Exploring formalized elite coach mentoring programmes in the UK:

‘We’ve had to play the game’

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Rebecca Sawiuk\textsuperscript{a*}, William G Taylor\textsuperscript{b} and Ryan Groom\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Hertfordshire University, UK; \textsuperscript{b}Manchester Metropolitan University, UK; Centre for Research into Coaching (CRiC)

*Corresponding author. Department of Human and Environmental Sciences, School of Life and Medical Sciences, Hertfordshire University, Hatfield, Herts, AL10 9AB. Email: r.sawiuk@herts.ac.uk

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Formalized mentoring programmes have been implemented increasingly by UK sporting institutions as a central coach development tool, yet claims supporting formal mentoring as an effective learning strategy are often speculative, scarce, ill-defined and accepted without verification. The aim of this study, therefore, was to explore some of the realities of formalized elite sports coaching mentoring programmes. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 15 mentors of elite coaches on formal programmes, across a range of sports. The findings were read through a Bourdieusian lens and revealed the importance of understanding the complexities of elite sports coaching environments, that elite sports coach development is highly specific and, therefore, should not be over-formalized, and how current elite sport coach mentoring programmes may be better conceptualized as a form of social control rather than being driven by pedagogical concerns. Following this empirically based analysis of practice, a number of implications for Governing Bodies (GBs), mentors and mentees were considered.

**Keywords:** Sports coaching, coach education, mentoring, formal coach learning, elite coach development, micro-politics.
Introduction

The need to broaden coaching’s theoretical and empirical basis has been previously acknowledged within the coaching literature (e.g. Jones, 2006; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). However, Nelson et al. (2013) have cautioned that although an increase in theoretically informed delivery is evident, there seems to be a reluctance to assess the merits of existing modes of education before moving on to more fashionable pedagogical modes of delivery. For example, a number of scholars have suggested a variety of approaches which may be used to inform the education of coaches, such as the establishment of mentoring schemes (Bloom et al., 1998), competency-based programmes (Demers et al., 2006), problem-based learning (Jones & Turner, 2006), communities of practice (Culver & Trudel, 2008 and reflective practice (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). However, within the sports coaching literature scant attention has been paid to exploring the efficacy and realities of such approaches in practice. This oversight is perhaps best illustrated within the sports coaching mentoring literature. For example, although formalized mentoring schemes have been considered a ‘worthwhile addition to coach development’ (Bloom et al., 1998, p. 223), and have been viewed by coaches as an essential method contributing towards their development as a coach (Bloom et al., 1995), similarly to mainstream mentoring literature (Noe et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003), empirical research examining formal mentoring remains scarce (Bloom, 2013; Chambers, 2015).

Typically, within the literature, mentoring situations are categorized as being either informal or formal across different contextual domains (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005). Informal mentoring refers to an organic mentorship that is unstructured and without a formal contract; it occurs through mutual identification and is often concerned with personal or professional development outcomes (Kram, 1985). These relationships allow for frequent personal feedback and interventions, usually because the mentor–mentee dyad occurs within the actual work setting (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005). Formal mentoring has been defined as ‘a contractual relationship
where the terms are defined in such a way as to foster greater acceptance of and conformity to formally recognized organisational norms and expectations’ (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005, p. 69).

Commonly, formalized mentoring programmes are employed by organizations as institutionalized in-house training programmes that promote the development of employee skill sets, competencies, policies, procedures and standards (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005; Wright & Smith, 2000). Although recommendations for ‘best practice’ exist for the utilization of these formal schemes, scrutiny or empirical exploration is somewhat absent (Murray, 1991; Allen et al., 2006). Often, the process of formalizing institutional mentoring programmes involves a number of key elements, such as establishing mentoring objectives, selecting and matching mentors and protégés, setting achievable expectations and goals, outlining responsibility, and duration and frequency of mentoring sessions or workshops (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005).

Mentoring within sports coaching remains an ‘ill-defined activity’ (Jones et al., 2009, p. 280). That is, despite the claims surrounding the adoption of coach mentoring schemes within sports coaching, mentoring continues to lack clear conceptual clarity and is often depicted in a fragmented manner (Bloom et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2009; Nash, 2003).

Unlike the centralized national sports education systems in North America (e.g. National Canadian Coaches Association) formalized coach mentoring schemes in the UK have been designed and implemented by individual sporting GBs. Consequently, these formalized mentoring schemes lack a standardized curriculum, and the content of these courses is dictated by the needs of the individual sporting body (e.g. more female coaches, more UKCC Level 4 coaches, etc.). Indeed, considerable variation of coach mentoring provision is evident within UK sports across UKCC Level and gender (cf. The FA, 2012).

Therefore, there remains the need to analyse the development of sports coach mentoring schemes within the UK from an empirically based and theoretically informed perspective in order to provide a sound conceptual basis for the implementation of such schemes.
In building upon previous work, Jones et al. (2009) have suggested that the next step is ‘to generate empirical evidence regarding the current nature of mentoring in sports coaching in order to inform more meaningful coach education programmes’ (p. 276). In an attempt to answer such a call, this study aims to empirically explore the realities of coach mentoring within formalized elite sports contexts. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more complete representation of the current practices employed within formalized elite coach mentoring schemes in order to better understand the realities of elite coach mentoring. In addition, a Bourdieusian reading of the field data is offered, to deepen the level of understanding of the social context of mentoring practice (Bourdieu 2007, 2004b). The significance of this work is grounded in the recognition that mentoring within elite sports coaching is distinctive in nature (Griffiths & Armour, 2012), nuanced and contextually bound (Jones et al., 2009) and uneven in quality and outcomes (Cushion, 2006). Such a conceptualization acknowledges the inherent complexity evident within the formal mentoring literature (e.g. Allen et al., 2006; Chun et al., 2012; Eby et al., 2008; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; McManus & Russell, 1997). In this regard, an empirical analysis of the current practices of formal mentors working with elite sports coaches attempts to reflect the realities of formalized coach mentoring and may assist in the design of future coach mentoring schemes.

Methodology

**Philosophical underpinnings**

Engaging more explicitly in both the philosophical and procedural elements of the research process is an essential step to increase the quality of research within sports coaching (Nelson et al., 2014b; Nelson et al., 2014c; Potrac et al., 2014). In an attempt to explicitly address this issue, the present study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm (cf. Potrac et al., 2014) and underpinned by a relativist ontology (i.e. participants hold socially
constructed views of reality) and a subjectivist epistemology (i.e. knowledge is created through an interaction between the researchers and the participants). In addition, within the analysis of the findings, the paper draws on the work of Bourdieu to provide a theorised reading of the data and to illustrate the inherent social dynamics found within elite coach mentoring contexts (Grenfell, 2008). From a representational perspective, the present paper follows the traditional representational prose of the dominant form of representation within qualitative research, the ‘realist tale’, in that we, as authors, deploy a neutral voice, written in the third person (Groom et al., 2014). However, it is important to recognize that this is a textual strategy and a decision made by the research team, rather than a true or real account of the complexity of the lived experiences of the participants (Groom et al., 2014).

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, mentors who mentored elite coaches across a range of mentoring schemes were contacted and informed about the purpose and nature of the present study. Following this initial contact, 15 participants were purposefully selected as formal coach mentors. The process was underpinned by a guiding frame: (1) holding the highest formal coaching award within their sport; (2) a minimum of 10 years of practical coaching experience; (3) had worked as a coach mentor for a minimum of three years. All participants have actively participated in a UK elite coach mentoring programme, which requires the mentor to contractually deliver mentoring sessions on behalf of a sporting institution.

Interviews and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 15 participant mentors, either face to face ($n = 13$) in a private location close to the participant’s place of work or, where the
participants were unable to meet in person, via the phone ($n = 2$). All of the interviews were recorded via a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the lead author. The participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms within the text to preserve their anonymity; however, to contextualize the data, the participants’ main sport/s are reported within Table: 1. All of the interviews were recorded via a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the lead author. The participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms within the text to preserve their anonymity; however, to contextualize the data, the participants’ main sport/s are reported within Table: 1. alongside each data extract. The interviews were open in nature and allowed for the exploration of key themes regarding the participants’ experiences within formal mentoring schemes. The interviews typically lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in a flexible manner using open-ended questions and elaboration probes. An interview guide was utilized in an attempt to structure the conversation towards the research aims of the study. A literature review was completed. Its findings, together with author 1’s previous experience as a mentee on an elite sports coach mentoring scheme and author 2’s experience as an educator on an elite sports coach mentoring scheme, increased the research team’s theoretical sensitivity to the questionnaire design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Questions broadly focused on exploring the participants’ perceptions of their engagement with formal mentoring schemes.

Thematic analysis

For the purposes of this study, a data-driven inductive thematic approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to stimulate useful comparisons between themes. Methodologically such an approach is informed by a phenomenological epistemology concerned with understanding meaning and experience as socially [re]produced through interactions, thus the importance of socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions of the context remain at the centre of the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, the data analysis was not viewed as a singular event but instead can be better conceptualized as an iterative process between data and theory. However, it is important to recognize that as researchers we made
decisions on the data, and that the categories in the present study did not simply ‘emerge’ from
the data but rather are a result of ongoing analysis, interpretation and embedded critical
reflection by the research team. Following Taylor (2014: 189), we suggest that the analysis of
qualitative data is not easy; instead it is ‘often messy, at times confusing, and rarely presents a
complete picture’.

During the analysis process a method of working back and forth was adopted between
data and theory (Boyatzis, 1998). The research team met on a regular basis during the data
collection phase, and we talked aloud about the data and what we thought it meant (Taylor,
2014). The sharing of these thoughts and feelings was not a single isolated event but a
collective one, often involving us reconsidering and challenging our own and each other’s
ideas (Taylor, 2014). This process was themed around the importance of culture and context
in elite sports coach mentoring, the problematic nature of institutional agendas in elite sports
coach mentoring, the dangers of over-formalizing elite sports coach mentoring and micro-
politics in elite sports coach mentoring, which are discussed below and throughout the study.
Additionally, the creation of theoretical codes enabled potentially important concepts to be
explored through an iterative process in which the research team asked questions of the data
to assist in the development of insightful comparisons and analytical reflection (Boyatzis,
1998).

In the first instance, the primary researcher and author familiarized themselves with
the data sets by engaging in the process of transcription, which has been described as a key
phase of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were then identified by the research
team (authors 1–3) in relation to the questions asked, and responses presented in a patterned
format. The data was interpreted by assessing the commonality of emerging articulated
themes, which in turn produced the first order categorization, for example institutional
influences impacting the formalized scheme. Secondly, individual occurrences were explored
across the first order themes to identify comparisons within the data set (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Results and discussion**

Within this section, the paper utilizes the work of Bourdieu in attempting to shed light on the selected themes represented here. Particularly, it applies the concepts of field, habitus, capital, symbolic violence, doxa and misrecognition to the reading (Grenfell, 2008). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an outline of Bourdieu’s body of theory, it should be acknowledged that to a limited degree it has helped to illuminate coaching research.

Taylor and Garratt (2010) used ‘field and capital’ to investigate the experience of coaches and the professionalisation of their practice; Cushion and Jones (2006) explored the verbal interaction of coaches, citing the ‘symbolic violence’ inherent in their exchanges with athletes; Taylor and McEwan (2012) used the notion of ‘educational capital’ to examine the nature of interprofessional relationships; and Noble and Watkin (2003) provided an interesting use of the concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘embodiment’ within the sports training literature.

**The culture and context of elite sports coach mentoring**

This first section builds a case for and highlights some of the contextual nuances of elite sports coach mentoring within sport (Griffiths & Armour, 2012). The following extracts in this section explore how important it is for mentors to understand the elite sports milieu and how this differs across operational contexts, with reference to effective formalized mentoring and elite coach education. It further discusses the benefit of an elite sports mentor from a different sport or context. The following section highlights a number of examples of
how the participant mentors discussed the importance of context within elite coach mentoring:

When you’re working in sport and you do sport yourself you do have an understanding of the environment people are operating within … Sometimes there’s the element of rapport because there’s that something in common and that can fast track that relationship. (Mark)

In business if you’re operating within a totally different context every time you don’t have an appreciation of the complexities of the environment [in] which the individual is working. However, it doesn’t seem to be an issue for the people from business that you don’t come from business, but I suspect if you come from sport it’s more of an issue: you understand it, you work it and you live it … There’s an element of culture, the way sport has a mind-set and is set up, this desire or want or need to have this kind of credibility around the technical element of sport. (Mark)

Formal mentoring has to happen. When you’re embedded within the sport you’re much more situationally based; where I have physically had to come up here. So when I worked in sailing, if a coach wandered into the office and we had a bit of a chat and said ‘do you want to grab a tea?’ That informality is incredibly useful. That can’t happen in my role because I’m not embedded as I would like to be. (Simon)

Although elite sports coach mentoring delivery appears to be distinctive in nature, the participant mentors identified the benefits of drawing upon mentors from outside the mentees’ sporting domain:
I would advocate at an elite level there’s a stronger argument for the mentors to be outside the sport, but having a mentor skill set to facilitate the development of the elite coach is beneficial. Lower down the sports a mentor from the same sport can be important, like the ‘buddy-up’ system. My overall feeling on mentoring is that it’s still very global and it’s not specific. I think we need to differentiate between maybe not only the demands between different sports and how mentors look within different sports but more importantly at different levels and a coaching journey from where they started coaching seriously to an elite end. (Danielle)

Similarly to the work of Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1992) within teacher education, different forms of mentoring occur within different contexts. Bourdieu refers to these emplotments as fields, which are common spaces where individuals and organizations interact and mutually construct shared experiences (Bourdieu 2007; Grenfell, 2008). These fields are often in conflict over resources and issues such as time, and are constrained by the informality that Simon (sailing and canoe coach) values as being built by members as they co-experience field conditions (Grenfell, 2008). Within business, Cox (2003) highlighted ‘the imperative that context places on the enhancement of professional practice, the implications it holds for the use of standards and the opportunity that it provides for a creative approach to coach/mentor development’ (p. 21). Thus, mentors operating within a sports coaching context require specialized coaching expertise and contextual sensitivity (Lyle & Cushion, 2010).

Within the present study, coach mentors describe scenarios whereby contextual differences exist not only across mentoring domains (i.e. sport and business) but also between different sports and within the developmental pathway in a single sport. As a result, participant mentors suggest that the elite coach requires a unique, individualised mentoring
approach which takes longer and is more likely to address behaviour change. Furthermore, the role requirements of high performance coaches demand an amplified contextual knowledge base: something which has previously been highlighted as a shortcoming of current coach education provision (Griffiths & Armour, 2012; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). The work of Chesterfield et al. (2010) highlighted the problematic nature of coach education programmes in the UK, in that they lack contextual sensitivity and are delivered in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Bourdieu, in his consideration of the ‘naturalisation of best fit’, applies the term ‘doxa’ to situations where certain cultural assumptions become embodied to the degree that they are rarely questioned. Assumptions remain unspoken because they came without speaking (Bourdieu, 2004a). The idea that the contextual field is not central in the emergence of sport-related coaching norms is an example of doxa. The importance of place and culture is amplified within the idea of habitus, which is a set of dispositions that colour our everyday actions and provide us with aligned behaviours (Deer, 2008). Within the current treatment of sports coach mentoring in the literature, coach education programmes suggest this ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach will effectively upskill the coaching workforce, whereas elite coach mentors in the current study suggest the need to revise this mode of delivery and to challenge the doxa of the fields (Deer, 2008). Therefore, there remains a need to recognize that elite coach mentees require a contextually bound individually focused development programme based upon developing a reflective, flexible and critical understanding of the coaching role.

The problematic nature of institutional agendas in elite sports coach mentoring

The employment of formal mentoring schemes by sporting institutions as a workforce development tool continues to increase in popularity (Cushion, 2006). Often, institutions utilizing this approach align the mentoring scheme to long-term objectives or the strategic
position of the institution, instead of adopting a bespoke approach for the coach mentee

(Bloom *et al.*, 1998; Tinning, 1996; Thomson, 1998). As a result, formal mentors feel

restricted in both the topic and format of mentoring delivery. The participant coach mentors

in this study highlighted a number of specific social and cultural issues within their sport,

which impacted the aim and the philosophy of the mentoring schemes:

At times the awards dictate the content; it’s what is for the greater good of most. I

would like mentoring in the future to be more about philosophy and the things that

really do affect what we do every day. And it is about philosophy in some respects at

the moment, but the scheme was devised because of the perceived lack of highly

qualified female coaches. (Geoff)

It’s really to take talented coaches who work within NGBs at the minute and really

fast track them and accelerate their development. So we are hoping there will be some

short-term gains in the role they’re in at the moment but we are hoping they will

become the elite coaches of the future. And we are trying to fast track their

development by helping them with some of their skills and knowledge. (Dawn)

Further, the participants within the present study acknowledged how institutionally

driven agendas had problematically impacted their own mentoring schemes, as bespoke

coach development becomes neglected. Bourdieu suggests that the ability to challenge these

field-based agendas is based on the possession of various forms of capital (Grenfell, 2008).

Capital is essentially symbolic in nature and is used to influence your own and others’ field

positions. Without such capital, be it institutional capital (such as working for an NGB) or the

symbolic capital inferred by the acquiring of higher coaching awards, the prevailing
conditions and discourses are hard to confront (Taylor & Garratt, 2010: Taylor and McEwan, 2012). In the participants’ own words:

The coach themselves identifies the area of need, although there’s a performance-driven target by the organization. … I’d probably say to a certain level formalized mentoring could be of use but I think at a certain level, more towards the elite end, coach development is so specific you tick the boxes but you might not actually be developing the coach. (Danielle)

Often the format and mode of delivery of mentoring programmes are dictated by the institution in line with providing measurable outcomes for funding purposes. Here, Adam highlighted that:

Due to the [mentoring] scheme being tightly funded there’s a few more bits that are sort of overly measured [i.e. performance-driven targets]. I mean, my issue is funding comes in, the programme gets developed, it’s quite glossy, it’s supposed to be bespoke for the coach, [but] it’s too structured at the moment. (Adam)

Obtaining funding for coach education adds limitations to the formalized mentoring session and structure, which in turn drives the monitoring of mentoring effectiveness towards an audit culture. These fields are, in turn, influenced by external fields that are more powerful in terms of the control of and allocation of economic capital (e.g. sport body funding) (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Consequently, these external institutional pressures and stakeholder influences may be problematic and confine coach mentor practice, which may, in turn, reduce the value of the mentee’s experience. Here, Tony noted that:
On the odd occasion, you might feel like sometimes the formalized scheme has got the chains on you. I think that’s when your experience, intuition, gut feeling, call it whatever you like, help you because you would have been in a situation like that before. There have been a couple of times where I have done that and it’s not actually worked. It hasn’t worked for the mentee I’m working with. Afterwards, when I’ve evaluated it, it’s not worked for me either and I have to learn from those lessons.

(Tony)

Similarly to the work of Tourigny and Pulich (2005) within nursing, the participant mentors described scenarios where institutional norms, hierarchical structures or political influences dictated the format of delivery for the mentors. Indeed, one of the dangers of implementing a sports coach mentoring scheme which is heavily driven by institutional agendas and assessed through the collection of metrics is a reduction in the bespoke educational impact of the mentoring scheme. The work of Hansford et al. (2004) explains that such realities may be understood as the ‘darker side’ of mentoring (Duck, 1994; Long, 1997). In addition, this controlling of the field conditions can lead to ‘misrecognition’; this state, according to Bourdieu, produces an illusionary belief where agents are compliant to the dominant agenda, believing it is the only and best option open to them (Bourdieu 2004a; Grenfell, 2008).

Coach mentors in the present study noted the impact of ‘tightly funded’ schemes which manifested into a structured, regulated and generic approach to coach mentoring delivery. Furthermore, one of the difficulties institutions faced whilst designing and implementing formalized mentoring programmes was the ongoing concern relating to insufficient funding or the impact of funding being terminated before the programme was
established (cf. Long, 1997). Here, a number of financial pressures were placed upon the
demonstration of the success of sports coach mentoring schemes through the audit of tangible
increases in target demographics. However, such a climate may be contradictory to, and thus
discourage, supportive behaviour (Kram, 1985).

The dangers of over-formalizing elite sports coach mentoring
The over-formalizing of sports coach mentoring schemes occurs in numerous ways; for
example ridged structure, specific formats, generic workshops or conferences with rules and
regulations. As a result, these mentoring schemes reduce the bespoke value of mentoring and
learning outcomes for the mentorship (Jones et al., 2009). This section outlines the extent to
which over-formalizing the mentoring process is influenced by the institutions’ desire to
attain continuous funding and the problematic nature of measuring programme effectiveness.
The threat of a reduction in or complete withdrawal of funding manifests itself as an act of
symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2007), where compliance and orthodoxy are rewarded capital
above localism and bespoke development. Here, coach mentors expressed their concerns
about over-formalizing the schemes due to the complex nature of measuring mentee
development:

I think it’s important, the political environment the coach sits in. Some [contexts] are
so large the formalized process just gets the same [delivery] to every individual. But
they all come with different experiences and are individuals and will need different
things. … It’s finding the right people to mentor and it doesn’t become so washy that
nothing is achieved. And I think that’s the sad thing, politically, that if you look at
processes with players there’s a formal monitoring process of where funding is given
to the development of a player and you can see that through physiological data, or
performance data or rankings. And I think that in many respects we take that
[approach] and we try and apply it to coach education where it shouldn’t be as
formalized. (Danielle)

Christian outlined a number of realities of the audit culture within which many of the
elite sports mentoring programmes operate:

Often, I mean there’s a real challenge out there because if we talk strictly, you know,
funders would say ‘if we are going to fund a programme we want to know exactly
how many people are on the programme. We want to know the exact outcomes of the
programme and we want to measure the processes.’ And what we are looking at is a
natural relationship which has troughs and peaks with points of contact and it doesn’t
always fit in with a structured programme or recording form. So on one end you’ve
got this real need for structure and on the other you’ve got the need for a natural
relationship, which may or may not work. (Christian)

Interestingly, Arthur highlighted the political pressures placed upon publicly funded
formal mentoring programmes that are targeted for elite coach development:

Who accredits a mentor? The only real accreditation is from the coach or athlete
they’re working with. The accreditations is, ‘I need to see you again next week’, but
of course we can’t do that if we are using public money to run this programme so we
have had to find a way to assess people against a competence framework which is a
real pain in the arse. It’s subjective; it’s really difficult to say how self-aware
somebody is. You know we can spend hours doing it, and the sad thing is, we’ve had
to play the game. We appreciate we live in a political world and sometimes we have
to do it. It's not right but that's what we have had to do, so we do have a framework
against which we assess. (Arthur)

Such findings are mirrored in the work of Roberts (2000) who argued that excessive
structure and imposed guidelines upon mentorships could hinder the development of the
mentee. A further factor discussed by Ragins and Cotton (1999) is the complex nature of
balancing the bespoke nature of the mentorship with the structure and expectations of the
formal agenda. Philosophically, mentoring may be considered to operate on a continuum
from ‘coach-centred programmes’ to ‘institutionally driven programmes’. Coach-centred
approaches may focus upon assisting coaches to become ‘the best that they can be’, where the
role of the coach mentor is that of a facilitator of learning (Nelson et al., 2014a). For
Bourdieu (2004a), the corporation of education and the control of what is valued in learning
rarely serve those whom they were designed to educate. Learning, in this case, becomes
instrumental for both the agency it serves and those actors within that field who lack the
capital to effectively challenge, thus contributing to the field doxa by being cast ‘silently
silenced’ (Mathiesen, 2004). The role of the coach mentor in an institutionally driven
programme would be to ensure that mentees progress in line with a competence framework,
ensuring the institutional agendas are met, often with the aim of securing continued financial
support. The coach mentors were acutely aware of the difficulties associated with working
within highly politicalized environments where a number of stakeholders held contrasting
agendas (Jones & Wallace, 2005), and the impact that those influences often placed upon
formal mentoring schemes (i.e. over-formalizing mentoring schemes reduces the
individualised, bespoke, mentee-centred nature of the learning experience). Consequently, in
an attempt to develop the mentees in accordance with measurable modes of delivery, generic
workshops, sessions or conferences are often also implemented by GBs, which at times results in an ineffective decontextualized ‘tick box’ approach to coach learning (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2013).

Micro-politics in elite sports coach mentoring

The thematic analysis of the data further revealed how formalized elite sports mentoring programmes, like coaching more broadly, are not immune from social and political pressures from a number of stakeholders who have, at times, contradictory agendas (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Drawing upon the work of Ball (1987) and Blasé (1991), Potrac and Jones (2009) have highlighted that, when applied to sports coaching, micro-politics encapsulates the ‘political interactions that take place between social actors in different organizational settings’ (p. 225). More specifically, micro-politics relates to ‘the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals’ (Blasé, 1991, p. 11). For Bourdieu, the social is relational: each actor attempting to maintain an advantageous position within each field as it struggles with constrained resources. An individual’s own position and security in each field are governed by the value accrued by various forms of capital; this process only gives a temporary sense of security as outside forces determine the symbolic value these are afforded (Bourdieu, 2004b). Micro-political intercourse is a display of this unsettling condition and where individuals struggle to enhance or maintain field location. The following extracts highlight the micro-political nature of elite sports coaching mentoring programmes, particularly with regard to social power and interpersonal influence:

One of the KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] for the future will be to get as many mentees onto the Level 4 as possible [UKCC Level 4]. All of them have to be Level 4 by 2016, which is what canoeing have requested; which is useful because the whole
issue is to get people to engage in coaching and their own development, and you can
either do that by inspiring people to do that, or with the carrot and the stick. (Simon)

Importantly, Geoff highlighted that he was well aware that elite sports coach
mentoring programmes may be viewed as a form of formal power to achieve specific goals:

Our mentoring scheme, the prime aim is to help female coaches get higher
qualifications, whereas the men’s scheme is not necessarily for that … If you are
asking ‘is our mentoring scheme a form of social control?’, absolutely, I am sure it is.
Now, do we try and guard against that? Yes. How? Well, in discussions in trying to
encourage people to look at solving problems in different ways. But we are all a
product of our society. (Geoff)

The previous extracts highlighted the potential for elite sports coach mentoring
schemes to be used to control the career development of mentees. Indeed, Simon made the
point that you can inspire people ‘with the carrot and the stick’, whilst Geoff recognized that
formal coach mentoring schemes can be seen as a form of ‘social control’. The following
extract highlights an extension of one of the formalized elite sports mentoring programmes
and some of the micro-political realities of trying to encourage knowledge sharing:

The second strand of it [the mentoring scheme] was to mentor the assistant coaches.
Both our main coaches were foreign, university educated and had coaching degrees.
One [was] running the coach education system in Finland, very bright, very switched
on, [and was] also running the international federation shooting training academy,
working with very experienced Olympic medal winning coaches. Try as I may I could
not get them to do any mentoring whatsoever and that was a real disappointment. And after I saw that this was happening, this is really when I started the programme, because I had hoped to do it even more informally as a leader-follower type of mentoring, [but] they didn’t want to do it. I also felt the time wasn’t there, but again I instinctively felt that a lot of it was ‘my secrets, my power, my knowledge, and I am not sure where I am going in the future and may not have a role in Great Britain. I don’t want to tell you all my secrets.’ (Steve)

The following paired quotes from Arthur and David highlight the issues that mentors and mentees face working within the same sport:

We find the coaches much prefer to be coached by somebody who doesn’t have an agenda in their sport. Often NGBs will employ mentors from within and they are often seen very suspiciously as a spy. As soon as you have that there’s no trust, so mentoring doesn’t happen. (Arthur)

Sometimes I ask my mentor ‘how would you do this?’ His responses are not as clear or forthcoming as I’d like. I sometimes feel like it’s because it’s a competitive exchange, in terms of, you know, his athletes doing well and my athletes doing well because they compete against each other, and it’s been a problem. (David)

Again, one of the stark realities faced by many GBs is the availability and willingness of senior coaches to engage in mentoring programmes as coach mentors. This is particularly evident within elite sporting contexts where coaches may be competing for the same employment opportunities in the future. Each coach’s habitus is one that emerges in a culture
where competition and competitiveness are rewarded and a disposition towards self-preservation helps to ensure longevity in the field (Bourdieu, 2004b; Grenfell, 2008). Sharing sporting capital in the form of a free exchange of knowledge may be regarded as a weakening of individual capital (Taylor & McEwan, 2012). In this regard, this study presents some initial findings which suggested that to progress their own careers senior coaches may, in some instances, purposely resist engagement within mentoring programmes. Steve highlighted how some coaches were keen to retain their ‘secrets’, ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ to protect themselves from vulnerability and further their own individual career aspirations.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to address the dearth of empirical work exploring the realities of formalized elite sports coach mentoring. Specifically, this work sought to generate an empirically based picture of current practices in elite sports mentoring contexts in order to inform more meaningful coach education programmes (Jones et al., 2009). Following a thematic analysis of the data, four principle themes were generated which provided additional insights into the realities of formalized elite sports coach mentoring programmes. These themes were subjected to a Bourdieusian reading, which, it is argued, provided a richer insight into the political and cultural grammar of elite coach mentoring.

First, elite sports coach mentoring is contextually bound and distinctive in nature; thus, mentors operating within a sports coaching context require specialized coaching expertise and contextual sensitivity (Griffiths & Armour, 2012; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). That is, knowledge, value systems, competition and interpersonal skills will vary across coaching domains, which in turn requires coach mentoring approaches to be context sensitive.

Coaching domains, therefore, necessitate behaviours, practice and expertise to suit the domain the coach is operating within. However, the extent to which generic or cross-sport
mentoring may impact upon coach learning remains an as yet unexplored avenue for future 
coach learning research.

Second, formalized mentoring schemes are frequently driven by a number of, at times 
contradictory, agendas, which often served to fulfil the political agendas of the institution 
through meeting GB coaching workforce demographic targets (cf. Jones & Wallace, 2005). 
Each sporting domain, in terms of a Bourdieusian notion of field, is one of internal tensions 
and subject to the influence of political field, which governs economic capital (resources and 
money) and symbolic capital in terms of the value placed on each sport by organizations such 
as UK Sport and the British Olympic Association (Taylor & Garratt, 2010; Taylor & 
McEwan, 2012). Furthermore, formal mentoring schemes were seen to be important in 
sustaining and increasing funding for their sport from national funding bodies. From an 
internal GB perspective, formal mentoring schemes were identified as a vehicle to clearly 
demonstrate the success of current coach education programmes in coping with an 
increasingly evident audit culture within elite sport.

Third, a number of dangers existed if mentoring schemes were over-formalized and 
coach learners were required to progress through generic training programmes. Here, overly 
rigid programmes reduce the bespoke nature of the learning requirements of elite sports 
coaches (cf. Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Therefore, over-formalized schemes designed primarily 
to satisfy a competence framework approach run the risk of only satisfying institutional 
agendas, which at times results in an ineffective decontextualized approach to coach learning 
(cf. Chesterfield et al., 2010).

Fourth, from a micro-political perspective, elite sports coaching mentoring 
programmes held significant potential as a tool for social and political control of the coaching 
workforce, whilst at the same time potential mentors could be seen to exert resistance to such 
programmes to further their own future career opportunities (cf. Ball, 1987; Blasé, 1991;
Potrac & Jones, 2009). A great deal of interest in the pedagogical value of formalized coach mentoring programmes is evident within the sports coaching literature, but similarly to the suggestion of Jones and Wallace (2005), elite sports coaching mentoring programmes are not immune from the tussles of stakeholders’ at times contradictory agendas. As such, directors of elite sports mentoring schemes should recognize the tension between the individual goals and agendas of potential coach mentors and the institutional goals and agendas which often drive formal mentoring programmes.

In summary, this paper highlights several important issues for GBs, mentors and mentees to consider when engaging in formalized elite sports coach mentoring schemes. Whilst coach learning may remain, at least implicitly, the overarching goal of formalized elite sports coach mentoring programmes, consideration should be given to the institutional context and associated pressures upon stakeholders to ‘tick boxes’, ‘hit targets’ and maintain and increase levels of funding. Furthermore, conflicting institutional and individual agendas may limit the number of senior coach mentors who are willing to participate within formalized mentoring programmes because of concerns regarding the reduction in future career opportunities. Finally, it is important to recognize that whilst some elements of sports coaching may remain generic across sporting domains, there exists a need to educate coaches in a contextually sensitive manner if coaches are to be given an educational programme which they value and which is useful and relevant in informing their everyday coaching practice.

References


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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>Background</th>
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<td>Adam</td>
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<td>Hockey</td>
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<td>Alfie</td>
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<td>Football</td>
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1. Table 1. Participant Demographics.