to which they are exposed" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 133). Indeed, even in this one detailed case, we can see the level of complexity and number of interacting norms/contextual circumstances which help to explain behaviour. Here, the athletes' engagement in a permanent dialectic between (conflicting) dispositions and reflexivity influenced their respective decisions (Elder-Vass, 2007). In other words, athletes are not docile, passive, recipients of monological coaching practice. The players' active awareness of the possibilities and structural constraints under which they were able to be realised in the

present study was mediated by (inter)action and communication with others (Fairclough, 2005). Indeed, we suggest that athletes may also engage in orchestrative practice as they respond to the orchestration of coaches (Raabe, Readdy, & Zakrajsek, 2017). Both coaches and athletes, then, are often required to notice, endorse and enforce a range of norms, intricately appreciating their indexical nature and temporal applicability within unfolding contextual circumstances before consciously reflecting, deciding and acting (Elder-Vass, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper had three key aims. These were to: a) pinpoint the specific entities at a level of social structure which are responsible for influencing agents' (i.e., athletes') actions, b) recognise how coaches might influence the shaping of such entities, and c) understand how the agency of athletes plays a role alongside these entities in developing habitus and influencing action. In addressing these aims, we introduced and applied a new theoretical perspective to the sport sociology literature. Specifically, Elder-Vass' (2007, 2010) theorising enabled us to consider how *norm circles* (i.e., groups of people who share a commitment to tend to endorse and enforce a specific norm) are responsible for influencing agents' actions by storing/shaping sets of dispositions or beliefs (habitus) in individuals through interaction. Our analysis suggested that coaches act on behalf of these norm circles (in attempt) to influence the actions of athletes. They did this by endorsing and enforcing specific normative practices (e.g., to adapt your style of play to the match circumstances and to adopt the style recommended by your coach in response to the current situation; Elder-Vass, 2010). Through making agential decisions over time to act in alignment with these norms, athletes stored/shaped (and were influenced by) these dispositions, but also experienced tension in relation to which coaches were in a position to make these suggestions and how they should act when coaches presented different (conflicting) strategies. Importantly, it was the dialectic

between reflexive deliberation and existing dispositions which influenced social action in this organisational context (Elder-Vass, 2007). Our findings highlighted how athletes can consciously reflect before acting and change or abort their actions in this dialectical process. In particular, the analysis provides fresh insights on how two athletes utilised conscious reflexivity to "fill in" gaps left by dispositions to decide to act in particular ways. This demonstrates the central nature of both dispositions *and* reflexivity in informing and explaining most actions (Elder-Vass, 2012). Overall, we believe this study contributes to the evolving literature base addressing "practical accomplishments of skilled social actors in the course of their day-to-day lives" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 5; Elder-Vass, 2010). Indeed, it is hoped that the novel theoretical and empirical contributions offered in this paper will help researchers, coaches, athletes, and coach developers to critically engage with the central issue of social influence.

Given the inevitable gap between ontological realism and epistemic relativism we recognise that this, as with any research in a critical realist perspective, remains a fallible understanding which is open to contestation and revision (Elder-Vass, 2010). As such, even where readers may disagree with the ontological and epistemological assumptions set out in this study, we hope that the insights provided help to stimulate critical thought and debate about the role of social structure and agency in influencing the action of agents in sporting organisations. Indeed, the dynamics of influence remains a fertile area for future research. Here, we feel that such work could focus on understanding the shared noticing of coaches and others (e.g., assistant coaches, athletes) to understand how this underpins coaches' actions in attempting to endorse specific practices when acting on behalf of norm circles. In reflecting the arguments of Jones and Wallace (2005), further developing our understanding of this topic area will allow us to better understand the gap which often exists between coaches' *intentions* for influence and the *actual* influence of their practices, as well as if,

when and how to close this gap. Here, such inquiry could further utilise Elder-Vass' (2010) theorising (i.e., his concepts of actual, proximal and imagined norm circles) to examine instances where coaches or athletes may misinterpret or behave inappropriately in specific normative environments. Alternatively, the methodological and theoretical stance adopted in the current study could be utilised within other (sporting and non-sporting) contexts to examine its robustness, practical adequacy and utility (Smith, 2018). Such inquiry has the potential to not only enrich our understanding of social influence in sport, but it could also productively contribute to wider sociological concerns and agendas regarding the processes of social influence.

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[i] There is not enough space in this paper to sufficiently review the complexities and nuances of different theorisations of structure/agency and their respective onto-ethico-epistemological positionings. For a review and critique of these positions readers may wish to refer to Crossley (2001), Dreyfus & Rainbow (1983), Elder-Vass (2007, 2010, 2011, 2012), Jenkins (2002), Rawls (1987), Scambler (2006), and Stones (2005).

[ii] For a more detailed discussion of emergentism and its application to social ontology please see Elder-Vass (2010).

[iii] This theory is built upon the assumption that realist ontology and (moderate) social constructionism are compatible with one other and that both are needed to fully explain the influence of social structure. As humans we socially construct (i.e., create) and shape normative practices, however it is real, material groups of people (norm circles) which causally influence our action by storing dispositions in individuals. See Elder-Vass (2012) for a closer examination of these issues.

[iv] Although there is not room to discuss it in this paper, see Elder-Vass (2010, 2012) for a distinction between actual, imagined and proximal norm circles to understand how agents might be wrong about the normative environment that they face.