

1 **The Challenges of Navigating different Spaces and Contexts in Collaborative Doctoral**
2 **Research in Sport Coaching**

3

4 **Abstract**

5 In this paper, we analyse our experiences as both researchers and supervisors while collaborating
6 with national governing bodies (NGBs) on jointly funded doctoral sport coaching research
7 projects. We share our collective accounts of undertaking applied coaching research. Composite
8 narratives reveal our ambitions for authentic collaboration; the vulnerabilities of the researcher;
9 and the importance of empathy. Using Bronfenbrenner’s theory, we explore how researcher-
10 practitioner PhDs involve movement between complex social-ecological systems. In doing so,
11 we seek to support neophyte researchers and supervisors engaged in collaborative research
12 partnerships. Contributions may also support NGBs and funders who are seeking high quality
13 and contextually situated coaching research.

14

15 Key Words: Collaboration, Doctoral Research, Bronfenbrenner

16

17 **Introduction**

18 This paper opens with three composite vignettes that consider our (*blinded*) journeys as
19 doctoral (PhD) researchers and supervisors. The first scene highlights our initial challenge of
20 achieving a sense of belonging in two *protected* spaces– the HEI and the NGB. The second
21 scene, a year into the project, highlights the third space we operated within – collecting data ‘in
22 the field’. The final vignette presents composite reflections from a supervisor perspective
23 (*blinded*) which empathises with some of the challenges we faced when navigating these
24 contexts. In presenting the vignettes first, we break away from traditional writing conventions,
25 not for its own sake, but to prioritise the reflexive account that crystallise our experiences (see
26 Ellingson, 2009). However, this approach was by no means straightforward, as the inclusion of
27 multiple authors, who held different roles and had their own nuanced experiences had to be
28 navigated to find some form of consensus from the beginning. Examples of this include 1) the
29 negotiation of an appropriate theoretical lens to makes sense of our experiences, and 2) the
30 writing and rewriting of the manuscript, which through a reflexive approach, and dialogue with
31 the reviewers, was completely restructured (i.e., vignettes were presented first as opposed to
32 originally coming after a traditional introduction, methodology, etc.). As seen now, the vignettes
33 are subsequently followed by a theoretical discussion that illuminates some of the complexities
34 of collaborative research.

35

36 **Vignette 1: New worlds and ambitions for an authentic collaboration**

37 Walking through campus sporting a bright yellow lanyard and new student card felt
38 strange. My heart was pounding. I had recently started my PhD journey, and the campus didn’t
39 feel like an ‘inside’ space. Not home - not yet. I headed towards Roger’s office, my supervisor,

40 passing undergraduate students, in their youthful spaces. Unlike them I had *proper* life
41 experiences. My working life in full-time sport was good; my coaching was good, and I held
42 credibility in that field. I felt secure. Here though, returning to university after so many years, I
43 just didn't feel as though I belonged. Hesitantly, I knocked on the office door.

44 *"There he is!"* Roger's voice boomed.

45 A smile and a nod accompanied "Hello!" as I pushed the door open. I took a seat and pulled out
46 my notepad and pen. I had a million questions I wanted answers to, yet Roger seemed relaxed.

47 *"How are you getting on?"* Roger asked.

48 I took a few seconds and glanced over to the buckling bookshelf that housed previous students'
49 bound theses. Space was limited in the growing library; I hoped my work would be there soon
50 enough.

51

52 "Ermm... it's great. I still can't quite believe I've been given this opportunity; you know?"

53

54 *"How are you settling in? How are things over at the other office?"*

55

56 "Being there is adding to how crazy this is! Like, I'm at the head office of an NGB! I
57 recognise I'm privileged, and it feels strange because every time I visit, you can tell
58 something special happens there. But equally, I feel out of place, as though I am slowing
59 them down".

60

61 I hoped Roger would share my desire for impact. However, I'm not entirely sure where, or how,
62 I can influence change. When at the NGB I want to chat, understand, observe, soak it in, but they

63 simply don't have the time. I try to be constructive; reading and attending meetings. I struggle to
64 feel like I belong in this solitary uninhabited space. What does the NGB need from me? How can
65 I support coach education development? Where does my contribution to knowledge fit?

66

67 "From my viewpoint I feel conflicted. I don't want to engage in their conversations all the
68 time. But when asked for my academic input I have nothing to share".

69

70 *"There is a lot to do, isn't there. I think people forget sometimes how slow the research*
71 *processes can be. They need to realise this is a PhD you're doing, not a commissioned*
72 *report. You can't rush it. It needs to be planned methodically...plus we are still waiting for*
73 *approval from the ethics committee".*

74

75 I found Roger's response both comforting and daunting in equal measure.

76

77 "They just want answers to their research question now, like right now, like three months
78 in. I feel they're expecting me to work at their pace, a much faster pace than my PhD
79 allows. I really want to embrace the challenge and split my time between their office and
80 this campus, but I'm struggling to balance the academic requirements and NGB
81 expectations."

82

83 *"Welcome to the PhD journey".*

84

85 **Vignette 2: What a day – the vulnerabilities of the researcher**

86 My empty coffee cup and black researcher lanyard bounced on the passenger seat. Several
87 attempts to set the Sat Nav correctly. Another day ticked off. Just the 137 miles until the
88 blissfulness of my head touching a pillow. Plenty of time to think. This fieldwork environment
89 was where I felt at home. A far cry from the awkwardness of the University, and the NGB
90 headquarters. I picked up the phone as I pulled out the gravel car park.

91

92 “*How was today?*” Roger asked. No small talk needed.

93

94 “Was good, there is so much to unpack! Coach developers were great. Really open, even
95 unloading frustrations. I think that’s because they know I’m a coach, so that perhaps gives
96 me some credibility. It felt good anyway being around coaches again”. I paused. “...Just
97 concerned, not with you, but with me. Where do I go with all the data...?”

98

99 A long silence before I had a response, or perhaps there was a loss of phone signal, I can’t tell as
100 it happens so often while chugging down a maze of country roads.

101

102 “*Yeah, I get it, think big picture now, what would theory X say? What part of the system is*
103 *impacted by this work? Has it changed another part of the system? Where does this fit into*
104 *the literature?*”

105

106 Roger knew everything. Of course he did! I wish he didn’t always have the *right* answer and
107 make it look easy. That’s why he has that blue staff lanyard!

108

109 “Yeah.... But Where does this go now, though? Who do I feedback to?”

110

111 I asked with a degree of certainty because the answer that would come my way was predictable
112 enough. My research contact at the NGB had moved on and my best connection in the NGB was
113 lost. I’m beginning to learn that industry moves fast - faster than my PhD studies and I am
114 impacted by things outside my control. I’m not sure how much of a collaboration this is
115 anymore! Could I have offered more to my contact, sooner? Perhaps I should have, maybe that’s
116 my error. Without my contact, communication with the NGB has died as of late. I am not sure
117 they even know I exist anymore. Despite the situation, Roger replies in his usual pragmatic tone.

118

119 *“Get yourself home safely. Let’s chat on Thursday. For now, just reflect on where this fits*
120 *in your PhD. The NGB might have to wait for the final article publication. If we are*
121 *thinking about publishing of course”.*

122

123 I offer an agreement, but I’m just a doctoral researcher. I don’t know about publishing work. I’m
124 not ready for that! I’m not sure I ever will be. I said goodbye to Roger and turned up the radio
125 sports show. This is my realm, my space, my football team were near the top of the table, and the
126 Olympics were around the corner. Against the background discussions, I can’t help feeling a bit
127 out of sorts, a bit lost, and frustrated. The meetings with NGB staff, the stakeholders in coach
128 education, started well. They seemed interested. They wanted me around. Now, a year later and
129 as we approach some of the results...it seems to have dissolved? People have moved on. I am
130 bearing the burden of silence. Perhaps I need to retreat into the academic or even my own world
131 a bit more.

132

133 **Vignette 3: Roger’s reflections on Collaborative Research – Importance of Empathy**

134 Let’s not beat around the bush. Developing high-*quality* researchers, advancing knowledge,
135 and bridging the research to practice gap is a risky, ambiguous business. Typically, the
136 collaborative partner wants data driven solutions and wants them *on time*, and within budget.
137 Whereas often the HEI has different priorities: peer-review publications; doctoral completions;
138 and measuring this obtuse term - ‘impact’. In essence, the managerialist quantifications of
139 quality may not align between the partners. For example, we publish our work as a means of
140 informing fellow researchers, and perhaps athletes, coaches, students and interested readers.
141 There may however be a disconnect between scientific research and knowledge translation in
142 sport (Bartlett & Drust, 2021; Fullagar et al., 2019; Lyle, 2019). Key stakeholders such as
143 performance staff and coaches rarely read published research or consciously act on researchers’
144 recommendations (Malone et al., 2019). Even if they did, and if they wanted to support such
145 work, the applied sporting environment does not always lend itself to ‘gold-standard’
146 reductionist research designs, the classic ‘pre/post intervention’, nor the incentive of the peer
147 reviewed publication. Rather, the applied environment is messy, complex, and policymakers
148 often ask different questions and operate to different logistical timescales and value systems than
149 academic researchers (Greenhalgh & Fahy, 2015). Empathising with the needs of policy makers,
150 has prompted me to (re)consider my approach to research. This is not to say I encourage lazy
151 interpretations or overgeneralised findings, but that I conceive functional integration as a
152 laudable quality in our work. After all, our industry collaborators certainly value that. Moreover,
153 as illustrated in the narratives above, our doctoral students are searching for ways to be
154 authentically useful and may need support to flourish across and between these two worlds.

155 In my experience the needs of researchers-practitioners and collaborative research partners
156 requires a reorientation of the conventional relationship between research and applied practice.
157 This can be difficult. So can convincing fellow academics (i.e., co-supervisors) of the need for
158 pragmatic and creative research designs (e.g., action research, ethnographic studies, visual
159 methods, dissemination via resources such as webinars and podcasts) that meet the needs of
160 partners and foster mutual benefits. It is a dispute I don't often win. For a long time, I did not
161 even convince myself to be flexible. Indeed, gaining an empathetic understanding of industry
162 partners can be a challenge for supervisors and students alike, who are immersed in the
163 metrication of HE. Here we can be driven by a narrow focus on the audit culture of academic
164 macro policies combined with a hubris for the theories, evidence, and capital of the academic
165 world.

166 For genuine authentic collaboration, supervisors require a critical awareness of their own
167 positionality, moving beyond pet theories and methodologies inherited through their own
168 occupational socialisation. Even the act of considering alternative research designs and
169 disseminating findings in creative ways prompts reflexive conversations about who we are as
170 supervisors. However, a curiosity for the alternative does not signify an abandonment of
171 'research rigour' but rather, a commitment to solution-focused projects. Drawing on my own,
172 somewhat forgotten, applied experiences has also helped me to consider the needs of industry
173 and support students to navigate that world. Indeed, critically getting back into the field (albeit as
174 a volunteer and on a small scale) has rekindled my empathy for practitioners, policy makers, and
175 vulnerable doctoral researchers. Of course, as a supervisor, I will never be a complete industry
176 insider. Nevertheless, there is much value in the supervisor who can relate to both.

177

178 **Where did these stories come from?**

179 Perhaps like many PhD students, in the post viva vacuum our (blinded) thoughts inevitably
180 focused on the personal and affective nature of our PhD experiences. Mindful of a reflexive
181 ethos (Berger, 2015; Townsend & Cushion, 2021), and imbued by the special issue opportunity,
182 we choose to move beyond our own individual musings and undertake a collaborative study
183 involving three different sport coaching researcher-practitioners. This approach aligned to the
184 interpretivist philosophical stance undertaken throughout our doctoral studies. Our collaborative
185 efforts therefore reflected a subjective epistemology (i.e., knowledge is constructed and therefore
186 subjective) as we co-constructed this article together as authors, over time (Philips, 1995). As a
187 team of three doctoral students and two supervisors, we also appreciate the relativist ontological
188 position (i.e., reality is multiple and dynamic) of one another's lived experiences, while still
189 aiming to find a collaborative consensus (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). This approach was
190 therefore appropriate because in understanding each other's PhD experiences, we sought a
191 different interpretation of the researcher-practitioner PhD phenomenon. This ambition is
192 consistent with 'crystallisation', which is a process where researchers offer something different
193 from a previously examined data set (Chapman et al., 2023; Ellingson 2009). Crucially,
194 crystallisation is not as a form of triangulation, but a means to an alternative and different
195 understanding. For example, in this manuscript we reanalysed and retold our experiences through
196 adopting principles from Bronfenbrenner's work as opposed to other lenses used by us in other
197 work. Furthermore, in this work we have offered our crystallised reflections of our journeys
198 through completing a PhD and thus we now offer a more comprehensive view of our experiences
199 than what previously may have been retold (Gearity et al, 2021).

200 To develop a crystalised view of the researcher-practitioner experience in sport coaching,
201 we utilised our respective reflective diaries. These had been collected across multiple sites and
202 time (e.g., in a HEI, at an NGB) across our PhD experience. These diaries had been individually
203 analysed using a range of theoretical frameworks (e.g., Bernstein, Freire) within our thesis. Now
204 they provided an opportunity to develop a new collaborative view of being a researcher-
205 practitioner undertaking a sport coaching PhD. Collectively our diary extracts were derived from
206 over ten years' worth of experience and comprised 122 pages of initial written text, that provided
207 a new opportunity for analysis.

208 Iteratively, we analysed the diaries to identify shared, and nuanced insights from our
209 experiences. This began with doctoral students reading each other's diaries and the reflective
210 chapters in our PhDs, before deconstructing our collective experiences through discussion.
211 Several iterations of meetings were undertaken including sharing perspectives with our
212 supervisors who challenged us as critical friends and subsequently provided their own
213 perspective. Through this we came to confirm that undertaking a doctoral study project alongside
214 a NGB can be very challenging; at least it was for us! But our supervisors continued to remind us
215 that the challenge of collaborative research efforts *may* be worthwhile because they *could* result
216 in published research (e.g., Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2022), and
217 inform *potential* changes in situated practice (e.g., informing new policy). Our analysis also
218 highlighted how different stakeholders (and by consequence, the contexts they reflexively
219 construct), operate under different constraints (e.g., time and funding allocations) reflecting
220 particular and wider socio-political influences (Newman et al., 2022).

221 During the analysis and writing process we have seen empathy, disagreement and finally,
222 consensus, resulting in these vignettes presented above. This process included several versions of

223 the vignettes both prior to and after a very helpful peer review. For us, this writing and rewriting
224 has been a reflexive process which enabled us to understand our positionality (i.e., see where we
225 had come from and where we arrived). Indeed, the initial writing was driven by this and was
226 undertaken by the doctoral students. During this initial writing process, we made the decision to
227 make ourselves publicly identifiable as authors. Reflexively, we did not seek to produce a
228 narrative that caused harm to ourselves, nor the organisations we represented during our studies.
229 Related to this, we chose to represent our collective insights using a composite creative non-
230 fiction (CNF) approach (Cavallerio, 2021). The composite creative approach is appropriate
231 because it allows for the obscuring of identifying information while creatively articulating shared
232 situated experiences (Dempsey et al., 2021; Leeder, Dempsey, and Chapman, 2022). To do this
233 we considered character (i.e., the agents within the story), scene (i.e., the contextual locations in
234 which the story develops) and plot (i.e., the events in the story show a continued journey when
235 navigating political spaces) (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that represented our shared reflexive
236 analysis. Indeed, while acknowledging the differences across our experience, we primarily
237 sought to emphasise common experiences in the vignettes. In time we passed these to our
238 supervisors for their input.

239 During subsequent discussions, supervisors somewhat ‘scrutinised’ what we had created,
240 while adding their own input. This process perhaps reflects the legacy, rituals and power
241 dynamics that had grown between us during our previous supervisor-supervisee relationship.
242 Further back and forth from students, supervisors and indeed reviewers has occurred over a 9-
243 month period. This has been a challenging, highly contested, yet fruitful learning and reflective
244 process for all authors, especially navigating the role development of ‘the students’ towards ‘the
245 colleague’. This involved crystallising our experiences (i.e. seeing old data anew) through

246 Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological work. Indeed, this scrutiny of our experiences, and rewriting
247 of the vignettes that represent some of them, continued up until the end of the publication
248 process. We hope that it has led to a layered account of our researcher-practitioner experiences.
249 Furthermore, we hope fellow students and supervisors can draw some naturalistic generalisations
250 from the vignettes to inform their own journeys (Smith, 2018).

251

252 **A Critical Commentary**

253 Through a reflexive process (i.e., an internal dialogue of critical self-evaluation and
254 reflection) (see Berger, 2015; Townsend & Cushion 2021), we came to understand our shared
255 doctoral experiences as involving movement between complex social contexts. To further
256 crystallise these experiences, we turned to the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner,
257 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), while acknowledging that other perspectives may also add
258 value.

259 Bronfenbrenner's work evolved from an early ecological view of human development
260 (1980-1993), which situated the individual in both immediate and wider environments. This
261 theory is often represented through concentric systems (i.e., micro, meso, exo, and macro
262 system). Bronfenbrenner's later work elaborated on how the individual interacts within and
263 between these systems including the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model
264 (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Trudge, 2013). Here it is recognised that development
265 is influenced by the *person* (e.g., resources, gender, personality), *context* including the immediate
266 micro (e.g., buildings, social actors), meso (e.g., university or NGB) and macro levels (e.g.,
267 societal cultures), and *time* interacting with people, in contexts and through broader societal

268 periods. These interactions reciprocally influence *proximal processes* including regular,
269 contextual interactions with people, symbols, and objects over time (e.g., supervisory meetings).

270 In terms of *person*, we (blinded) as neophyte researcher-practitioners had experiences as
271 teachers, coaches, and coach developers/mentors in different sporting environments. These
272 experiences contributed to what Bronfenbrenner refers to as our ecological transition, as we
273 approached the different *contexts* (i.e., the University and NGB). With mixed success (see
274 vignette 1), we engaged with multiple stakeholders across these political, spatial, and relational
275 contexts (e.g., sport clubs; HEI meetings, conferences; and meetings within the NGB who part-
276 funded our studies). Crucially, the University and NGB contexts have both shared and distinctly
277 different macro influences, meso level policies, and micro level procedures, behaviours, and
278 norms. These manifest in different dress codes, greetings, motives, knowledges, and
279 expectations. At times, our prior experiences helped us to navigate these contexts. For example,
280 in vignette 2 we drew upon our coaching experiences to connect with participants and build
281 rapport during interviews. At other times our researcher-practitioner identities ‘othered us’ (see
282 vignette 1). Critically we use the term researcher-practitioner here and not
283 researcher/practitioner. Our notation is not intended to create an either/or. Nor is to strengthen a
284 theory and practice divide (Jones, Corsby, & Thomas, 2023). Rather it signifies the salient point,
285 that amongst the many other roles in our lives, we as doctoral students inhabited both academic
286 and industry *contexts*.

287 As alluded to in the second vignette, our researcher-practitioner doctoral processes required
288 us to (re)orientate ourselves with both the concrete and abstract understanding of everyday
289 coaching (Jones, Corsby & Thomas, 2023). For example, when observing coaches in *context*, we
290 adopted varied theoretical lens. We have become more critical, and we urge future researcher-

291 practitioners to appreciate theory in practice. *Proximal processes* have supported us with this
292 (e.g., supervisory meetings, writing, meetings with NGBs, conference presentations, annual
293 reviews). Alongside a reflexive attitude, these processes drove our development as researcher-
294 practitioners. For example, the first vignette highlights our hopeful ambitions for impactful
295 research with the potential to change policy, rather than the “product” being a bound thesis
296 gathering dust on our supervisor’s shelf. However, by the second vignette, we are practicing
297 researchers who can collect data and who's motivational focus had shifted towards making sense
298 using theory, learning to publish, and completing our doctoral qualifications. We also saw how
299 this development in the slow ‘processes’ of HE contrasted with the fast-paced, volatile nature of
300 the NGB. Indeed, evidencing the indexing of the Person-Process-Context-Time, we gained an
301 appreciation of the *time* to think in academia and developed long-term relationships with our
302 academic supervisors. In contrast, our experience with NGB partners, saw early progress, but
303 also rapid change and staff turnover. As we progressed, we had less interaction with the *people*
304 within the NGB as many had moved on and others had come in with newer age. This contributed
305 to what Bronfenbrenner (2005) refers to as the three-legged stool metaphor, whereby when a
306 context is less influential than the others, then the individual tilts towards one direction. In other
307 words, we came to spend more *time* in the academic context, and this has shaped our
308 development. Now all three of us are employed as lecturers.

309 Roger’s reflections similarly highlight how moving between the academic and industry
310 contexts continues to shape his development as a supervisor. Primarily, Roger has learned,
311 through engagement with *people* in industry, the importance of reorientating his conventionally
312 held view of scientific research. We hear how Roger contrasts the peer-reviewed publications
313 (and the associated scientific rigour) expected of HEI against the research-informed solutions

314 required by the industry partner. In practice Roger balances the *time* and budget constraints of
315 the industry partner (in this case, the NGB), against the concern for theories, evidence, and
316 capital of the HEI. He does this through what he refers to as “functional integration” and by
317 rethinking the approaches to doctoral projects (e.g., action research, case reports, or natural
318 experiments). An appreciation of the wider macro influences on both these immediate micro-
319 environments also helps Roger to support researchers-practitioners. This is not always easy,
320 however, as the third vignette illustrates the ‘push and pull’ of both contexts. Indeed,
321 Bronfenbrenner (2005, p. 55) alludes to these challenges when he discusses how a lack of a
322 complementary relationship can lead to limiting the “...formulation of research questions and
323 designs, and thus the range of possible findings”. Lastly, we recognise how the time and
324 opportunity advocated by Roger helped to shape our understanding of the (sometimes)
325 competing demands of academia and NGBs. In this regard, we are grateful for supervision that
326 worked *with* us, not only in terms of our anxieties and stresses, but to appreciate the relation
327 between new knowledge and industry.

328

329 **Conclusion**

330 This paper offers some insight into our experiences as doctoral researcher-practitioners. By
331 using a collaborative approach and concepts from Bronfenbrenner’s theory, we have crystallised
332 our previously examined experiences. Across three vignettes we show our ambitions for
333 authentic collaboration, our vulnerability as we moved between different contexts, and the value
334 of empathy for both students and NGB stakeholders. Moreover, we have learned how 1)
335 researcher-practitioners bring multiple backgrounds to their role that can add value, but may also
336 serve to ‘other’ them; 2) how investing in proximal processes in both contexts can help

337 researcher-practitioners develop and maintain understanding; 3) how time mediates differently
338 within the research and practice contexts; and 4) how supervisors may need to empathetically,
339 creatively, and skilfully navigate the demands of the researcher-practitioner PhD. How such
340 considerations translate to recommendations in practice remains a challenge. Despite this, the
341 researcher-practitioner PhD was rewarding, dynamic, and solution-focused. We *may* even have
342 helped (re)shape some coach development along the way.

343

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