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UNDERSTANDING SPORTS COACHING: A CASE FOR A CRITICAL REALIST INFORMED APPROACH
AIMS OF THE SESSION

- Introducing critical realism as a research philosophy, appropriate for understanding sports coaching
- Demonstrate how realist evaluation can be used to explain coach education programmes. An example of realist research (PhD) with the Football Association (FA)
- Questions and group discussion
QUESTIONS COME BEFORE ANSWERS . . .

A PLACE TO BEGIN
PART 1: CRITICAL REALISM AND SPORTS COACHING
DIAGNOSING SPORTS COACHING ISSUES

Task
PART 1

IDEALISED OPPOSITES ON A CONTINUUM OF RESEARCH

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**POSITIVIST (INDIVIDUAL)**

**BEHAVIOURAL**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL**

**COACHING IS** A SET OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS TO BE COPIED

**COACHING IS** A DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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**CONSTRUCTIVIST (GROUP/COMPLEXITY)**

**SOCIAL**

**COACHING IS** A SOCIAL PROCESS

**COACHING IS** RELATIONAL
I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.

Maslow (1962; p15)
**DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES OFFER US A DIFFERENT PART OF THE PICTURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>E.g. Research/authors</th>
<th>Coaching practice</th>
<th>Coaching effectiveness</th>
<th>Coach education</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Abraham and Collins (1998; 2011)</td>
<td>Generation, storage, retrieval and use of knowledge in context (a greater appreciation of this, than above)</td>
<td>Integration and application of knowledge bases in and away from coaching contexts</td>
<td>Concerned with the development of mental models, knowledge (can be taught) and decision-making. Situated, deliberate practice and critical reflection.</td>
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**Source:**
The sociologists, with an inclination towards criticism, present a picture of an occupational area with problems, difficulties and tensions – underpinned by what they suggest to be a largely inadequate policy, practice and research. The psychologists, with an inclination towards problem-solving, rarely paint a picture at all. Rather they utilize research to abstract good practice ideas and tools (knowledge, decision-making and planning approaches, effective behaviours etc.) to help coaches manage problems and difficulties. Somewhere in the ‘middle’ something is lost: research that attempts to describe and explain sport coaching practice, and how it works, that is not preoccupied a priori.
“To make progress we need to move beyond disciplines... We require an approach that transcends disciplines to the philosophical level”

North (2017, p12)
# Taxonomy of Choices in Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm (ontology: world view)</th>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Critical Realism</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A single objective reality exists</td>
<td>A reality independent of our knowledge of it</td>
<td>Multiple realities exist</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge is absolute and fixed.</td>
<td>Knowledge is fallible, subject to modification and refutation at any time</td>
<td>Knowledge is co-constructed and developed through relationships. ‘We’ create meaning.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncover single ‘truths’</td>
<td>To provide an explanatory account (causal but not successionist) of what works for whom, under what conditions</td>
<td>Gain an insight into the lives of people, their thoughts and feelings, to understand their reality</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Mixed methods</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statistical analysis</td>
<td>Realist interviews</td>
<td>Unstructured/Semi structured interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Systematic observation</td>
<td>Analysis of grey-literature</td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>Insight can come from anywhere!</td>
<td>Personal documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
<th>Deductive (theory testing)</th>
<th>Retroduction (theory inspired by data/adaptive theory)</th>
<th>Inductive (theory generating)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
‘No run of favourable data, however long and unbroken, is logically sufficient to establish the truth of an unrestricted generalisation’ (Popper, 1934)

CRITICAL REALISM: AN OVERVIEW

- The world and our knowledge of the world, are two separate things (E.g. a shift from flat Earth theory to round Earth theory was not accompanied by a change in the shape of the Earth itself)

- Ontology is always prior to epistemology (a view of the world is necessary before making knowledge claims)

- Reality is knowable through identifying causality (not necessarily a regular succession of events)

- Objects have potential, they are generative mechanisms which can fire in a given context

- A modest view on knowledge; knowledge can be modified or rejected at any moment

THE REALIST SLOGAN:
WHAT WORKS FOR WHO, IN WHAT CONTEXT AND WHY?
"What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening" (Sayer, 2000, p 12)

CRITICAL REALISM AND IT'S USE IN UNDERSTANDING SPORTS COACHING

Martians have landed on Earth, and have set themselves the task of understanding the human body:

1. Group 1 took random samples of specimens from all over the body, looking for regularities (enough to generalise)

2. Group 2 started from a particular point on the body (unfazed they might not cover it all) and developed some explanation of why things work in particular ways. They wouldn’t be too bothered that their work wasn’t representative

"Realists seek substantial connections among phenomena rather than formal associations or regularities" - Sayer (2000, p27)
“Observability may make us more confident about what we think exists, but existence itself does not depend on it” - Sayer (2000, p12)

Source:
“IT REQUIRES AN APPROACH THAT MOVES BEYOND SURFACE LEVEL DESCRIPTION, FOR EXAMPLE, OBSERVATION OF EVENTS AND/OR STAKEHOLDER NARRATIVES TO EXPLORE UNDERPINNING CAUSAL PROPERTIES AND POWERS. . . THE MOVEMENT FROM A FOCUS ON EVENTS TO DEEP CAUSAL PROPERTIES AND POWERS SUGGESTS A CENTRAL ROLE FOR THEORISING [SPECULATING]”

North (2017, p209)
“The empirical basis of objective science has nothing ‘absolute’ about it. Science does not rest upon rock-bottom. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or given base... We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.”
PART 2: REALIST INFORMED RESEARCH AND COACH EDUCATION PROGRAMMES
THESIS:
A REALIST EVALUATION OF ASSESSMENT APPROACHES IN COACH EDUCATION: WHAT ASPECTS OF ASSESSMENT WORK IN COACH EDUCATION PROGRAMMES, FOR WHAT COACHES, AND WHY?
问题情况：

英格兰足球协会已经重新开发了他们的教练教育计划。这包括重新思考传统的教学模式和评估模式。由于有大量的教练参与了这种提供，并且对他们自己的申请（甚至是在自己的声明中），他们理解地渴望理解这些变化的影响（特别是对FA Level 3/UEFA B）。为什么是赢家，赢家和输家，输家——在相同的计划上？
EXISTING LITERATURE

EXISTING COACH EDUCATION RESEARCH

▸ Simplifies practice into silos, ‘best practice’ recipes and clean treatments (Jones, 2006; Jones, 2007)

▸ Presents a ‘gold standard’ recipe for practice (Abraham and Collins, 1998)

▸ Presents coaching as sequential and routine (Cushion, Armour and Jones, 2003)

▸ Rarely considered important or useful; lack of nuance (Piggott, 2011)

▸ Low impact on practice and understanding (Harvey et al, 2013; Stodter and Cushion, 2015)

▸ Prescriptive and/or descriptive (Piggott, 2015)

MOST NOTABLY, NO NUANCED ANALYSES
We implemented the same program in two locations. For some reason, we had very different results.
IF NATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATIONS WISH TO EFFECT CHANGE, THIS MUST BE GROUNDED IN A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT, AND HOW PROGRAMMES AND THEIR MECHANISMS CAN BE USED TO GENERATE DESIRED OUTCOMES

NORTH (2016, P27)
THE CONTEXTUAL PENNY HAS NOW DROPPED... WHAT WORKS IN WIGAN ON A WET WEDNESDAY WILL NOT NECESSARILY WORK IN THURSO ON A THUNDEROUS THURSDAY. THE PROBLEM IS, THAT CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS ARE INFINITE. COMPLEXITY SNOWBALLS.

Pawson (2013, pXVI)
IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAMME IS MORE LIKE HERDING INVISIBLE CATS IN A BOUNDLESS TERRAIN. I RECKON THAT THIS RENDERS EVALUATION AS THE TASK OF MONITORING THE HERDING OF THESE INDISCERNIBLE CREATURES ACROSS INFINITUDE. NOT AN EASY UNDERTAKING.

Pawson (2013, p81)
WHAT MAKES A COACH EDUCATION PROGRAMME SO COMPLEX?

- **Volitions** - what choices are on offer?
- **Implementation chains** - programmes pass through many hands
- **Context** - success depends on locating the programme in an appropriate context
- **Time** - the ‘showcasing effect’ of pilots
- **Outcomes** - the contested nature of measurement
- **Rivalry** - where does one programme start and another end?
- **Emergence** - long-term adaptations, unintended effects and societal/system changes

Pawson (2013)
PROGRAMMES ARE COMPLEX BY DINT OF THEIR MULTIPLE AMBITIONS AND MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS, AND ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR LONG, ADAPTIVE AND DISPUTED IMPLEMENTATIONS CHAINS, AND BECAUSE THE PROBLEMS THEY SEEK TO SOLVE ARE OFTEN INTERCONNECTED, LONG-STANDING AND DEEP-SEATED AND BY REASON OF THEIR DIVERSE RULES, CUSTOMS, HISTORIES IN THE INSTITUTIONS AND CONTEXTS IN WHICH THEY OPERATE. AND SO ON!

Pawson (2013, pXV)
We are interested in the 'real' (mechanisms = resources and reasoning), rather than the 'empirical' (what we might observe).

We are interested in causation and the logic of causation.

We want to know what is expected to cause that to happen (not what has happened, or what should happen!)

\[ \text{CONTEXT} + \text{MECHANISM} = \text{OUTCOME} \]
PART 2

**METHOD: REALIST SYNTHESIS AND REALIST EVALUATION**

- a. Observation on three UEFA B courses with different cohort profiles
- b. Capture the assessment experiences of all coaches using questionnaires
- c. Initial and 1-year follow-up interviews with coach developers and candidates

- a. Review of FA policy documents (e.g. course handbooks, learning strategy, coach competency framework etc.)
- b. Interviews with policy architects, course development team members and other key stakeholders (e.g. coach developers)
- c. Review of existing research on assessment in adult education, coach learning, coaching practice, coach education and coaching effectiveness
REALIST SYNTHESIS: GENERATING PROGRAMME THEORIES

- Open-mindedness
- Work with the widest possible range of sources
- Don’t discount sources on perceived quality; good insight can come from bad research.
The FA Education Learning Strategy
“Theory without experiment is empty. Experiment without theory is blind” - Bhaskar (1978, p191)

THE REALIST INTERVIEW AND THE CENTRALITY OF THEORY

1. Teaches conceptual structure
2. Learns conceptual structure
3. Applies/refines conceptual structure
4. Tests/refines theory further

“The subject matter of the interview is the researcher’s theory and interviewees are there to confirm, falsify and basically, refine the theory. This relationship - described as a teacher-learner cycle - is distinctive of realist evaluations." - Manzano (2016, p2)
Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking. There are bad storms ahead, but we are not going to go around them for fear of introducing bias.
"There seems to be large degrees of freedom offered to county FAs as deliverers of the UEFA B programme. I understand that they can plan and deliver a curriculum most relevant to their learners. Can you explain what this looks like and the reasoning behind it?"

"Here is my theory of what the assessment process is designed to do, could you tell me if this is correct, or is inaccurate? IF learners are assessed by way of 18 game project THEN learners will develop along their own personally relevant trajectory. This is important BECAUSE learners come from the breadth of game (anywhere outside of the EFL)"

"It seems to me that you are giving coaches an opportunity to become better at what they do, would this be right?

I noted that [ ] had said, “A lot of things in the past was, ‘i’ve only coached like this to pass the test, i don’t do this in the day job, i’d never coach like that.’ there’s something in this isn’t there, there’s something in this, if we’re saying, if we put a course together and coaches perceive this as a coaching but yet don’t practice that, then we’ve got this totally wrong, we need to know what does coaching look like and what does this bit look like to help them do coaching better.”

**Things to avoid:**

“You will want to conceal your knowledge as far as possible. The correct role for the qualitative researcher has often been described as that of the ‘amiable incompetent’ - someone friendly and intelligent but lacking knowledge, someone who has to be told things” - Sapsford and Abbott (1992, p. 112)

“...be neutral towards the topic while displaying interest” Fielding and Thomas (2001, p 129)
“...going back probably three or four years ago, the technical director came in and said ‘i think we need to do something about the coach education pathway’, we needed to streamline it, we needed to recognise where content was being duplicated”
“It’s scary really, you know, it is the unknown, because I think like anything, you always look at other people and you want to be perceived as what you’re doing is right. But when you look out there and there isn’t any other models of this way of working, not on the scale that we do.”
“...we were given the new strategy and the strategy clearly states, ‘FA Education will create a world leading coach development programme, ultimately to empower and support coaches’, that’s what we’re there to do. Erm, we were never going to do that, never going to be world leading if we kept doing the same stuff, that’s the definition of insanity isn’t it, doing the same stuff and expecting a different outcome. We needed to do something different. You listen to Gareth Southgate talk about the England teams, the England national side and he talks about, you know, ‘if we keep following what Germany and Spain have done, we’re only ever going to be six years behind’. We’ve got to do something different, to get beyond them. Same with education”
“If we’d have suddenly got to B and gone ‘pull your socks up, tuck your shirt in, if you don't do that you don't get your checklist’, erm, you know, we’re never going to inspire coaches to come back and do more. Ultimately, the strategy says, ‘inspire a culture of lifelong learning, i personally couldn't think of anything worse than doing this endpoint summative assessment any more.”
"I was delivering on a course at the weekend and I was talking to somebody else about it and I said, ‘one of the biggest things we’ve done is taken a course and tried to make it fit the 24 people that sit inside the room for the first time ever’. Instead of making 24 people fit the course. We’ve turned this thing on its head.”
"So, having worked for national governing bodies or with national governing bodies and awarding organisations in the past, the awarding organisations dictate that evidence must be generated in a simple and often archaic way to tick boxes, to achieve outcomes, for the benefit of the awarding body, for the benefit of Ofqual. Often at the detriment of the learners doing the course. When I joined the FA I saw it as a massive opportunity to work for, not with, but for a major national governing body and almost rewrite the rule book a little bit. And that’s what we’ve done. We’ve completely binned this ‘endpoint summative running around for each other assessment’ and moved to this real life formative journey where people get better at the things they need to get better at, at a time and a place that’s right for them."
“I think that’s the thing. What is a pass? And I’ve been asked this a thousand times. I have to be honest, I am still wrestling with it. Coming from the black and white awarding body world, it is difficult. As an IQA, I want to see evidence if I am performing the role of IQA, and at the minute, we’re not seeing it in one single place that’s easy to track and standardise - it’s not happening. So it is something we need to deal with. How do you deal with it? Jesus.”
INITIAL PROGRAMME THEORIES: THE LOGIC OF THE PROGRAMME

“A statement or a hypothesis about how a programme or a programme component is working, and/or in what circumstance, or in what context.” (Jagosh, 2017)

“Every programme has a theory, whether made explicit or not” (Pawson, 2006)

IF THE RIGHT PROCESSES OPERATE IN THE RIGHT CONDITIONS, THEN THE PROGRAMME WILL PREVAIL

IF learners are assessed by way of 18 game project THEN learners will develop along their own personally relevant trajectory. This is important BECAUSE learners come from the breadth of game (anywhere outside of the EFL)

IF programme content is driven by the individual learner’s needs, THEN they will become better at the things they need to become better at BECAUSE they will be attending to the things they need to attend to

IF the vision of the organisation is to create a culture of lifelong learning THEN the coach competency framework should not be a coach-facing document BECAUSE the coach may become preoccupied with doing ‘just enough’
PART 2

NEXT STEPS

- Continue to build a robust set of programme theories based on further interviews, document analysis and dipping back into the literature.

- Observation of 3 UEFA B courses from August 2018 to May 2019; testing and refining theories (is what is supposed to happen, happening?)

- Develop and deliver 3 case studies from 3 distinct contexts; what works for one coach in a specific county and why?
PART 2

POTENTIAL OUTPUTS

▸ that a particular intervention works in quite separate ways
▸ that it gets implemented in different ways
▸ that it is more effective with some groups rather that others
▸ that it will find more use in one location rather than another
▸ that it has intended and unintended consequences
▸ that its effects are likely to be sustained or taper off

Pawson and Tiley (2004, p19)
REALIST READING LIST


