# Reappraising theorisations of power in the coach–athlete relationship: future directions for sports coaching research

Alexandra Consterdine & William G. Taylor

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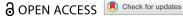Alexandra Consterdine [ID][a] and William G. Taylor[b]

aSchool of Sport & Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores, Liverpool, UK; bCarnegie School of Sport, Leeds Becket University, Leeds, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a reconceptualisation of the manner in which we have considered and described the coach–athlete relationship in high-performance sport. We appeal for a radical reconsideration of the way that power has been portrayed within coaching literature in an attempt to consider new ways in which power operates in such arenas. Although theoretical work on power within the coaching process has been enlightening, and more recent empirical studies have demonstrated some interesting conceptualisations of power from a poststructural perspective, it has not been extensively applied in sufficient depth overall. By offering more nuanced poststructural and critical readings of power, together with a contextualised approach that considers interactions, language, entanglement, materiality, and discourse, it may be possible to suggest a more insightful set of ideas; one that allows us to better understand the nature of coach–athlete relationships operating at this level.

## Introduction

### The sport–power relationship under scrutiny

> As a socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, sport remains profoundly opaque: it has proved strongly resistant to critical analysis, and by far the most intractable aspect is the question of the relationship between sport and power. (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 1)

In John Hargreaves's (1986) seminal work, *Sport, Power and Culture*, he challenged the consensus that in Western societies power is located in one place or possessed by a political elite. Instead, he argued that power has the capacity to circulate through the social body where networks of power extend beyond that of government and the State through to the fissures of civil society. This capillary attribute implies that power infiltrates all aspects of everyday life and is expressed as many different forms of power relations between dominant and subordinate groups in society. Power may find embodiment within economic, cultural or political institutions as well as through *vis-à-vis* interaction, and can be exercised openly or covertly, with or without resistance, or by taking or withholding action (Westwood, 2002). Consequently, power relations are complex, mobile, difficult to unpick and can have consequences beyond their intended location. Hargreaves (1986) elaborates that:

> Power relations are rarely total in their scope, or totally one way in their effects, for agents can never perfectly predict and control the whole environment of their operations, and least of all the actions of other agents and or the responses of power subjects. (p. 5)

Sport is one such arena where complex power relations operate. Given the historical and social importance of sporting activities, Jarvie et al. (2017) contends that the sport–power relationship may need to be considered within wider forms of culture, namely, late capitalist, consumer, and popular culture when analysed. We, the authors, offer that these power relations are not stagnant nor definitive, rather they represent a permanent state of contestation that combines the efforts of the individual with

**CONTACT** Alexandra Consterdine ✉ A.Consterdine@ljmu.ac.uk 🖃 Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool John Moores, Liverpool, L3 3AF UK

communal operation or agency with socio-political, economic and cultural forces and courses (Carrington, 2022; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002). To elaborate, these power relations are fluid and need continual attention and modification to either maintain the social order, or undergo fundamental reform during periods of social flux (Hargreaves, 1986). Through disputation, compromise, and negotiation, other writers such as Atkinson and Gibson (2017) and Pike (2021) have acknowledged the transformative capabilities of the sport-power relationship, where all parties regardless of dominant or subordinate grouping profit from the ensuing entanglement and subsequent conciliatory process. Yet, the subtle multiple manifestations of the nuances of power are hard to distinguish, and some of the difficulties lie in the assertion that power relations are elusive, complex and seldom subject to the public gaze (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002). Perhaps, an alternative approach could embrace the process of entanglement in contrast to disentanglement, further acknowledging the intricacies of power? Moreover, tracing how ideas and critiques about power scatter, overlap, or transform as they interact with different contexts or frameworks could be fruitful in evolving the field (Barad, 2014; Camiré, 2023).

## The social in/significance of sports studies/coaching

In spite of its importance, some authors have argued that the sociology of sport has not always received the acknowledgement it deserves, thus quieting the emphasis on the sport-power nexus (Andrews, 2008; Potrac et al., 2011). For example, many sport and exercise science/sports coaching/kinesiology undergraduate degree courses do not fully account for the social or cultural context in which sport as a phenomenon is studied (Andrews, 2008). Conversely, by taking a more sociologically informed approach, students and researchers might uncover more diverse and rich insights into issues such as identity, power, and resistance within sport and physical activity (Silk et al., 2014). However, this continuing neglect results in the privileging of a technocratic discourse of sport over socio-cultural aspects, leading to a dominant ideology of the scientific analysis of sport and physical activity and the marginalisation of other paradigms (Andrews, 2008; Cushion et al., 2003). The complicity of sporting systems in the unproblematic acceptance of the dominant ideology of scientific analysis was explored in Manley and Williams (2022) article on rugby. They offered that increasing reliance on data and surveillance tools leads to a tension between the human, emotional side of being an athlete and the technological demands of performance optimisation. This paper is illustrative of a growing counter-movement that challenges the positivistic, reductionist interpretation of sports performance and sports coaching in particular (e.g. Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2002; Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Mills & Thue Bjørndal, 2025; Mills et al., 2024; Potrac et al., 2011).

By recognising and championing the role of the coach in the development of athletes across the whole range of sports participation, coaching is increasingly seen by some as a socially embedded activity where social relationships between athletes and coaches become crucial (Cushion et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2004). Specifically, it is at the nexus of social interaction where the key themes of power, control, and politics exist, influencing the synthesis, development and (re)creation of coach–athlete relationships (Ronglan, 2011). Just as Jones et al. (2004) argued that the coach–athlete relationship is at the heart of the coaching process, Ronglan (2011) suggested that interaction and power lie at the heart of this relationship. Conversely, authors such as Camiré (2023), Denison (2022), and Maclean and Allen (2022), go further, instead positioning coaching beyond the coach–athlete relationship or solely situating micro-coaching in a broader macro-social context. For example, Denison in his Latourian exploration of cross-country ski coaches offered that their practice is located in "... constantly changing and evolving actor-networks comprised of multiple circulating human and nonhuman entities 'made to act' by their many ties and attachments" (2022, p. 1). He argued for a new topographical landscape that moves in and between ideas, people, objects, materials, and documents that is in constant flux.

It is important to note that power relations are not just limited to human interaction, discourse and language, but include the sociomateriality of nonhuman agents (e.g. video cameras, equipment, landscape etc) (Maclean & Allen, 2022). These are vital concerns, for both human and nonhuman actors interact with

the athlete's learning, knowledge and subsequent development as a performer (Potrac et al., 2011; Maclean & Allen, 2023).

### Illuminating coach–athlete relationships

Given the significant role of the coach in developing these interacting aspects of athlete development (Cushion et al., 2006), this article calls for more work to explore and deconstruct[1] *both* the coaching process and social relationships between athletes and coaches. In championing the sociocultural and pedagogical landscape, many authors have presented the coach–athlete relationship as being foundational to an athlete's success and well-being (Cassidy et al., 2016; de Haan & Norman, 2020; Potrac & Jones, 2011; Ronglan, 2011). By studying these dynamic, transient, contested, and powerful relationships within the broader topographical landscape, we can better understand the complex ways in which coaches can influence athletes in multiple ways (Gearity et al., 2023; Johns & Johns, 2000; Mills et al., 2020; Potrac & Jones, 2009; Purdy & Jones, 2011). Furthermore, most scholars have approached the coach–athlete relationship from a humanist behavioural psychological position (Jowett, 2007, Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Sandström et al., 2016; Stebbings et al., 2016; Zhao & Jowett, 2023), or from an interpretive micropolitical approach (Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Potrac & Jones, 2009, 2011; Potrac et al., 2002, 2007; Purdy et al., 2008), or used a poststructuralist perspective (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Denison, 2007; Denison & Mills, 2018; Denison et al., 2017; Gearity & Mills, 2012; Gearity et al., 2023; Johns & Johns, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Mills & Denison, 2013, 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). The framing of the research questions, the various paradigms employed, the variety of methodological approaches used and the multiplicity of ways to analyse research has resulted in a disparate knowledge base that varies in quality and application. Whilst the proliferation of research taking a models-based, reductive and prescriptive approach to this phenomenon might have the attraction for coaches looking for a straightforward answer to their relational issues, these articles are reductive, post-positivistic, and do not fully consider power-relations in their complexity (Jowett, 2007, 2017; Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Rather than offering a set of instructions for coaches to follow, being cognisant of their own approaches and interrogating their interactions with athletes could help coaches become more ethical in their practice (Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Denison et al., 2017). Ethical conduct in this case refers to more than just following a set of rules that govern behaviours. To offer coaches ways to reflect on their practice and consider different ways of thinking about people, performances, and progress as suggested by Denison and Avner (2011) could help coaches develop an "ethic of care" towards athletes (Cronin & Armour, 2018). By alerting coaches to existence of ethical dilemmas or coaching problems could be fruitful in exploring how moral principles guide coaching practice.

We should also consider the framing of coach–athlete relationships in terms of the dominant discourse of status and power (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015; Turman, 2006). Hierarchical notions of leadership being invested in the coach with the athlete being subjugated feeds into a top-down, possessive, and limited understanding of power and the coaching process (Cassidy et al., 2016). Ultimately, this has ramifications for the production of docile bodies and athlete alienation (Denison, 2007; Mills & Denison, 2018). Studies that interrogate existing systems of control, the neoliberal effects of capitalist sports culture, coach development/training, and current rationalistic-performance coaching discourse could help challenge dualistic thinking amongst coaches and other stakeholders. Perhaps in the spirit of evolving these discussions in purposeful ways, we could consider new ways of conceptualising these relationships as moving beyond the interactions of these two agents. Is there potential to consider coaching as an embodied and dynamic performance occurring through, but certainly beyond the margins of coach–athlete interactions and behaviours? Thus, a more critical reading is required that not only exposes the complexities of coach–athlete relationships and the coaching process they are engaged in but also locates their central activities within its environment, context, and more-than-human agencies (Camiré, 2023).

### Coming up . . .

This paper will explore wider readings of power and how it has been theorised in the social sciences to help ground the phenomenon as a highly complex web of social forces between structure and agency, inter- and

intra-subjectivities, and the interstitial flow of power through society. Throughout, we attempt to problematise previous conceptions of power and explore the manifest ways that it has been conceived from a poststructural perspective to illuminate coaching practices, perceptions and discourses. We offer that this represents an exciting research direction, but suggest that these appreciations of power are yet to be fully mobilised with regard to coach–athlete relationships. Given its multiple, rhizomatic and omnipresent nature, we suggest ways that power has been theorised in this field and call for a subtler appreciation the operations of power that are not possessive or located in the individual, but instead continue the work of critical scholars inspired by Foucault, Hargreaves, Bourdieu, and others. Thus, poststructural Foucauldian theorisations of power have been instrumental in re-conceptualising the coaching process, acting as a counter to the hegemony of earlier interpretations of power. The article then progresses to a critique of humanist behavioural psychology and points of departure for sports coaching research. This includes a critique of how power has been treated from a sociological approach in sports coaching with proposed alternatives woven throughout. The article then closes with a brief conclusion which summarises key positions, (re)conceptualisations of power and reiterates its call for further work that continues to diversify its theoretical framework, considers broader epistemologies, utilises novel fieldwork methods, and invites an interdisciplinary approach to exploring power (e.g. Avner et al., 2021; Denison, 2007; Gearity & Mills, 2012) in coaching more generally and applied specifically to understanding the coach–athlete relationship.

## The wider context

> The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in Physics. Like energy, power has many forms, such as wealth, armament, influence on opinion. (Russell, 1938, p. 10)

Russell's conception of power is a useful starting point from which to engage with the wider social manifestation, operation and consequences of power. Here, power is described as an all-embracing component of social interaction and related behaviours. Not only does it infuse the social world, taking many guises, but it also extends into the materiality of reality, shaping our thoughts; where matter, meaning, and agency are always in flux and co-constituted through the processes of entanglement (Barad, 2003). Yet, despite its ubiquitous nature, power actively defies interpretation and resists definition (Lukes, 2021). The implication here is that its complexity makes it difficult to study, as illustrated by French and Raven's view that "The processes of power are pervasive, complex and often disguised in our society" (1959, p. 150). Thus, power has been seen as a blunt tool of influence and control (Dahl, 1957; Weber, 1921), and also, as having refined, multifaceted, relational, and multidimensional levels of significance and consequence (Foucault, 1978,; Westwood, 2002). A further challenge is that power has fostered a plurality of voices from diverse social fields including economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, thus contributing to the different ways in which power has been explored and applied (Gaventa, 2003).

### *Problematising power*

Russell's (1938) early conception of power being essential, multifaceted and elusive is also expressed in Dowding's (2011) *Encyclopaedia of Power* who frames power in a multiplicity of ways. Here, power is conceptualised as power in relation to cognition and behaviour, power as control theory, power as influence, power as prize, power to and power over, and power to initiate action, and power to prevent action. In addition, power is defined as imperial, bureaucratic, political, structural, religious, and social. It is, therefore, not surprising that this all-encompassing, polysemic word with its many layers, connotations and inferences has been treated as a key concept for many thinkers in the Western world, from ancient history through to late capitalism. Power engaged the early Greek philosophers, was a fundamental concern to Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Hobbes (1588–1679), and was a crucial aspect of the work of Weber, Giddens, Foucault, and Lukes operating in the twentieth century (Westwood, 2002). We contend that the notion of power actively calls for continuous attention and accompanied redefinition as it continues to engage writers in the new millennium (Fiske, 2010; Magee & Smith, 2013).

Despite a wealth of interpretations and meanings offered, a number of definitions of power share a common characteristic; that of being the potential to influence or cause an effect. This is illustrated by Weber (1921, p. 162) who argued that "Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [sic.] own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests". For us, this may be an anthropocentric conceit, for attributing so much agency to one human, we downplay the influence of structure and the agency of nonhumans (Denison, 2022). We are also critical of this hierarchical, top-down notion of power being possessive, but it is pervasive. Indeed, this Weberian position is central to much wider writing on power, with the current debate being centred on the means to enable, make societal actions possible, or to act to constrain or prevent actions (Blader & Chen, 2012). Additionally, central to these discussions are the ways in which power is understood, grounded in the type of power (modalities) that it involves, and the social spaces (sites of power) where it is applied (Carrington, 2022; Westwood, 2002).

Despite the wealth of interpretations available, social power is often defined as asymmetric control over valuable resources in social relations (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Magee and Smith (2013) corroborate this position and maintain the centrality of power within social relationships, specifically in circumstances involving restricted assets. Variables such as social stratification, gender, ethnicity, hierarchy, and status also interact in ways that add colour and complexity to an already heady mix of the social and personal (Blader & Chen, 2012). Yet it is the notion of interdependence within power relations that has increasing potency within the social sciences. As Fiske (2010, p. 942) argues " . . . inter-dependence describes people's patterns of control within a dyadic relationship, that is in what ways they need each other (or not) to attain valued goals".

A critique that could be levelled at these works is that they are often tied to the notion of micro-interactions and ignore the wider socio-politico macro forces that structure even the most basic of human interactions. This is not to fall back to an unnecessary humanist binary, but to expand the possibilities of an entanglement between these worlds that lead to an " . . . ongoing reconfiguring of spacetimemattering across and within spaces and times" (Barad, 2014, p. 174). Adopting a more fluid position about the operation of power *in potentia*, its manifest fluctuations and the multitudinous ways that it finds expression might lead to a more persuasive set of ideas to explore how power produces people, ideas, things and processes. However, in work that considers relationships, micro-interactions are often situated within a social vacuum, and takes the view of power as being possessive, repressive and linked to manipulation and strategy (Blader & Chen, 2012). From a sports coaching perspective, some empirical studies (e.g. Groom et al., 2012; Rylander, 2015; Turman, 2006) have looked to the seminal French and Raven (1959) model as a framework for under-standing power. Whilst this has the advantages of simplicity and straightforwardness, this perspective on power is socio-psychological in nature (Rylander, 2015) and does not account for the impact of wider social or cultural forces such as the family, governmentality, social class, mass media, age, gender, and ethnicity. However, whilst not offering these approaches as a panacea for studying power, they have been fundamentally useful as steps towards more complex analysis which are considered below.

### What of the alternative views on power?

Given the plurality of the different interpretations of power within the social sciences, we should be wary of accepting one-dimensional or simplistic workings of power to frame our understanding. Doing so may limit our consideration and perception of social processes, including the way in which we navigate our collective, many-faceted and layered social world. For power to take on more nuanced notions of meaning and significance, it is to the work of power theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Elias, Blau, Giddens, and Mann that could be valuable when proposing alternative readings of power. For us, these critical thinkers have been influential in provoking a deeper engagement with the plurality of power, its multiple manifestations, operations and subtleties. This was no easy task, as we wrestle with, and continue to consider these critical scholars' connections, similarities and differences in their thinking. We first turn to Hargreaves (1986) who, in his work on the sport-power nexus, referred to it as a " . . . relationship between agents, the outcome of which is determined by agents' access to relevant resources and their use of appropriate strategies in specific conditions of struggle with other agents" (p. 3).

It is possible to link the genealogy of Hargreaves's thoughts from conventional interpretations such as Dahl's (1957, pp. 202–203) idea of power as "A has power over B to the extent that he [sic.] can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do", to Elias (1982) view in which he emphasises the relational and processual nature of power. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Norbert Elias was concerned with civilisation and the interdependence of power relations. He thought of power as an essential aspect of all human relationships in which power balances, are always present. Power is not seen as being possessional, a thing to hold or wield, as others in the social sciences have done (e.g. Magee & Galinsky, 2008), but rather as a process between individual or groups in which people are bound together by their interdependence. Elias (1982) developed this concept into his figurations of mutual interdependence which in itself has links to Mann's (2012) networks of intersecting power structures. Nevertheless, Elias' value to sport sociology is not without critique, for Giulianotti (2004) challenged Elias' oversimplification of power as a social resource imagined through social figurations and unsophisticated games models. Furthermore, Giulianotti argued that power cannot be explained in arithmetic terms, critiquing Elias' reductive reading of power further. These arguments certainly add depth to an analysis of power, emphasising it as a contested space and continuing sport scholars' valuable contribution to discussion and theoretical debate.

The idea of power as a relational aspect of social interaction and ontological positioning finds expression in the writings of the French poststructuralist Michel Foucault. Observed by many to be the most significant power theorist of the late twentieth century (Gaventa, 2003), Foucault often discussed power according to what it was *not* and was more interested in its operation as opposed to committing himself to a narrow definition. Thus, for Foucault "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 94).

This new reading of power was taken up by Westwood (2002) who purports that by not treating power as a facility exterior and separate from social relations, but is integral to social relations, situates the phenomenon as always present or immanent and diffused through the fabric of social life. Although Foucault's writing and concepts have a reputation of being difficult and contradictory, his ideas and theories are often expressed indirectly and interwoven with his work on other topics (Gaventa, 2003). Yet, to understand Foucault's position on power, Gaventa identifies four major areas in which he departs from conventional models of understanding; "Power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them" (2003, p. 3).

## Locating sport as an interpersonal and social enterprise: applying the concepts of power

Although we have mapped out a brief exploration of how power has been considered, we should return to explore it in relation to a complex, dynamic social activity such as sports coaching (Potrac et al., 2007). To elaborate, when Westwood (2002, p. 25) claims, " . . . there is no social without power" and when this is applied to coach-athlete relationships, the manner in which power operates and manifests itself within a coaching context becomes a potent area for study (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Potrac et al., 2011). A more nuanced and intricate understanding of power should provide a more thought-provoking lens by which to consider the constructed social world (Markula & Silk, 2011) and in particular offer coaches an opportunity to study their own coaching practice and coach-athlete interactions (Jones & Kingston, 2013; Potrac & Jones, 2009). Furthermore, should we consider coaching as operating beyond the socially constructed world in which power relations and social interactions are just one part of a complex dance with and between social and cultural forces, language, subjectivities, ontologies, and other structures? (Camiré, 2023). For coaches, the ability to reflect on practice, and to consider wider social and non-human factors could also offer a more socially embedded view of coaching (Denison, 2022; Denison & Avner, 2011).

Although both theoretical and empirical work on power and control within the coaching process has been enlightening (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Jones et al., 2002; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Potrac & Jones, 2009, 2011; Potrac et al., 2011), it has not been applied *extensively* to the coach-athlete relationship. Since the start of the 21st Century there has been a burgeoning interest in Foucauldian and poststructuralist readings of power which focuses on its manifestation and operation in the coaching process, or coach education more broadly (Denison & Avner, 2011; Denison & Mills, 2014; Mills et al., 2022). These theories

and frameworks have found expression in the work of Denison and Mills (2018), Gearity et al. (2023), and Pringle and Crocket (2013) in their exploration of the coach-athlete relationship, leading to novel insights into coaching practices, and the (re)production and contestation of discourse. Nonetheless, intriguing as they are, they have not challenged the hegemony of earlier conceptualisations of power, which contemporary authors continue to fall back on (Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

We call for a reappraisal of the workings of power as we contend that prior investigations have not given credence to the primacy of power relations (Jowett, 2007; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Furthermore, those who have acknowledged the centrality of power relations have often produced binate, closed, and unambiguous interpretations of power that, we would argue, require re-evaluation (Jones et al., 2005; Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). These interpretations of power often result in its construction as a negative, sinister, repressive or abusive force (Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). By emphasising the operation of power as hierarchical and located solely within the coach-athlete binary, the aforementioned research adds to the dominant discourse – that of power as possessive and presented as a paired dynamic (d'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998).

## Points of departure for sports coaching research

### Psychological dominance and an insensitivity to the social-cultural elements of the coach-athlete relationship

In order to further unpack some of the issues inherent to sports coaching research and practice, we seek to problematise its reliance on humanist sports psychology that present coaching as idealistic representations, decontextualised linear models, or restricted coach-athlete dyads. However, labelling such work as humanist sport psychology is not without its problems, for those that work in this area would not recognise it as such. Postpositivistic behavioural sport psychology has focused mainly on coaching mechanisms such as cognition, decision making, behaviours and traits in shaping coaching discourse and quieting alternative epistemologies (Jowett, 2003, 2017; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). We offer that these approaches do not consider the complex social interplay between multiple actors operating on numerous intersecting levels where structure, agency, role, interaction, and learning amongst others are both subject to and constituted by relations of power within a wider socio-cultural context (Denison & Mills, 2018).

Since the start of the twenty-first century, Jowett and colleagues have explored the coach-athlete relationship in sport by focusing on interconnected beliefs, perceptions, and behaviours of actors predominated by the constructs of the 3 + 1 Cs (closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation) (Jowett, 2007, 2017; Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006, Jowett & Cockerill, 2002, 2003; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). From this perspective, the coach-athlete relationship is widely defined " . . . as a situation in which a coach and athlete's cognitions, feelings and behaviours are mutually and casually interrelated" (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007, p. 4). In this way, individual character and personality traits, together with affective behavioural elements are combined with each actor's thoughts to produce a closed study of the relationship in question.

Whilst this research may have the attractiveness of being straightforward and accessible, we need to consider the contextual, interpersonal, relational, entangled, and enacted interactions between a range of human and nonhuman agents, in which the coach-athlete relationship is situated. By ignoring the social context and temporal nature of relationships, these models do not account for the wider relationships and networks of power that surround the protagonists (Denison & Mills, 2018; Wagstaff, 2021).

By way of contrast, when the wider social world is acknowledged (Jowett & Frost, 2007; Olympiou et al., 2008), there are oversimplifications which affect the cogency of such studies. First, when issues of race intersect with the coach-athlete relationship, despite an understanding of race as a social construct, Jowett and Frost (2007) present the issue as unproblematic. Furthermore, though this is a welcome attempt at adopting a more qualitative angle, the paper is deeply wedded to postpositivistic sensibilities, an uncritical interview methodology, and returns to the same themes of closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation. Finally, such studies rely on antecedents correlated with motivational climate. The paper by Olympiou et al. (2008) was based on a systematic application of questionnaires designed to produce set

responses which were quantitatively analysed and reduced to selective covariates of behaviour. Our perception is that it did not take a truly interpersonal approach (being located as behaviours within individuals) in ways that lacked a critical angle or communicated enough depth.

Although the coach-athlete relationship has been dominated by behavioural psychology, its emphasis has been predominantly on the quantitative measurement of relationships to identify problem areas (Jowett, 2007, 2009; Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Rhind & Jowett, 2010). When attempts to provide neat categorisations of coding and analysis result in reductive reasoning, we often lose the richness, thick description and fleshiness that imbues qualitative research (St Pierre, 2011). Equally, when interviews have been included as a method of data generation (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), we argue that although mixed methods may have been used, it has not resulted in a mixed methodology. Instead, they are epistemologically wedded to postpositivist approaches that consider knowledge to be liberated from consciousness and based upon a sole outward reality that can be explained through cause and effect (Markula & Silk, 2011). We suggest that such an approach that seeks generalisations and produces deterministic accounts does not fully consider the complexities and nuances of the coach-athlete relationship.

In addition, when power as a concept is mentioned, it is presented in Weberian terms; always possessive, never embodied or relational (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). More recently, despite a chapter on power in coach-athlete relationships focusing on women's artistic gymnastics, the phenomenon is treated uncritically and relies heavily on Weberian concepts of power (Jowett & Wachsmuth, 2020).

### *French and Raven (1959) influence takes wing . . .*

By way of contrast, some studies focusing on the coaching process or coach-athlete relationships have given more emphasis to the processes of power, by applying a power framework based on the seminal study by French and Raven (1959). Whilst this has been a useful starting point for several theoretical works (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2004; Potrac & Jones, 2011) most empirical studies compress and scale down key concepts (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015; Turman, 2006). Nevertheless, some studies such as Groom et al. (2012), Potrac et al. (2002) and Rylander (2015) have taken more rigorous methodological and evaluative approaches that have attempted to further our understanding of the complex nature of power relations inherent in coaching. Based on five power bases (reward, referent, expert, legitimate and coercive power), we consider that the French and Raven (1959) framework appears persuasive and offers a nuanced reading of how power may be operationalised between actors.

Notwithstanding its potential application, there are a number of limitations of the original paper. First, Rylander (2015) points to its power framework being more psychological in nature, which is as odds to with its title emphasising *The Basis of Social Power*. Additionally, this discord is emphasised by an early section entitled "psychological change" focusing on mental attributes and the capacity for influence and modification of behaviours. Second, the framework is constructed from the perspective of the individual upon who the power is applied and not from the power-dominant agent (French & Raven, 1959). In the papers by Turman (2006) and Cranmer and Goodboy (2015), it is the athletes' impression of the coach that influences their assumed power base and attributes too much emphasis to the implicit dialectic between these two perspectives. We intimate that these are actually investigations into what determines the reactions of the recipient of the behaviour that is the focus.

Further criticisms of the use of the French and Raven (1959) framework is that numerous studies do not do justice to the complexities and sophistication of the original paper. We contend that many of the subtler points are omitted; for example, there is little in the way of a discussion of social influence verses control, or strength of power and dependence. In addition, we are sceptical of methodologies that rely specifically on postpositive questionnaires and subjected to quantitative analysis that do not invite deeper readings of this multi-layered interdependent phenomenon (Turman, 2006). Finally, most research (with the exception of Groom et al., 2012; Potrac et al., 2002 or Cassidy et al., 2009) ignore the more recent developments of the original French and Raven (1959) framework, dating them. For example, studies such as Raven (Raven, 1992, 2008) and Raven et al. (1998) evolved the original ideas and take a more refined view of the more detailed ways that the five original power bases could be conceptualised. It would be interesting to see future research inspired by French and Raven's ideas that is mindful of these anxieties.

### How else can power be conceived from a sociological approach?

Given the limitations of these approaches, it is worth further investigating how previous conceptions of power have been treated in the sports coaching literature from a sociological perspective. Owing to the many different ways of conceiving and presenting the workings of power (Lyle & Cushion, 2017), we offer that empirical work is nascent and variable. On one level, power is presented as a binary dynamic, or zero-sum game as illustrated in earlier work by Jones et al. (2005) and d'Arripe-Longueville et al. (1998). Whilst these are welcome attempts to problematise the coach-athlete relationship, power is presented as a finite resource and always located within the realm of the coach. Second, other studies (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac & Jones, 2009) have taken a classic Weberian or Machiavellian approach to power, which is focused on manoeuvring, strategy or control. These perspectives consider power to have more fluid properties, linked to schemes and tactics and presented by notions of a disputed hegemony. Though providing valuable insights, we contend that power in this vein is still infused by possessive notions of "power over" and manipulation and thus limited in its application.

Alternatively, sports scholars like Denison (2007), Denison and Mills (2014), Denison et al. (2017), Gearity and Mills (2012) and Mills and Denison (2013, 2018) have taken a Foucauldian approach to produce a more subtle interpretation of power relations. We offer that by presenting power as diffuse, relational and decentred makes it a compelling conception with multiple applications. For example, Pringle and Crocket's (2013) article draws upon Foucault's ideas about ethics, power, discipline, and surveillance to analyse how coaching practices shape athletes' behaviour, bodies, and identities. They argued that coaching operates through and within mechanisms of power that influence athletes not only through techniques of domination but by shaping their self-regulation, beliefs and action – what Foucault might call "conduct of one's conduct". One of the article's qualities is that it encourages coaches to consider how normalising disciplinary practices work to produce regimes of "truths" that affect the athlete, leading them to prioritise performance over well-being or ethical considerations. By encouraging coaches to interrogate their practice, challenging them to foster environments where athletes can critically reflect on their own actions, decisions, and identities, ultimately gives athletes more agency in their development. This move towards critiquing contemporary coaching practices in endurance sports is explored in the work of Jim Denison and colleagues (Denison, 2007; Denison & Mills, 2014; Mills & Denison, 2013, 2018; Mills et al., 2022). In their use of Foucault's disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self, these authors have explored how coaches have created not only situational contexts and training practices that produce docile athlete bodies but contribute to the creation of athlete identities and dominant discourse. Power, in this way is perceived as an essential operational element within the social context and together with the power-knowledge nexus contributes to the circulation and recreation of discourses such as compliance and conformity (Cushion, 2018). Similarly, Gearity et al. (2023) also explored the operation of power and discourse, but focused on deconstructing caring in the coach-athlete relationship. This empirical study analysed interview data from coaches to problematise their understanding of "care" and to explore how it may operate as a softer form of power and control. Although articulation of "care" may have overtones of guardianship and protection, these practices are reframed as disciplinary techniques which create docile bodies, masking issues of manipulation, reliance, and equity.

Whilst we consider that the appropriation of Foucauldian thinking is an exciting direction, present studies to date have not included consideration of the hidden institutional, economic, political or cultural intersections of power as it relates to the coach-athlete relationship. Furthermore, in terms of diversifying the theoretical framework, only a handful of studies have employed *postmodernism* as an approach in sports coaching (e.g. Friedman, Mills, & Gearity, 2022; Kuklick & Mills, 2023).

Nonetheless, other sociological thinkers (in addition to Foucault) have been appropriated by the sports coaching literature in an attempt to accommodate differing theorisations of power. Despite several studies (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Townsend & Cushion, 2017) focusing on Bourdieusian analyses of sports coaching or coach education, there is a scarcity of research that explores the coach-athlete relationship from a power perspective (Cassidy et al., 2009). Specifically, Cushion and Jones's (2006) paper is powerfully suggestive of how symbolic violence systematically recreates a dictatorial coaching regime that is intimately connected with social capital, and thus dimensions of power. These themes are continued in Cushion and Jones (2014) whereby the circulation of capital underpins the context, imbuing coaches with legitimate power and

strengthening coaching norms and behaviours. Dominant ideologies of respecting authority or winning reinforce accepted discourse about coaches' access to power, transforming athletes into objects with little recourse to their own autonomy.

By way of contrast, work by Purdy and colleagues (Purdy & Jones, 2011; Purdy et al., 2008, 2009) have highlighted ways in which athletes have access to subversion and resistance tactics when faced with over authoritative coaches or poor coaching practices. Rather than passively accepting controlling behaviours or complying with the demands of certain coaches, the high-level rowers featured employed withdrawal of best effort, open challenges, derision, scorn and routine complains to administrators. By utilising Giddens (1984) theorisation of power as fluid, interdependent and characterised the capacity of individuals to modify their social worlds, Purdy et al. (2008) explored the extent to which subordinate individuals or groups were able to challenge the balance of power. This dialectic of control manifests itself as covert or open rebellion from the rowers leading to an irrevocable breakdown of the coach-athlete relationship. Furthermore, it exemplifies Giddens (1984) conception that power is not only asymmetrical but that its operation relies on authority and dependence. When social capital is diminished, relationships are contested and resisted, leading to a redistribution of the balance and operation of power.

Notwithstanding these interesting forays into perceived athlete power, we propose that work by Purdy and colleagues is essentially micro-political in nature, and is narrowly focused on the behaviours and interactions of the active parties. Not only are opportunities for further cultural commentary lost but that the notion of entanglement and the materiality of existence and relationality are not considered. Similarly, though work by Potrac and Jones (2009), Potrac et al. (2002) Potrac et al. (2012) and Thompson et al. (2015) has emphasised the value of the micropolitical coach in action, the broader connotations and manifestations of power relationships are omitted. We contend that power runs much deeper, and that is intimately concerned with the ways in which it produces reality and contributes to the creation of knowledges, discourse or ways of knowing (Foucault, 1978).

Specifically, we are interested in how future work might consider not only how the cultural, political, economic and institutional workings of power may influence the coach-athlete relationship, but by portraying sports coaching as entangled enactment encompassing human/nonhuman material/discursive actors/entities could help evolve the field. By incorporating intra-action as well as inter-actions could " … compel coaching scholars to realise how sport coaching materialises in entangled influences involving humans but also plants, animals, surfaces, technologies, and other agentic entities" (Camiré, 2023, p. 15).

## Concluding thoughts

Although handful of authors have produced some empirical work on power in coaching (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac et al., 2007; Purdy et al., 2008), augmented by burgeoning poststructural scholars (Avner et al., 2021; Denison et al., 2017; Gearity et al., 2023; Mills & Denison, 2018), this is still an underplayed and under-studied component of the broader coaching process. Expanding the topic further, diversifying the theoretical framework, inviting an inter-disciplinary approach (social-organisational-cultural) and borrowing from education and the social sciences would challenge existing views on power and lead to a more refined reading of the coach-athlete relationship.

In addition, we reject the view that coaching occurs in a social vacuum, nor does it operate as the mechanistic, unidirectional, sequential activity criticised by contemporary authors (Cushion et al., 2003; Potrac et al., 2011). Instead, we call for research that encompasses alternative paradigms, nuanced theorisations of power and novel fieldwork methodologies that positions coaching as a dynamic, social activity. An appreciation and depiction of the fluid exchanges between athletes, coaches, and others in the wider social and relational context is crucial. By allowing for the concepts of struggle, strategy, cooperation and diplomacy, we call for scholars to locate the evolving coach-athlete relationship within the broader public arena and to make explicit the nexus between the personal, the political and the social (Jones & Kingston, 2013). Specifically, we join with Wagstaff (2021) who calls for an understanding of the coach-athlete relationship existing beyond the individual level, instead being part of a system phenomenon where multiple intersecting, conflicting relations occur within and between various social actors comprising

organisations, teams, departments, support staff, coaches, and athletes across the physical and sociological context.

Rather than offering a static and closed definition of power, we have certain sympathies to how it could be conceptualised. By examining power that is itself illustrated by shifting patterns of influence and control, power can be argued as being relational and not centrally located (Foucault, 1978), diffuse and de-centred (Westwood, 2002), processual and not possessive (Elias, 1982) and positive and not solely repressive (Foucault, 1978). Equally, by emphasising the temporal and ephemeral nature of power within the coach-athlete relationship, a more fluid appreciation of its workings and consequences might be offered.

## Note

1. Our interpretation of Derrida's *deconstruction* or "différance", proposes that in rejecting a standard discourse of coaching, or singular framing of the coach-athlete relationship, instead calls for one which decentres its positivistic understanding, encouraging more pluralistic meanings (Derrida, 1993).

## ORCID

Alexandra Consterdine http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8564-1960

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