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Am I just not good enough?

The creation, development and questioning of a high performance coaching identity

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While the career experiences and trajectories of various sports workers have received increased scholarly attention, those of professional coaches have, in comparison, received scant consideration. This paper focuses on the career experiences of Maeve (a pseudonym), a high performance coach, and the critical incidents related to the creation, development, and, ultimately, questioning of her professional identity. Data were collected through a series of narrative-biographical interviews and were subject to a process of iterative data analysis. The results indicated that her significant investment into her coaching self, combined with the vagaries and uncertain nature of work in high performance coaching, led her to experience a biographical disruption that interrupted the narrative coherence of her coaching life. The findings add further credence to recent critiques of only understanding and representing coaching careers in a linear and chronically staged fashion

Key words: career; high-performance sport; coaching; identity, narrative-biographical

Introduction

While researchers in the sociology of work have increasingly considered the subjective experiences of employees in various organisations (e.g., Burchell et al., 1999; Collinson, 2003; Doogan, 2001; Kalleberg, 2009; Sennett, 1998), Roderick (2006) lamented the lack of corresponding attention that had been paid to sports workers (e.g., athletes, coaches, referees, support staff, administrators). Indeed, while developments in the mainstream literature have contributed to an increased sociological understanding of “precarious work” and “insecure workers” (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 1) in neo-liberal societies (Bauman, 2007), there remains a paucity of such inquiry within sporting contexts. This is somewhat surprising as sports workers might arguably experience careers that are not only “relatively short term in nature”, but also include contending with “the ever-present possibility of career failure and rejection” (Roderick, 2006, p. 246; Andrews & Silk, 2012). Equally, it could be argued that what is true of actor subjectivity in the workplace in general, such as fears about the threat of unemployment, is also applicable for consideration in the careers of sports workers (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne, & Nelson, 2013; Roderick, 2006; Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, in press;).

In illustrating the above points, studies (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Parker, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006, 2013a, 2013b) addressing the careers of professional football players have highlighted how individual players encounter working in a marketplace where injury, ageing, short term contracts, managerial change, and a large pool of surplus high quality labour combine to produce a strong and continuing sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Such investigations have also provided insights into the inextricable relationship between self and work, the way in which talent and performance is socially determined, as well as the difficulties that players,

especially neophytes, face in terms of their career planning and development (McGillivray, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005; Roderick, 2006).

Interestingly, the critical attention afforded to the careers of professional coaches (i.e., coaches who are employed on a full-time basis) has been relatively sparse. The focus on charting the progress from neophyte to expert practitioner, which characterised much of the early literature on this topic, may have unwittingly led to coaching careers being represented in rather functionalistic and linear ways (Christensen, 2013). Furthermore, while some studies have increasingly recognised the social complexity of coaching in a range of sports (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2013; Denison, 2007, 2010; Jones, Potrac, Cushion & Ronglan, 2011; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac et al., 2013), there remains a paucity of knowledge addressing the interactions that occur between coaches, their organisational contexts, the working conditions that they experience, and the impact that these interactions may subsequently have on their identities and career trajectories (Bayer, Brinkkjaer, Plauborg, & Rolls, 2009; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Norman, 2010, 2012, 2013; Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b; Sage, 1989;). That is, we know relatively little about how professional coaches experience working in environments in which their interactions and relationships with key contextual stakeholders are frequently “bound up in the production and consumption of [sporting] performances” (Roderick, 2006, p. 246; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002)

Some initial research (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Norman, 2010, 2012, 2013; Potrac 2009a; Potrac et al., 2013) has hinted at these notions. For example, in drawing upon Bauman’s thesis of liquid modernity, Potrac et al.’s (2013) autoethnographic work not only highlighted how the lead author understood his job security to be directly related to the perceived quality of his last coaching performance, but also how he

subsequently adopted individualistic and short term working strategies and afforded little trust to his employer and colleagues. Equally, the work of Thompson et al. (in press) has considered a neophyte coach's attempts to develop, advance, and maintain his work-place identity within the context of a professional soccer club. Aside from these and a few other notable exceptions (e.g., Jones et al., 2004; Norman, 2010, 2012, 2013), we know very little about how coaches understand the sometimes ambiguous and messy nature of their careers, nor the ways in which their respective coaching identities are developed, advanced, sustained, or, indeed, disrupted.

In order to somewhat redress this situation, this study focuses on the experiences of Maeve (a pseudonym), a high performance athletics coach, and the critical incidents that related to the creation, development, and, ultimately, questioning of her coaching identity. Through the adoption of a narrative-biographic approach (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009a), this study seeks to chart Maeve's experiences in her work as a coach. It begins with her entrance into coaching and ends with her current predicament as a disillusioned and disappointed individual, who faces an uncertain future to her coaching career. Indeed, we strove to provide some initial exploratory insights into the ways in which one coach understood her organisational contexts and working conditions to have influenced career trajectory and accompanying sense of identity (Bayer, Brinkkjaer, Plauborg, & Rolls, 2009; Sage, 1989; Salmela, 1995). We hope that Maeve's story, and our subsequent analysis of it, can stimulate wider discussions and scholarly inquiry into this neglected area of coaching science. Equally, while the focus on one individual life may be somewhat problematic, we believe that such accounts do more than focus on "isolated personal agency" (Thompson et al., in press). Instead, they offer a platform upon which to more fruitfully challenge the rhetoric and, from our perspective, often

seamless representations of coaches and their respective coaching careers than has been the case to date (Christensen, 2013).

Methodology

In keeping with the interpretive approach utilised by other coaching researchers (Jones, 2006, 2009; Potrac, Jones, & Nelson, 2014; Santos, Jones & Mesquita, 2013), our intention was to explore how Maeve understood the choices, actions, and events that comprised her coaching career. As such, the emphasis here was on developing an empathetic understanding of individual experience rather than engaging in a quest to provide any universal, or nomothetic, generalisations regarding the formation and questioning of a coaching identity. That said, we recognise how this work may provide the reader with what Williams (2000) refers to as *moderatum* (i.e., moderate) generalisations. This form of generalisation is grounded in the relative cultural consistency of the social world and, relatedly, social life (Williams, 2000). This outlook also reflects Stake's (1980) notion of naturalistic generalisation, which refers to "a partially intuitive process arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context" (p. 69).

A narrative-biographical approach was utilised to explore Maeve's subjective understandings of her coaching identity and accompanying career trajectory (Kelchtermans, 2009a). The narrative-biographical inquiry combines the traditions of life history and biographical research, with narrative approaches to professional practice, in order to illuminate some of the ways in which individuals understand, and give meaning to, their career experiences (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009a). This interpretive methodology is then committed to exploring the "continuity between the past, present, and as yet unrealised future", as well as the "transforming of human

experience into meaning” (Berger & Quinney, 2005, p. 4). From our perspective, it allowed us to consider Maeve’s experiences as a coach in relation to “a politics of identity” (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002, p. 766). Indeed, the emphasis within this study was not on examining her career in relation to the “chain of possible and actually acquired hierarchical positions”, but, instead, her subjective experiences of her coaching life over time, the decisions she made, and the impact she considered these to have on her identity as a coach (Kelchtermans, 2009a, p. 29; Thompson et al., in press).

Methods and Procedure

The narrative-biographical data were collected through three formal semi-structured interviews with Maeve. These interviews were supplemented by telephone conversations and emails which focussed on clarifying and/or developing information from the formal interviews. These phone conversations were not audio-taped; rather, they were documented in field notes, which served to re-conceive and elaborate on what was being learned - a means to “rethink, undo, and shape the ongoing research process and products” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 18). The ethical implications of her involvement in the study were discussed with Maeve in a preliminary meeting. In line with the host university’s ethical guidelines, Maeve agreed to the interviews being audio-taped, was assured that her identity would remain confidential, that access to the research tapes, emails, and field notes would be restricted to her and the research team, and that she was free to withdraw from the study at any time. In keeping with ethical guidelines, we also used pseudonyms, changed dates and censored certain events in the construction of Maeve’s narrative (Boruch & Cecil, 1979, Renzetti & Lee, 1993).

The first author conducted the interviews, while the second author acted as a critical friend throughout the related processes of data collection, analysis, and the writing of

Maeve's story. At the time of the interviews, Maeve (pseudonym) was in the second year of a four year contract as an Assistant Coach in a high performance athletics programme. In her late forties, Maeve's full-time coaching story had spanned two decades, and evolved from a volunteer role where she worked with novice athletes to a full-time occupation that included her engagement with World Champions. Further details regarding Maeve's career and coaching aspirations are provided in the results section of this paper

The initial interview not only focused on generating some background information regarding Maeve and her coaching career, but it also served as a means to develop a rapport between the lead researcher and the participant (Josselson, 2013). The following interviews then addressed themes related to her decision to pursue coaching as a career, the development of her coaching career and aspirations, the highlights and frustrations that she has experienced in her coaching career, and, finally, her understandings of her current situation and the career choices that she may make. While the interviews did have an agenda, they were purposely semi-structured to ensure there was flexibility to explore additional areas that arose in the conversation (Freebody, 2004).

The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and Maeve was given a copy of the transcript to confirm accuracy, not only in terms of what words were spoken and what information was shared, but also in the meaning of what was expressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Stake, 1995;). Maeve was also invited to comment on the various iterations of this manuscript, especially in terms of the narrative of her coaching career and the accompanying theoretical sense-making that we presented. Not only was Maeve very much involved in our storied re-telling of her coaching experiences, she also approved the final representation that we developed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was an iterative one, which required us to alternate between etic and emic readings of the collected data (Tracy, 2013). The emic (or emergent) approach required us to develop an empathetic understanding of Maeve's experiences by immersing ourselves in the data throughout the interview process (Tracy, 2013). It also entailed the labelling of pieces of data that, from our perspective, addressed Maeve's understandings of her career trajectory and coaching identity. In particular, we examined the data as it related to critical phases of time, critical incidents, and critical people within her coaching career (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009a). These critical incidents, phases of time, and people were determined by Maeve's identification of them as being meaningful, our interpretations of particular events, people or phases of time being critical to Maeve, as well as when Maeve linked an incident person or phase of time to her coaching identity (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009).

The analysis of the data also included an etic component, which involved us considering Maeve's experiences in relation to a range of existing theories, models, and explanations (Tracy, 2013). Following the completion of the first interview, analytical memos were used to make initial connections to various theoretical concepts that we believed might explain the key issues that we identified within the data. For example, Maeve's discussion of the impact of the feedback that she received from other coaches and selectors was initially linked to Kelchtermans' (1993, 2002, 2009a, 2009b) work on the personal-interpretative framework, especially as this related to professional self-understanding. Our reading of Kelchtermans' work here also informed the ongoing questioning of Maeve's experiences that were explored in the subsequent interviews, emails, and telephone conversations. There was from our perspective, at least, a virtuous relationship between data and Kelchtermans' (2009a, 2009b) theorising. Equally we

sought to understand Maeve's experience using existing literature (e.g. Cregan, Bloom & Reid, 2007; Nash and Sproule, 2009; Schinke, Bloom & Salmela, 1995;) that have investigated coaches' career trajectories. Similar to the work of Nelson et al. (2013), this proved to be a much messier process than is often depicted in the literature, as we at times disagreed on the utility or deployment of particular sense-making concepts. As such, some theoretical concepts were considered but ultimately rejected in terms of their explanatory utility (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Tracy, 2013; Wolcott, 2005). We did, however, reach a consensus in terms of the interpretation of Maeve's experiences that is offered in this paper. Relatedly, we, of course, recognise that our decisions here were undoubtedly influenced by our "respective disciplinary knowledge, our epistemological and theoretical beliefs", as well as our readings of empirical and "theoretical texts that occurred before, as well as during" this particular study (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 474). As such, we appreciate that other researchers may have interpreted Maeve's experiences using different theoretical frameworks (Nelson et al., 2013).

The results and accompanying theoretical discussion are organised into three separate yet progressive sections. The first "*Time to change: From athlete to coach*" explores a critical time in Maeve's career, in this case her transition from elite athlete to a coach. Building on this, "*Career entry and buying in': The development of a coaching identity*" marks Maeve's initial commitment to, and desire to become established in, her coaching career. "*A change in self-narrative*" focuses on a career crisis as Maeve perceives herself to have failed in her quest to achieve her desired career goal. Finally, a reflective conclusion draws together the principal points made in this study, including its contribution to our knowledge in coaching science, its limitations, and our suggestions for future research on this topic.

Results and Discussion

Time to change: from athlete to coach

Although Maeve had an active childhood, her competitive sporting story began in her 20's when she was introduced to athletics.

I'm from a family that just does sport in a non-competitive way... I mean nothing was this sort of you go train, you just do it because it's enjoyable. So I sort of came from that...I played hockey at school...played tennis because we all learned tennis but I never really went training... It wasn't until I was halfway through a university degree and I went to the orientation day for the university and saw they had athletics and that's how it started. I started training very seriously.

Athletics appealed to Maeve as "I just liked the concentration and I really liked to run." Consequently, Maeve began to devote much of her time to the sport. Her enjoyment and hard work paid off as she began to excel in progressively demanding levels of competition. Indeed, Maeve's sporting achievements did not go unnoticed and, in her late 20's, she was selected to be a reserve on the World Championship team. Not only did selection as a reserve give Maeve confidence about her abilities as an athlete, it also strengthened her belief that it was possible for her to compete at the Olympic Games, her ultimate dream. However, the following year she found herself out of the World Championship squad as a result of a last minute change in the team. Disappointed with her de-selection, Maeve began to question whether her athletic abilities were of the standard required to compete at the subsequent World Championships and, ultimately, the Olympic Games. By now, Maeve was in her early 30s, and she recalled this time as a crossroads in her athletic career. In particular, her plateauing performance levels led her to believe that she had left it "too late" to fulfil her Olympic ambitions. While she thought that she had given high performance sport "a good shot" she ultimately felt that she was not "going to make it to the Olympics as an athlete. I was not going to get any better – I was the best I was going to be." Consequently, Maeve began to have reservations and anxieties about her future. Her

strong connection to her identity as an athlete however, led her to feel that she had ‘unfinished business’ in the sport.

Career entry and ‘buying in’: The development of a coaching identity

Believing the end of her athletic career was in sight, Maeve felt especially vulnerable in terms of her next steps and future career direction. To help her to decide whether it was time to end her career as an athlete, Maeve sought the opinion of her coach, a person to whom she had attached significant respect and reverence. (“He was just a brilliant coach. Every session I had with him was just fantastic, you’d be in the zone all the time. There were very few sessions that weren’t enjoyable....”). Maeve’s respect for her coach led her to place significant value on his opinion and it was, perhaps unsurprising that this meeting proved critical in the reformulation of her career plans: “[He said] you’re not going to [the Olympics] as an athlete but you’ve got a chance to get there as a coach.”

The conversation with her coach marked a significant turning point in Maeve’s life as it opened up the prospect of a career opportunity and direction that she had not previously considered. In relation to her coach’s offer of a full-time coaching position in a newly created sports academy, Maeve commented, “I sort of thought I’m not going to make it as an athlete... like I’ve left it too late. If I’d really wanted to have been good I should have done this when I was 19 and not when I’m 31.” Her thoughts about the need to engage in a new career direction not only reflected her increasing questioning of her physical capabilities as an athlete then, but also her coach’s decision to offer her a full-time coaching position. That is, her admiration for him not only helped her to envision coaching as a potential career, but because he offered her the position, Maeve believed that he thought that she was capable of success in such a role. In this regard, it

could be argued that Maeve afforded this coach a degree of referent power (French & Raven, 1959; Jones, Potrac & Armour, 2004). Her respect for him as a ‘person’ meant that his feedback and suggestions really mattered to her in terms of how she thought about herself and, relatedly, the decisions and choices that she made about her future (Jones et al., 2004; Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b). Today, she continues to hold him in high esteem:

I love [Head coach’s] coaching. So I guess I wanted to do that thing of getting in [the athlete’s] head. I’m just trying to think if I had any other coach that came near what he did but I don’t think so. I think he was the only one who did that. Now I’ll be in the gym but I’m not the one saying anything... I mean it’s such a small group and I think that they don’t need two voices... even though [Head coach] and I would probably be saying exactly the same, maybe slightly different words.

While Maeve’s serious consideration of coaching as a career path primarily arose through the relationship and interactions that she had with her coach, she was also influenced by her previous positive experience as a volunteer coach. She commented:

I was always coaching. Like [I coached athletes in] university competitions... there were [also] two [secondary] schools that had kind of started training once a week and I was looking after them a bit... And then I did a bit of coaching with disabled athletes... and it was really exciting to see that...what [I] did [as a coach] really paid off [in terms of athlete success].

Here, Maeve’s positive experience as an athlete and her enjoyment as volunteer coach were also contributory factors in helping her envisage a career as a coach. Coaching also supported Maeve’s sport-related identity and allowed her social support system (i.e. the valued relationships with friends and colleagues that she had met in the sport) to remain intact (Lavalley, Grove & Gordon, 1997). As such, Maeve’s decision to become a coach was not simply due to a position vacancy, rather, the position also fitted within her view of herself at that moment in time (Allin & Humberstone, 2006).

Upon formally accepting the coaching position in the sports academy, Maeve retired from competition and took charge of a group of twenty athletes. The athletes were males and females between the ages of 12 and 17 who had been recruited through

a talent identification programme. “The whole programme was about getting these kids to the Olympics,” which complemented Maeve’s personal Olympic dream.

The acceptance of this coaching position furthered the development of her identity as Maeve transitioned from “thinking as an athlete to thinking as a coach.” Here, it could be argued that adapting to a new role required Maeve to not only make sense of her new position, but to simultaneously develop an identity which bridged the gap between herself (i.e. her current capabilities as a coach) and her work environment (i.e. her expectations of her self in a coaching role) (Ibarra, 1999). Like other neophyte coaches (e.g., Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Jones et al., 2004), Maeve responded to this challenge by drawing upon her existing experiences of participating in a high performance athletics programme, her observations of other coaches and athletes, as well as the values and attitudes she had gleaned from others. In Maeve’s case, her new network of social relations (i.e. the athletes who only knew her as a coach) also helped facilitate the formation of a coaching identity. In particular, working with these athletes allowed Maeve to trial possible ‘selves’ and select or discard them based on her experience and the meaningful feedback she received from them (Ibarra, 1999; Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b; ; Yost, Strube & Bailey, 1992).

Maeve enjoyed a particularly productive period in this coaching role, with many of the athletes that she coached going on to enjoy high levels of competitive success. Indeed Maeve reflected, “[during that time] the athletes went on to medal [at international events] each year.” To Maeve then, the selection of these athletes to the World Championships suggested that her coaching practices were working and also served to reinforce her burgeoning coaching identity. Interestingly, this finding also highlights how, at this relatively early stage of her coaching career, Maeve believed the development and successes of her athletes to be something over which she had a large

degree of influence. That is, she enjoyed a high internal locus of control (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b).

Further validation of her coaching occurred when she was selected to coach the junior national team. Certainly, the increasing responsibility and a sense of her own development led Maeve to feel a sense of competence and a strong connection to her role. She reflected, “I think I was very much considered as really good in that role... and really good working with that age athlete.” Thus, selection to be a coach for the junior national team also marked a significant turning point in Maeve’s professional identity, as she “now viewed [her]self as a coach.”

Maeve spent four years as a national junior coach, with several athletes achieving success under her guidance. Following this, she was appointed to be a coach of the under 23 national team. Maeve viewed the move from junior coach to coach of the under 23 squad as a promotion that indicated that others (i.e., the selectors) felt that she was “good at [her] job.” This perception was further reinforced when, in the following year, Maeve was given the role of head coach of the under 23 women’s squad. “It was not only a really good year [in terms of athlete success], but [also] because I was working with two other coaches, which was really fun.” This interaction with the other coaches positively affected Maeve’s perception of herself as a coach. While the recognition that Maeve received from the national selectors increased the affinity she had with her role, it also gave her a ‘major boost’ as she saw her goal of coaching at the Olympics as now being something that was achievable. This was reinforced by an increase in the number of athletes who were choosing to transfer to her club “because the athletes I had coached had won.” Certainly, the actions of the selectors and athletes provided Maeve with confirmation and confidence that what she was doing was being perceived as working.

Maeve's experiences could be understood in relation to Kelchtermans' (1993, 2009a, 2009b) work addressing professional self-understanding, which not only refers to the understanding that an individual may have of his or her 'self' at a particular point in time, but also the ways in which ongoing interactions and experiences influence and impact upon an individual's sense of self. Of particular relevance here, are his notions of 'self-image' and 'self-esteem'. Self-image can be understood to refer to Maeve's typification, or image, of herself as a coach. This is not only based on her own self-perception, but also the messages and perceptions that others (e.g., coaches, athletes, and selectors) mirrored back to her. Closely related to self-image is self-esteem. This is principally concerned with an individual's (i.e., Maeve) appreciation of how well, or not, he or she is performing in a particular job or role, Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b) distinguishes self-image from self-esteem through the latter's emphasis on the filtering and interpretation of feedback. Specifically, the focus is on the way in which a coach may, for example, consider some individuals' or groups' feedback to matter more than others. In Maeve's story, the feedback she received from selectors in terms of recognising her success and promoting her as a coach contributed to her experiencing high levels of job satisfaction and fulfilment, as well as helping her to feel increasingly at ease with her identity as a good or 'proper' coach (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, in progress; Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b).

Maeve's progression from junior to under 23 head coach also contributed to her perception that her career existed within an environment in which mobility was rewarded with increased income and enhanced status. Certainly, the role of paid work cannot be undervalued in identity formation (Barnes & Parry, 2004). In Maeve's case,

... the first six months I wasn't paid at all and I had some other silly job on the other side of town...[then] I think I was on £7,000 for six months and then it went up to £13,000 but [several years later] I was on a salary that was starting to look like a salary, but still nothing you buy a house with!

In addition to strengthening her coaching identity, the increase in salary and additional responsibilities led Maeve to believe that she was progressing in her career. Maeve commented: “if you’re on a pathway and you do well at that you should move on.” This was reinforced when Maeve was asked to coach both the under 23 and the senior World Championship teams. Maeve viewed this appointment as significant in her coaching career as she felt she was finally “crossing over from being labelled as a junior/under 23” to having the credibility to work with the senior athletes. She was given the task of helping athletes achieve qualification places for the Olympics. To Maeve, this meant if the senior athletes on her squad qualified for the Olympic Games, she would be in good standing to be selected as their coach. At last, she believed that the fulfilment of her coaching ambitions were finally within in touching distance. At this time, Maeve’s immersion in her work also led to an increased affinity with her role as a coach. When commenting on the time she invested in her work, she noted that “I work[ed] triple time... what else [did] I do? Not a lot!”

At this stage of her coaching career, she arguably understood her ‘future perspectives’ to be very positive in nature. According to Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b), the concept of future perspectives is primarily concerned with how individual’s see themselves as practitioners in the years ahead, as well as the feelings that accompany these thoughts. He further argued that future perspectives reflect the dynamic nature of practitioners’ selves, as it is constituted by an active and ongoing process of individual sense-making. From a coaching perspective, this concept encourages us to consider how a coach’s actions and choices in the present may be influenced by both meaningful experiences in the past, as well as expectations about the future (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b; Cassidy et al., in progress).

While Maeve's coaching identity now appeared firmly established, one could be concerned that her full immersion in her job contributed to a one-dimensional sense of a coaching self. While her dedication to her work was commendable, the development of a one-dimensional coaching self leaves little room for other self-dimensions. Similar to the existing literature which has addressed this in athletes (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009), it could be said that by (over)investing in her work, Maeve's self-work might have been solely dependent on successfully fulfilling a coaching role (Coakley, 1992). Furthermore, as Brown and Potrac (2009) indicated in their work with soccer players, the over-investment in a coaching identity could lead to traumatic experiences if the identity is challenged or relinquished.

A change in self-narrative

While Maeve had spent ten years developing and reinforcing her coaching identity, the fragility of such an identity became apparent when, after being selected as a coach for junior, under 23 and senior World Champions, she was not selected to take athletes to the Olympic Games. She explained:

I got really close [to the Olympics] ...and I was completely pissed off at not getting an Olympic squad or [the role of] assistant coach. I think by rights I should have been an assistant coach but I was given the non-priority athletes [and not invited into the Olympic village] and [an apprentice coach who had been identified and developed by the sport] was given the top group. I was so pissed off... God it annoyed me. Sure he had been an international athlete but [in his career] he had only coached one junior athlete – that was it. And I was really, really unhappy about that.

Missing selection to the Olympic team was, for Maeve, a major turning-point in her career, as she questioned, “for me the ladder stopped. But why did [the apprentice coach] have more chance of moving on?” While her non-selection to the Olympic Games caused a disruption in her career trajectory, Maeve still viewed herself positively as a coach. However, she no longer felt that the selectors shared this view of her. She

noted that, “I think I was very much considered as... really good in the under 23 championship category and really good working with that age athlete... but [I] want to be at the top too.” Thus, it appeared that her non-selection as a coach to the Olympics did not affect her perceptions of competence but, instead, the opportunities that she believed would be afforded to her within this country’s athletic system. Maeve’s experiences here further reinforce the ambiguity of coaching careers, especially those of female coaches in high performance sport (Christensen, 2013; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Norman, 2010, 2012, 2013). For example, Maeve’s views regarding her failure to obtain a post at the highest level in athletics coaching, despite her burgeoning record of success, is in keeping with the work of Norman (2010, 2012, 2013), which has explored female coaches’ understandings of limited career progression within the often restrictive subcultures of many sports.

Feeling increasingly typecast as an under 23 coach, and dissatisfied with her lack of progression, Maeve’s changed understanding of her ‘future perspectives’ led her to search for alternative employment which would allow her to progress in the direction that she desired (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b). Whilst searching for a new position, Maeve came to recognise that obtaining such posts in high performance sport would ultimately require her to relocate from one country to another. Her search proved to be a short one, as she was soon offered a position as the assistant national team coach in another country. Her decision to accept this position reflected to her strong sense of competence about her abilities, especially in terms taking athletes to the Olympic Games (Cassidy et al., in progress; Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b). However, the decision to change systems and positions (from lead coach to assistant) required a change in self-narrative. Here, Maeve commented how, in her new role:

I’m doing very little coaching...Like I go to all of the sessions but I’m not the one saying anything...I do a lot of management. I do flight bookings, hotel

bookings, work out the price of medical staff...I'm good at the detail so I guess I'm getting job satisfaction [sounded unconvincing]....

Similar to her initial involvement as a coach, this change in role from 'lead' to 'assistant' coach required that Maeve trial possible 'selves' in relation to her professional identity. Such a practice has been long noted by socialisation researchers who have recognised that identity changes accompany career transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Kelchtermans, 2009a). Given that identities are subject to change due to time, context and interaction with others (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b; Kondo, 1990), it is unsurprising then that Maeve's change in role led to another turning point which resulted in a re-conceptualisation of her coaching identity. As her role in the high performance environment had changed from working directly with the athletes to a management-orientated position, her relationship to her coaching identity was increasingly shrouded by a questioning of competence:

It's been a long time since I've had what I consider to be effective coaching from myself. Not [in this position], [I have not] done it or not consistently... So I've got a lot of doubt about my ability at the moment.

After a year of working as the assistant to the head coach, Maeve became more 'comfortable' with the organisation and management of the high performance squad. However the lack of consistent 'coaching' contact with the athletes was beginning to threaten her previously strong coaching identity. This was evident in Maeve's statement,

I've got a lot of doubt about my ability at the moment...[Maybe] I'm just not good enough. I'm just not that level of coach... So it's sort of like as much as I want to do it, I know I'm not actually good enough to do it. But I mean how do you know if you don't do it?

With her coaching identity under threat, Maeve also began to increasingly question if her goal to coach a squad at the Olympic Games would ever be achieved. She noted:

I'm 47 now and I still haven't coached at that level... It's like, this isn't going to happen... I would have like to have done that but it's looking like I'm not going to be doing that so I've got to think 'is that okay or not?'

It could, thus, be argued that Maeve's experiences as an assistant coach were not only challenging in terms of its impact on her 'self-image' and 'self-esteem', but also in relation to her 'task perception' and 'job motivation'. According to Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b), task perception encompasses an individual's understanding of the duties and tasks that he or she should undertake in order to do a particular job well (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b). In the context of coaching, this might be understood in relation to a coach's response to the following questions: "What must I do as a proper coach? What are the essential tasks that I have to perform in order to have the justified feeling that I am doing well? What do I consider as legitimate duties to perform? What do I refuse to accept as part of my coaching practice" (Cassidy et al., in progress; Kelchtermans, 2009). Importantly, Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b) argued that when an individual is unable to perform a role in a particular way, he or she may experience a variety of strong emotional consequences, not only in terms of his or her self-esteem and job satisfaction, but also in terms of a continued engagement in a particular line of work. Similarly Jacobson-Widding (1983) also attested, "when a person's moral universe is suddenly invalidated because of lack of 'fit' with social reality, [her] conception of [her]self... will be invalidated..." (p. 14). Maeve's problematic experiences here may also be understood in relation to the notion of 'job motivation', which is, in the context of this study, concerned with the drives that makes an individual choose to coach, as well as to continue coaching, or not as the case may be (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, in progress; Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b). Kelchtermans (2009a, 2009b) suggested that job motivation is not only influenced by an individual's task

perception and working conditions, but that it is also something that may change over time. This was certainly a sentiment to which Maeve subscribed.

Finally, it could be argued that Maeve's investment of over two decades in the sport had assisted in the development of an identity which was strongly, if not exclusively, linked to athletics. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Maeve would feel a sense of dissonance (i.e., depression, emotional disturbance) following a disruption to that identity (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005). Indeed, it might be argued that Maeve experienced a "biographical disruption" or rupture in the structure of her coaching life that interrupted its narrative coherence (Bury, 1982; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Sparkes, 2000). Parallel work in teaching found that mid-career teachers who had not fulfilled their professional ambitions not only felt vulnerable (Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Rolls & Plauborg, 2009; Sikes, 1985; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985), but they also engaged in a re-assessment of their careers. Interestingly, despite feeling vulnerable in their teaching roles, some teachers also experienced considerable self-doubt about the prospects of exploring alternative career pathways (Huberman, 1993; Rolls & Plauborg, 2009). In a similar vein, Maeve commented,

I often struggle to think what else I would do. Like [I'm] going to finish up [the contract] here before the end of this year and I'm really thinking hard about what my pathway is after this. And I am seriously thinking of not doing this (coaching) but I think, can I be away from it?

Similar to the position she was in two decades earlier when contemplating ending her career as an athlete, Maeve found herself at another significant turning point in her career. At this point in time, Maeve felt that she was growing out of her position; a process that required that she "take stock... re-evaluate, revise, resee and rejudge" (Strauss, 1962, p. 65). However, in contrast to her earlier decision to transition from athlete to coach, a decision which supported her sport-related identity, Maeve's

thoughts of moving away from coaching were influenced by her current situation as well as her changing view of herself (Kelchtermans, 2009a, 2009b).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to draw attention to the career experiences of a high performance coach, Maeve, and the critical incidents relating to the initiation, development, and, ultimately, questioning of her career pathway and, consequently, her identity as a coach. Following what she would consider to be a 'logical' linear career trajectory: retiring from competition, coaching part-time, obtaining full-time positions and coaching junior, under 23 and senior athletes, Maeve thought she was moving through the coaching 'system' as expected. However, following two setbacks when she failed to be selected as a coach for the Olympic squad, it became apparent that her career would not progress in the linear and sequential manner that she had increasingly anticipated.

With coaching positions at this level characterised by short-term contracts based on performance (i.e. success) or Olympic cycles, high performance coaches are often left on their own to manage within a disorderly and unpredictable sector. In keeping with Bauman's (2007) sentiments regarding liquid modernity, it is arguably a context in which a good performance does not come with guarantees of contract renewal. Rather, coaches may, instead, face a continuous process of adaptation or reinvention as they market themselves in a precarious context (Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Thompson et al., in press). This outlook also reflects the recent work of Christensen (2013), who challenged the utility of representing, as well as understanding, coaches' careers in relation to a number of chronologically ordered milestones. In particular, she argued that 'one size fits all' models of coaching careers fail to adequately reflect differences in coaches'

athletic careers, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, wider cultural beliefs and expectations, and the socio-political milieu of particular sporting organizations, as well as the ambiguity and serendipity that may also feature heavily in an individual's coaching career.

Similarly, while previous work (e.g. Cregan, Bloom & Reid, 2007; Nash and Sproule, 2009; Schinke, Bloom & Salmela, 1995) has acknowledged coaches' careers, the focus has been on the development of 'expertise' rather than questioning the context in which these 'experts' operate. As such, focusing on individual coaches' understandings of their career pathways and their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) might not only provide us with potentially rich insights into contemporary working contexts in which coaches operate, but also the ways in which they may construct their respective coaching identities, inclusive of the emotions (i.e. anxiety, fear, joy, guilt) that are experienced (Christensen, 2013; Potrac, Jones, Purdy, Nelson, & Marshall, 2013). Such knowledge would, from our perspective at least, seem crucial if we are to better understand individual perceptions and sensibilities that are a significant feature of coaching. Equally, such work may also help us better understand the dilemmas, as well as the possible psychological and social issues, that might arise when an individual makes a heavy investment of his/her self into a coaching career (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Christensen, 2013; Potrac et al., 2013). As such, while we recognise that this has been an exploratory investigation of a single case, we hope this leads to future problematizing of the occupational contexts in which coaches are expected to operate.

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