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Learning to problematize 'the way things are' when coaching female athletes:

'Gender effective coaching' in sport

Introduction

On 23rd January 2018 former Manchester United, Everton and England player Philip Neville was appointed as the England Women's national soccer team Head coach. The appointment was greeted with mixed reaction. Although a respected figure within the game, and seen as a likable perhaps even gentle figure, Neville's appointment was widely questioned amongst the coaching community. This backlash was primarily as a result of his relative coaching inexperience and lack of specific experience coaching female players. Neville's appointment has once more magnified the discussion surrounding the qualities required to best coach female athletes.

So what does it take to coach 'gender-effectively'? In this chapter, we add our informed thoughts as coaching scholars to this important conversation and explore the taken for granted understandings about 'gender effective coaching', particularly in relation to female athletes. In doing so, we encourage the development of coaching frameworks and approaches that challenge some of the binary, limiting understandings of gender and their related coaching and sporting practices. We frame entrenched contemporary truths about female athletes', and their coaches continued uncritical acceptance of them, as particularly problematic and constraining for both female athletes and their coaches. And, given our stance as socio-cultural coaching researchers (Avner, Jones, & Denison,

2014) this is something that we would like to see problematized and re-imagined (Denison, Jones, & Mills, *In press*).

The purpose of this chapter is to use our position as socio-cultural coaching theorists to support those responsible for the development and stewardship of female athletes of all ages by introducing the key concept of problematization, as the first step towards more ethical practice. We will do this by explaining how Anton, our exemplar coach, chose to adopt the key skill/concept of problematization because of his desire to coach in a more 'gender effective manner'. To achieve our aim, we walk alongside Anton and consider how the dominant attitudes and 'best practices' applied in the coaching of women have emerged and how these practices may be limiting gender-effective coaching. We reveal how Anton's nagging doubts helped him identify a problem, and finally we explain how Anton's reflection and engagement with social theory and specifically French philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas surrounding truth, knowledge, and power, allowed him to 'give his problem a name'.

Anton's Story

Anton is a PhD student studying the sociology of sports coaching and a former varsity men's soccer player. Throughout his PhD, Anton has been exposed to various socio-cultural critiques of sport as a privileged site for both the reproduction and the destabilization of problematic gender norms and power relations. He is also now an Assistant Coach in a varsity programme in a major North American University Women's soccer programme – 'The Falcons'.

We join Anton and the Falcons during their post-season in an important play-off game against their big rivals the Bears. The Falcons are leading by a goal with ten minutes to go when Courtney, a third year forward, gives away the ball on the half way line by trying a trick she repeatedly tries in practice (with limited success) rather than choosing to conservatively keep possession. The Bears equalise as a result and then, shortly after, riding the wave of positive momentum the Bears score again just before full time and clinch progress to next week's National finals in San Diego. After the game, Anton observes the girls in the steamy changing room and they are sat in their usual cliques – very quiet – some older ones comforting some of the younger players who were quietly crying. He continues to observe as Mike (Head Coach) enters the room, clearly fuming. However, Mike says very little – just telling the players in a low voice to get changed and get back on the coach as soon as they can.

Anton remembers thinking that Mike very rarely says anything related to the game

during these moments.

On the long coach ride home Mike does not want to talk so Anton sits alone and flips

through his phone looking at the game's associated social media posts. When he has

had enough of looking at the negative reports he sits back into his seat and stares out

the window and reflects upon the game and the aftermath. As the snow covered

prairies zoom past outside Anton continues to think about the day's events.

When I played the men's game there would be water bottles flying and some kind of immediate

letting off of steam. I know that 'old school' approach doesn't really make sense anymore and

let's be honest it never really did – coaching has moved on, but I do think Mike always misses a

real opportunity to challenge and push players so that they may learn and grow from these

experiences. Maybe there is some middle ground to be found. Why does Mike always do this? . I

really don't see how saying nothing is helpful to Courtney's development as a player or the

team's for that matter. These are elite athletes; we don't need to walk on egg shells around them –

let's use these intense moments as opportunities to grow as a team…

Later that evening the Falcon's coach pulls up to their sports training village and the

players wearily disembark in a dejected fashion. Anton watches as Mike stands away

from the players as they collect their kit bags from under the vehicle and trudge off to

their cars. The last image that Anton has of this day is the solitary and hunched figure

of Courtney hanging back, separate from a larger group of players as they disperse into the night.

On Monday morning, with yesterday's defeat on his mind, Anton walks towards the University for his morning class on the socio-cultural dimensions of sport coaching. He has really enjoyed this class which has pushed him to critically reflect on and to question sanctioned, taken for granted 'best coaching practices' and their unintended problematic effects on athletes. For Anton this a new way of thinking about effective coaching and his own coaching practice that he is really excited about. Today's topic of discussion is gender in sport. As the instructor initiates a class discussion on sport as an important site for both the reproduction and destabilizing of gendered norms and power relations, and the important roles coaches can and should play in problematizing gendered sporting practices, Anton is suddenly brought back to yesterday's game and Mike's decision to stay silent.

I think this is all starting to make sense to me - that is, Mike's choosing to remain silent instead of providing Courtney and the other players with valuable immediate feedback. Mike probably thinks that he is doing the right thing by not providing feedback because he is operating under the assumption that female players can't handle it – that they are somewhat too weak/fragile and that they need to be treated differently than male athletes. Wow, this class on gendered power relations in sport is really bringing it home. Perhaps this old idea about the female psyche and

what motivates female players is holding us back as a coaching staff and as a team. I wonder

what I could do differently as a member of the coaching team.

As Anton walks home and gets ready for the night's training session, he is still

thinking about how he, as a coach, can disrupt some of these gendered assumptions

and norms and what type of feedback would be most effective for Courtney and the

team to learn and develop from experiences similar to Sunday's defeat.

Well, based on this past Sunday and multiple other instances, it seems to me that Courtney

really struggles with identifying key moments and zones in the field and choosing when to take

risks and when to be more conservative with the ball. I think that we, as coaches, need to help her

to identify and recognize where and when risk-taking is acceptable and encouraged and when it

is not. However, I also really don't want to stifle that risk taking attitude she has because that is

what sets her apart as a player, the ability to spark big plays. The last thing we want is a bunch

of robot players on the field who can't think for themselves and are afraid of taking risks and

losing the ball because they will get yelled at.

As Anton pulls into the training grounds parking lot, he decides he will speak to Mike

tonight about how they, as coaches, can communicate/provide feedback to players'

more effectively and in ways that challenge some of these problematic gendered

constructs about the female athlete that they discussed in class. Depending on how

Mike reacts, he decides he will also offer to run a practice session to help Courtney and

other players make better decisions on the field by asking them to react and problem-solve based on different 'game-like' scenarios.

There is no point in just telling them what we think, they should or should not do. Courtney and the other players need to figure it out and problem solve together. After all, they are the ones on the field, not us!

Making sense of Anton's story

Informed discussion about how to coach any population needs to recognise that the experiences of athletes do not occur in a vacuum, but rather that they occur within the broader historical-socio-cultural contexts of society—unless taking an egg from its omelette is an easy thing to do. These are contexts that have been shaped over time by dominant discourses (ways of knowing) and power relations (ways of doing) (Markula & Pringle, 2006). How are we to make sense of Anton's story against this backdrop? Before we consider how and why Anton arrived at his 'problem' and how this set him up to address a coaching quandary, we need to first contextualise his coaching experiences. Therefore, in the section that follows, we briefly establish the contemporary global context of female sport and move on to review the existing 'best practices' for how to coach females.

The context of female sport

Anton's story is set in contemporary times, but female sport has changed significantly over the last fifty years. In 1975 Patsy Neal and Thomas Tutko lamented

that women were being denied opportunities to compete in sport and were being

"deprived by a cultural lag and a society with double standards" (Neal & Tutko, 1975,

p. 52). Forty years later, predominantly as a result of 'Title IX', the single most dramatic

change in the world of sport had been the increased participation of girls and women

(Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). However, as Cooky et al (2013, p. 203) claimed,

"despite the tremendous increased participation of girls and women in sport at the high

school, collegiate, and professional level...sport continues to be by, for, and about men".

Increased participation after all, does not mean equity, it just means more women are

playing sport. Therefore, while opportunities for women to participate and be coached

have increased over recent times, there remains a need to develop more effective and

ethical frameworks and approaches to coaching women in sport (LaVoi, 2016).

Established and contemporary research that has focused on the social context of

women's sport has explored how the 'different nature of women' (derived from

historical-socio- culturally constructed norms and sustained by bio-medical readings of

the female body) continues to be reinforced in sports settings (Cooky et al., 2013;

Hargreaves, 1994). These social constructions have led to the marginalisation of

individuals of all genders that do not conform to the expected masculine and

heterosexual norms (Messner, 1992), and the continued sexualisation of the

contemporary female athlete (Bernstein, 2002; Cox & Thompson, 2000) for consumption

via multiple media streams (Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013). However, while sports

historians Osborne and Skillen (2010, p. 192) have noted "females have not yet achieved

equality with their male counterparts in the realm of sport", it is also important to

acknowledge that the site of sport is also where historical norms have, at times,

somewhat successfully, been challenged. Sport is therefore also a location where binary

assumptions regarding gender continue to be contested and, in the contemporary case

of South African middle distance athlete Caster Semenya, completely destabilised

(Buzuvis, 2010).

Best practice in the coaching of female athletes

It is clear from Anton's reflections about Mike's choices that he is conscious of

certain assumptions and associated 'best practices' that underpin the female sports

coaching context. However, what exactly are Mike's assumptions about 'best practices'

and where do they come from? So far, we have established that the context of female

sport within which Anton operates are governed by broader relations of power in

society. In this section, before we can move on to talk about Anton's process of

problematisation, we must briefly 'map out' the 'truths' that have come to dominate the

coaching of females (the 'truths' that Mike is relying upon) and where they come from.

It is clear from Anton's story that Mike has a well-established understanding regarding

what he perceives his female players to be capable of. So where do Mike's assumptions

about the female athlete come from?

It is easy to find texts that identify female specific physiological (Ireland & Ott, 2004), biomechanical (Hermann et al., 2008) and psychological (Duda, & Marks, 2014) characteristics that are assumed to ensure the healthy and successful development of the female athlete as separate and different from men's. Numerous mainstream resources exist about how to best develop, condition, and instruct the female athlete's body in competitive sport, including in soccer (Stokell, 2002). It is generally accepted amongst sport scientists that female athletes are faced with unique situations based upon their physiology (Ireland & Ott, 2004). Clearly the cumulative effect of the large body of sports research has significant implications for coaching women – namely that it reinforces and solidifies even, the general belief that female bodies cannot be exposed to and are simply not capable of completing the same training practices as male bodies.

It is not only the physical make up of women that has been effectively pigeon holed by sports science, indeed, the psychological characteristics of females have also been identified as different to those of their male counterparts. Newton, Duda, and Yin (2000) found that fostering a 'task-involving' team climate was more likely to be productive than fostering that of an 'ego-involving' climate when attempting to positively influence the motivation of female athletes. This common sense understanding perhaps explains why so many coaches work and adopt practices based upon the assumption that females are more motivated by the social and relational aspects of sport versus males who are more performance and competition driven. For

example, Avner, Denison, and Markula's (2017) research has recently identified a clear

difference in how coaches provide feedback and instruction to female athletes - that

coaches are less likely to shout across a room at female athletes, rather preferring to take

them aside and provide individual feedback. This finding is important as it highlights

just one example of exactly how established gender norms influence coaches' decisions

about developing effective relationships with their athletes, in this case that the female

psyche is more fragile and needs protecting in the team coaching setting. Clearly, the

choices made by Head Coach Mike in Anton's story are a strong example of how this

'truth' about the female athlete has implications for coaching practice.

Since sport scientists advise that the moving female body and mind works

differently to that of a male, it is likely that coaches (like Mike) will come to assume that

females need to be "treated differently", less harshly, with extra care or special gloves.

Often the findings from sport science potentially legitimises the prescription of

alternative management in the instruction and development of the female sportsperson.

As sports scientists Ireland and Ott (2004, p. 281) pointed out, there are fundamental

"differences between the sexes which must be considered when caring for the female

athlete". This sustains the 'truth' that while male athletes should be" trained", female

athletes should be "cared" for.

Where does this leave us? Well, sports coaching researchers who are familiar

with the concept of the social construction of knowledge may well already engage in

problematising certain entrenched coaching practices and attitudes. However, coaches

who are less likely to be exposed to different perspectives might not know how to

question many of the things that they do. And, because of the dominance of sport

science has as a 'privileged knowledge' in coach education programs these coaches are

much more likely to practice any sport science research finding as a cast iron truth

(Avner et al., 2017; Denison et al., 2013). As Anton's story has shown, from our socio-

cultural perspective, we suggest that there are significant consequences of solely relying

upon what the above sports science knowledge suggests about coaching females.

Reliance on this knowledge has numerous effects. According to the logic installed by

sports physiology and medicine, female bodies are less able to withstand the

physiological demands of certain bodily practices. Therefore, that the female athlete's

psyche, character, and mentality needs nurturing rather than challenging appears to

follow as an unquestioned correlating 'truth'. A problematic, binary understanding of

what it means to be a female athlete is legitimised, and this legitimised logic guides and

governs the practices and attitudes that make up the fabric of the contemporary

coaching of females. Put another way, we see this arrangement as having detrimental

consequences for female athletes because, in sports contexts, coaches seem to

uncritically internalize sports science knowledge (Avner et al., 2017). For example,

coaches like Head Coach Mike tend to rely on firmly established truths about what so-

called 'naturally' drives and motivates athletes of different genders.

As we have been keen to point out in this section this arrangement then translates into assumed 'best coaching practices' perpetuating and rarely challenging the limiting status quo. It is of course important to acknowledge that we do not dismiss the numerous advantages that sports science brings to the preparation, development, and instruction of female athletes. However, we do suggest that the practicing coach reconsiders how automatically adhering to existing assumptions about the female body in sport might be hampering their coaching and in turn, their athletes' development. In the next section, we move on to discuss how Anton developed this broader awareness and because of his own nagging doubts was able to identify a 'problem', and because of his exposure to alternative thinking, was able to give this 'problem' a name and see how he might be able to do things differently in the future.

Learning from Anton's problematization

To develop as flexible and open-minded coaches, first, individuals need to be willing to problematize the effects of entrenched practices and attitudes found within their coaching context (Denison & Avner, 2011). In the past we have created a coach education resource specifically designed to help coaches to develop problematisation as a key skill (Jones, Denison, & Gearity, 2016). More recently, we have suggested that more coaching researchers walk alongside coaches (Konoval, Denison, & Mills, *in press*) and "actively work with coaches to provide new types of knowledges with different coaching tool kits" (Avner, et al., 2017, p. 26). Anton's story has been intentionally

choreographed to show how through a process of reflection backed up with exposure to critical thinking in his graduate class, he identified and then challenged the dominant understandings underpinning how to 'manage' the athletic female in his immediate sporting context. In this instance, Anton, acting as a reflective coach, challenged existing assumptions based on a gendered and narrow perception of how female athletes 'should be treated', and as a result were preventing the team, and Courtney, from learning and developing. In keeping with the idea that ethical practices will not come from substituting one dominant model of truth for another, in our example, we can see that, thankfully, Anton did not rely upon returning to the promotion of coaching practices that he had experienced as a male soccer player. Rather, Anton used critical reflection to identify and problematize a problem and to catalyse a thought process that can lead to new, more effective and ethical coaching feedback practices. Anton's hope was that his reflective process might allow for both individual and team growth, whilst avoiding a reliance upon the prevailing and problematic traditional gender norms and problematic dominant disciplinary training and coaching practices relied upon by his Head Coach Mike.

Foucault and problematisation

The central aim of Michel Foucault's work was understanding how humans acquired knowledge about themselves and how certain human practices have come to be accepted and naturalized. He also sought to understand the various effects of these

knowledges and practices – he wanted to know, not only why we do what we do, but also what what we do does (Foucault, 1988). Foucault's aim was to show how discourses and power work together to limit and constrain people's perceptions of what they do in order to broaden, challenge and then change these perceptions. One of the ways that Foucault achieved this aim was by articulating how knowledge and power worked together to privilege only certain ways of being (Markula & Pringle, 2006). For Foucault, power was relational, as in power was not a possession that someone or something had over another, rather power was a strategy that was always performed and so was always producing meaning in whatever context it was practiced. Foucault identified how modern power made people believe that certain knowledges and their associated practices were 'true' and therefore undoubtedly effective. In exposing this artificial and constructed logic, Foucault suggested that their associated practices may, at times, have problematic effects.

So, how do Anton's actions and experiences line up with Foucault's project? Sometimes it seems that once various beliefs, values and characteristics are established in society as 'true' (not least in the realm of sports coaching) and that it can seem impossible to shift or change them. However, as Foucauldians we advocate that it remains essential to challenge these 'truths' if they are problematic because they if no one does, they will keep undermining coaches and their athletes without anyone being aware of what the real problem is. In line with this ethos, we recommend here that

coaches heighten their awareness surrounding how knowledges and practices are socially constructed – i.e., to begin to understand how their knowledges and practices are not true and therefore fixed but socially constructed and therefore flexible.

By using Anton's example, we have outlined how knowledge and power have combined to establish 'unquestioned truths' about the competencies and capabilities associated with female athletes. We have also endeavoured to show how these 'truths' legitimise specific approaches to coaching females – with restrictive consequences. Relations of power and their effects are often extremely hard to identify, so coaches need to understand as much of his theoretical tool-kit as possible so that they can broaden their awareness, or in simple terms; "see-more, think-broader and do-better". We recommend that by learning to problematize, or at the very least opening one's mind to the alternative logic promoted in these pages, the coach will begin to think differently.

It is clear that contemporary female sporting experiences cannot be taken out of the socio-cultural context within which they occur. With this in mind, we strongly believe that, like Anton, encouraging coaches towards using socio-culturally informed ideas/strategies is essential if we are to help them in their stewardship of athletes of all demographics – including those of all genders. Therefore, in this chapter we have used a socio-cultural lens to consider Anton as positive exemplar of a reflective coach who has thought about and problematised the implications of the practices common to their

coaching space. It has not been our intention to set out a definitive checklist or model

for 'best practice' in women's coaching. Indeed, as Foucauldian scholars we would

warn against this 'game of truth' (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Rather, we wanted to use

this opportunity to promote the applied way of thinking about 'gender-effective'

coaching that Anton employed as one that we believe can answer the call for more

ethical and productive outcomes in the women's sports coaching/physical activity

setting (Davis & Weaving, 2010). In doing so it has also been our intention to move

coaches from their 'absolutes' to 'more flexible and fluid' notions of what is possible,

true or effective in relation to coaching athletes of different genders in all sports

contexts.

We would like to conclude by highlighting the important notion– namely that no

dominant knowledge surrounding how to coach people of any gender should claim

ultimate authority or be considered as 'set in stone'. Rather, that any coaching

knowledge should be considered as fluid, and as such must be open to change (Denison

& Avner, 2011). We are of the firm belief that any alternative, marginalised, or re-

imagined idea about how to coach 'gender-effectively' should be welcomed and

embraced IF it has been arrived at through a careful period of informed reflection. After

all, we have spent a great deal of time and effort encouraging coaches like Anton to

'think with Foucault' (Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Denison, Mills, &

Jones, 2013; Mills & Denison, 2013).

Implications for practice

- When designing their practices and when making decisions about how to relate to their athletes, coaches must be prepared to question and problematise 'best practices' that are informed by existing cultural, physiological, and psychological assumptions surrounding gender.

- A 'gender effective coach' understands that to rely on, rather than to regularly question, these existing practices and assumptions, is an example of 'docile coaching' that will produce 'docile athletes'. A scenario that is well recognised as having limiting consequences (Shogan, 1999, 2007; etc.)

Therefore, to avoid being a 'docile coach'…

- A 'gender effective coach' should keep an eye out for any unwanted and limiting consequences of normalised taken for granted practices and approaches to coaching women within their immediate coaching context.

- A gender effective coach should equip themselves with the tools to not only identify problems but to 'give them a name' so they can be avoided.

- A 'gender effective coach' must constantly reflect upon the choices and practices they choose to adopt in their day to day interactions with athletes.

- A 'gender effective coach' should always be willing to consider the merits of alternative practices that are not underpinned by problematic and normalised assumptions surrounding the male and female body and mind.

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