“Put that in your fucking research”: Reflexivity, ethnography and disability sport coaching.

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Abstract

Reflexivity is continually called for as a marker of quality ethnographic research. In this paper we put reflexivity to 'work', providing a critical commentary on data generated through ethnographic fieldwork in high-performance disability sport. Drawing on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, we situate the ethnographer in the field of disability sport, turning a reflexive lens onto the practices that are associated with occupying the role of coach *and* researcher simultaneously. We illustrate the centrality of researcher subjectivity - through the reflexive device of 'crossing fields' - as a productive resource for examining the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in the process of doing ethnographic research. In so doing, we provide a unique example of how reflexive practice can offer a rigorous, power-conscious reading of an ethnography of high-performance coaching in disability sport.

Key words: ethnography; reflexivity; disability; disability sport; coaching

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Introduction

Reflexivity is firmly embedded within the language of social science and is well-established as a critical component of qualitative research. The reflexive turn has a long history, embedded in earlier critiques of epistemology, methodology and representation in social science (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1987; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Reflexivity itself, however, is a difficult concept to put to 'work' and can be subject to a good deal of conceptual slippage. There are different interpretations, approaches and positions for researchers to make sense of and operationalise (Foley, 2002), suggesting that, as Olive and Thorpe (2011) claim, the use of reflexivity is increasingly "under-defined, and hollow" (p. 424).

It might be reasonably argued that despite ongoing recourse to reflexive practice reflexivity constitutes a taken-for-granted or uncritically-accepted term (Maton, 2003) in which to be reflexive is taken as a proxy for individualistic self-reflexivity, either through autoethnographic or confessional tales (Van Maanen 1988; Sparkes, 2002). This refers to the ways in which the researcher writes themselves and their backgrounds into the text or analysis in order to demonstrate how their social history and identity influence their interpretations (e.g. Berger, 2015). These analyses are valuable for explaining 'hidden insight' into phenomena through either personal connections or lived experience, or for reflecting on the social problems that ethnographers have to 'grapple' with, such as negotiating power relations, ethical dilemmas, voice, subjectivity and interpretation (Sparkes, 2020).

Self-reflexive analysis, naturally, places emphasis on the agency of the researcher. However, this 'ethnocentric' position is not without its criticisms (see Wacquant, 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Indeed, such approaches have been dismissed as a "self-indulgent discussion about ethnographers between ethnographers" (Gibson and Atkinson, 2018: 446; Wacquant, 1989) that, at worst, provides a platform for tedious, benign and unrevealing description (Lynch, 2000). Such research risks consigning ethnography to cultural

relativism or regressive self-analysis, thus bringing the ethnographic enterprise to "a grinding halt" and leading to the rather disheartening conclusion that "all is in the final analysis nothing but discourse" (Bourdieu, 2003, 282).

In direct contrast to this form of reflexivity is the more 'objective' reflexivity of Pierre Bourdieu. A key component of Bourdieu's sociological method was the "methodical reflection on the act of objectivation itself" (Wacquant, 2004: 389). Bourdieu's particular stance of epistemic reflexivity demands that social scientists interrogate their 'scholastic posture', turning the 'tools of social science' (i.e. theory) on to the researcher themselves and the fields in which they are situated (Bourdieu, 2003). For Bourdieu, a truly reflexive sociology must make transparent how ethnographers, situated within the academic field, produce 'truth' claims and facts (Foley, 2002), highlighting the social and intellectual conditions that shape research practice. Reflexivity, thus, represents "the permanent sociological analysis and control of sociological practice" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 40). Bourdieu's reflexive practice might therefore be understood as both methodological *and* theoretical; recognising how engaging in research shapes, and is shaped by, the situated aspects of the researchers' social selves and the "invisible determinations" inherent in the scholarly gaze (Wacquant, 1989: 34).

Such is the strength and value of reflexivity that it is routinely called for in ethnographic research broadly (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; Van Maanen, 1988). This necessity for reflexive practice is magnified in areas of research that demand reflexive self-scrutiny and the careful theorising of claims made (Howe, 2009). Following this, our specific use of reflexivity is anchored in the context of coaching in disability sport. Berger (2015) recently argued that it is important to deepen our understanding of reflexivity across diverse contexts. Indeed, disability sport is a social institution that has considerable sociological significance, providing a lens to consider the grounded, historical and everyday discourses and practices that perpetuate social differentiation and accentuate the social categories of disability and disabled people.

122 For example, research investigating disability sport through the use of ethnography has
123 illustrated the ways in which sport acts as a complex site of empowerment *for* disabled athletes.
124 In disability sport, disabled people are able to negotiate an affirmative disability identity
125 associated with an 'athlete-first' discourse (see Berger, 2008; Powis 2018). Focusing
126 specifically on coaches and coaching provides critical insight into the constructed patterns of
127 social reality that constitute disability sport (cf. Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Coaches are
128 central figures in maintaining such discourses and coaching itself is a set of social practices
129 that are produced as a response to these situated understandings of disability. Recent research
130 has illustrated that the pedagogic function of coaching reproduces rather than redistributes
131 unequal social relations, thus imposing 'athlete-first' discourses based on highly-regulated
132 principles of performance, self-government, achievement, challenge and independence, to
133 construct a disabled *athlete* subject (Author A, B and others, 2018). At the same time, this high-
134 performance sport value system refracts deeper value judgements based on ableism. It is in
135 these complexities and contradictions that frame disability research that this study sits.

136 **Crossing Fields**

137 In this paper we operationalise Bourdieu's reflexive stance through the notion of 'crossing
138 fields' (cf. Thorpe, Barbour and Bruce, 2011; Olive and Thorpe, 2011). *Fields* are social spaces
139 that are defined as a "network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions"
140 (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 97). Crossing fields as a reflexive device illustrates how the first
141 author was deeply embedded in the local relationships, politics and ideologies of a distinctive
142 disability sport context, as well as the disciplinary specialty. Crossing fields therefore brings
143 to the forefront the way I (first author) moved between my field experience and the abstract
144 theoretical explanations of that experience. In doing so, we attempt to provide a practical and
145 theoretical grasp of the social conditions of 'doing' fieldwork, and a close scrutiny and mutual
146 questioning of the very production and interpretation of field data (Wacquant, 2004).

147 In putting the idea of crossing fields to work, we emphasise the “destabilizing and
148 potentially subversive effects that might arise from movement across fields” (McNay, 1999:
149 107), suggesting that moments of misalignment and tension between habitus and field may
150 give rise to increased reflexive awareness (Bourdieu and Wacquant,1992). It is in these
151 moments of tension that *habitus* forces a degree of "negotiation with itself and its
152 ambivalences” (Thorpe, 2009: 503). This process of introspection when engaging in fieldwork
153 can be productive, acknowledging the social rooting and split subjectivity of the ethnographer
154 “without reducing ethnography to the rhapsodic evocation of subjectivity” (Wacquant, 2004:
155 398).

156 **Aims and Purpose**

157 Despite extensive debate and discussion about the importance of reflexive practice to social
158 science research, there is a lack of research actively putting reflexivity to ‘work’ (Berger,
159 2015). As a result, there is little guidance for researchers wishing to provide grounded and
160 reflexive accounts of the research process. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to
161 demonstrate how Bourdieu’s reflexive framework acted as a theoretical resource to enable
162 heightened awareness of the sensitivities of ‘doing’ research in a social site that is routinely
163 described as ‘non-disabling’ and ‘empowering’, yet is constructed according to ableist values
164 and practices (Author A, B and others, 2018; DePauw, 1997; Powis, 2018). Our specific
165 reading and use of reflexivity, however, should not be seen as *the* way, rather we hope to
166 illustrate a way in which sport coaching research can offer a level of criticality and rigorous
167 self-awareness that has relevance for social science researchers more broadly.

168 Our (somewhat overdue) turn to reflexivity is not a call for naval-gazing. Sharing these
169 insights has the potential to bring into sharper focus perhaps the most consuming issue faced
170 by ethnographers: that of accessing, negotiating and representing socially-significant patterns
171 of culture. The second, and related, purpose of this research then, is to provide a level of

172 ethnographic authenticity to representations of social reality. We do this not through 'truth
173 telling', but through reflexive recognition of the problems and complexities involved in moving
174 "within and between academic and research fields—or put another way, between theory,
175 practice and culture" (Olive & Thorpe, 2011: 430).

176 **Fieldwork context**

177 In the following sections, I (first author) present my experiences as a researcher and a coach
178 embedded within a high-performance disability sport coaching context. At the outset it is
179 important to acknowledge that my position as a non-disabled researcher and coach is a
180 significant factor in the production of this research[1] (Oliver, 1992). In this process of presenting
181 my experiences, I necessarily abstract them, but do so in order to detail the tensions, processes
182 and conflicts comprising the fieldwork. Doing so may provide a shared language and
183 conceptual framework for researchers undertaking ethnographic research in highly stratified
184 disability contexts.

185 The experiences presented below were produced through eighteen months of fieldwork
186 with a national learning disability sports team. My role as observer in the ethnographic study
187 for this research was formulated entirely through my experiences as a member of the coaching
188 staff, working closely with both the staff and the players[2]. My participation was more or less
189 complete physical, social and psychological involvement within the coaching culture
190 throughout training and competition cycles. This immersion enabled the representation of the

[1] Although my focus was on coaching practice and not the disability experience, there is still a degree of cultural sensitivity and nuance required in the claims made about practice and it was not our intention to provide a reflexive standpoint ethnography (see Howe, 2009).
[2] Given the unique coaching context, discussions of confidentiality were had with participants at the outset of the research as a means of obtaining informed consent. It was explained that all possible precautions will be taken to disguise individuals' identities in the data. Anonymity proves a problem, however, as Kaiser (2009) notes, removing all of the identifying characteristics from the research (i.e. learning disability), would inhibit our ability to convey the lessons learned from this particular study. These choices are confronting in every aspect of 'writing up' the research.

191 routine, everyday action of the participants over time. In so doing, I occupied a complex
192 position in that I was simultaneously a part of the object of study, both participating *and*
193 observing. Throughout the fieldwork process I kept detailed field notes of the day-to-day
194 workings of the training camps and competitive fixtures. These included, but were not limited
195 to, the interactions between players and staff at various points, such as evening meals and time
196 spent in hotel bars, spas and the gym, as well as the dedicated practice sessions or in the
197 changing room during a competitive fixture. What follows are my reflexive analyses of some
198 of the more difficult situations that arose as I worked through the research process.

199 ***"Full of spiel, mate": Power and Respect***

200 My integration into the team environment was swift. The players, for the most part, were
201 familiar with me, and the coaching staff welcoming. Like most elite sport environments, the
202 coaching staff[3] of the learning disability squad was structured along hierarchical lines, with the
203 Performance Director responsible for the overall strategic and financial direction of the squad.
204 The head coach oversaw the contributions of the individual members of the management staff
205 and the technical, tactical and social direction of the team, and in particular expressed an
206 interest in my research topic. This meant that my cultural capital in the form of educational
207 qualifications, combined with a pre-existing understanding of the conventions of the field were
208 crucial in enabling a position on the coaching staff, positioning me in a legitimate social
209 position that guaranteed both entry *and* access (cf. Ball, 1990).

210 During the research I developed a close friendship with the assistant coach. He worked
211 closely with the players on a day-to-day basis, where I occupied a supporting role, highlighting
212 the often natural and embedded hierarchies of coaching. We would often travel to training

[3]Alongside the coaches, the team manager was responsible for organisational and administrative duties for the team and the coaching staff. However, during the period of fieldwork a financial commitment from the governing body meant that the team manager was able to take on an additional part-time role as Personal Development and Welfare Officer (PDW). The rest of the management staff was comprised of a physio, a part-time nutritionist and a strength and conditioning coach.

213 camps together, forming a tight relationship and engaging in many ‘off-the-record’
214 conversations[4]. I would actively spend time with him, spending evenings with him in the bar
215 and travelling with him to games. In doing so I had to negotiate my continually shifting role as
216 participant and researcher, where, despite his public scorn of academia (“academics are just
217 full of spiel mate - overcomplicating simple things” - field notes), and prolonged ‘banter’
218 toward my research, in private he was thoughtful and would regularly probe my views on
219 coaching.

220 It was common for the coaching and management staff to give their opinions on players
221 and discuss confidential information in my presence whether in the training hall or in the hotel
222 bar. Issues continually arose, for instance, about players’ sexualities, medication and
223 impairment effects, their (sometimes volatile) home lives or concerns about lifestyle and
224 behaviour, despite knowing that I was actively conducting research on the topic. Inevitably my
225 positioning within this subculture was more complex than ‘insider’ status indicates. While I
226 actively sought to declare affinity between myself and the participants and to distance myself
227 from constraining identities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), to do so I was drawing on my
228 bodily resources, my maleness, my able-bodiedness (and with it my athletic ability) to position
229 myself in simultaneous competing roles as both researcher *and* coach. Here, blurring the lines
230 between fields was both necessary and beneficial in gaining *entry* to the research site in a
231 position of power, i.e. as a member of the coaching staff, but to provide *access* I had to actively
232 disassociate from the role of ‘researcher’. Despite this, the fact that I was a researcher was
233 never forgotten completely:

234 During one particular morning of training, the assistant coach and I had set out a number
235 of activities across the sports hall.
236
237 “Okay, lads, you know what to do. Off you go” the coach barked.

[4] While some might conceptualise this as cultivating a ‘key informant’, I reject this as it invokes a level of strategy and cunningness to an otherwise naturally unfolding social relationship. Of course, our relationship helped me to navigate the power dynamics of the context and learn my ‘role’ in the field.

238
239 The players turned and made their way sluggishly to the 'stations' spread around the
240 hall. A minute passed and they were still not in position. The assistant coach swore
241 under his breath and shouted for the players to gather around him. He addressed them
242 angrily.
243
244 "Lads, LD or not, when I say, 'off you go', what do you do?"
245
246 There was a painful pause. One of the players eventually piped up "off we go?"
247
248 "Fucking right!" He looked at me . "Put that in your fucking research, (author name)!"
249

250 (Field notes).

251 Players would often express an interest in my research, and a keenness to be

252 interviewed. At first, the players' reaction to my wearing a microphone was wary, and it

253 became an object of masculine-dominated humour, as exemplified in the following passage:

254 M had been staring at me during the team briefing. I had noticed, and though I tried to
255 encourage him to continue listening, his eyes kept flicking down to my collar, and
256 mouthing silently to me "the fuck's that?"
257
258 He grabbed me as the players dispersed into the warm up routine and pointed at my
259 collar: "Oi! Is that thing on?", as he nodded towards my microphone, tucked on the
260 inside of my top. I smiled,
261
262 "Yep, everything you say mate. I've got to listen back to it, no swearing though, okay?"
263
264 M beamed a smile: "ah" He leaned close and growled, "you're a cunt!" before running
265 off towards the rest of the boys 'whooping' with glee.
266 (Field notes).

267 These data give a flavour of the subtle authoritarian, ableist and masculine discourse which

268 housed the coaching environment, wherein I had to actively protect my position as a coach

269 while at the same time conserving my research interests. After this incident I quickly

270 abandoned the microphone to allow the players to get over any sense of curiosity, and stopped

271 bringing my notebook to the training hall. While the fact that I was actively researching the

272 squad was recognised as part of a wider process of professionalisation and high-performance

273 in disability sport I actively sought to minimise my 'otherness' and maximise my associations

274 to the rest of the coaching staff:

275 For me it's a performance environment now. It wasn't four years ago. I think…we've
276 got better backroom staff, more professional backroom staff. I think by having people of
277 that calibre around it automatically ups the game, and I think the players have responded
278 to that. We're very different people (which) is to me the biggest thing. We've got one
279 and a half doctors (laughs) but when you get your letters at the end of your name then
280 we're going to have potentially two doctors involved in the squad. We've got a highly
281 experienced level four coach; we've got a former pro. We've got a physio who works for
282 first-class county. We've got a nutritionist who is also a teacher. So having not only a
283 massive personality shift across the board but also actually everyone is pretty much kind
284 of at the top of their game in terms of qualification, and that's made a big difference as
285 well. (Team Manager - interview).
286
287 I think where we're at as a management team at the minute is probably as strong as I've
288 ever felt it. Yeah there's a high calibre of education, I think a high calibre of people is
289 a different thing, but I think this group combine that education and personal attribute
290 well. (Head Coach – interview).

291 In negotiating the fieldwork setting the underlying processes of micro-access were continually
292 constrained and enabled by the exchange and recognition of cultural capital. Cultural capital is
293 useful in illustrating the micro-interactional processes through which individuals are judged
294 according to cultural frameworks of evaluation and distinction. For example, though
295 educational qualifications had social currency within the environment, a mark of distinction
296 exists in coaching for those that have played at a professional level (Blackett *et al.*, 2015), such
297 as the assistant coach:

298 I think straightaway there's an instant respect. There's a respect I think from the start
299 that these lads, you know, and I'm still playing now, which is nice, and I think that
300 there's a respect as a player. From what I've been involved with and what I've done as
301 a player, obviously not, nowhere near as high as a lot of players, but I'd like to think
302 that I've certainly done enough as a player to warrant a place in the performance
303 environment, I think. (Assistant coach, interview).

304 The 'technical' skills and knowledge regarding 'the game' are a highly valued aspect of
305 coaching (Author A and B, 2015; Blackett *et al.,* 2015), which are "the product of an
306 investment of time and cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). For researchers, there are
307 unavoidable implications. For example, sometimes the fieldworker may find her or himself
308 being 'tested', and it is not uncommon for new members within the group to effectively have
309 to 'prove their worth' or gain acceptance (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In my case, during

310 my first 'official' training camp, I was challenged to a target throwing competition by the
311 assistant coach in front of the players. I was expected to demonstrate the technical skills the
312 players had been working on and execute the throw towards a target around twenty metres
313 away. As the players gathered around, failure would have undoubtedly resulted in good-natured
314 ridicule and 'banter', and perhaps more insidiously, undermined my credibility as a coach.

315 While I was taken aback, I executed the throw well and hit the target to the cheers of
316 the players (and indeed to my own delight). The assistant coach was then left with the task of
317 maintaining face with the players by completing the 'challenge' himself. Afterwards, banter
318 aside, he explained that "the boys love that sort of thing, you have to be able to do it y'know?
319 To get their respect" (field notes). In this sense, technical competence was a strategic resource
320 by which I was able to secure my position within a status hierarchy (cf. Lareau & Weininger,
321 2003). Engaging in these strategies for the "appropriation of symbolic wealth" (Lareau &
322 Weininger, 2003: 578) within a field permeated and structured by the distribution of capital
323 was advantageous. Bourdieu (1996: 119) suggested that these displays of competence are
324 highly gendered, and have both a technical dimension and a status dimension, arising as actors
325 pursue different interests:

> 326 "dominants always tend to impose the skills they have mastered as necessary and
> 327 legitimate and to include in their definition of excellence the practices at which they
> 328 excel".

329 The implications for ethnographers are clear in terms of considering the social relations that
330 structure their chosen sites of research, and the social resources held that impact on the
331 possibilities of data collection. In other words, the history and proximity of the power relations
332 in the field make it possible (or not) to structure workable research relations, and grant the
333 access to be able to construct meaningful data. Though I began this work as a relatively
334 inexperienced coach in the disability sport context, I had 'institutionalised' cultural capital
335 (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of 'mainstream' coaching experience, knowledge and academic

336 qualifications guaranteeing a level of technical capacity and social competence to access the
337 environment. My level of 'credibility' as a 'decent player' (and therefore naturally a 'good'
338 coach[5]) enabled me to leverage enough cultural capital to gain a level of acceptance with the
339 players[6], and certainly my maleness contributed to my acceptance into a male-dominated
340 coaching culture. However, as the research developed I became increasingly aware of the
341 various forms of power operating through an entrenched coaching culture and the subtle
342 strategies members of the coaching staff would employ to negotiate space within the hierarchy:

343 The strength and conditioning coach and I had gone for a walk around the pitch during
344 one of the games. As we discussed working with the team, he asked me for feedback
345 on his coaching. At first, I was reluctant –
346
347 "I know very little about strength and conditioning, mate"
348
349 "No, fuck that – you know coaching". We clapped in support of one of our players.
350
351 I paused as I thought how best to reply. "Okay well, you know your stuff. I think
352 sometimes you use pretty complex or technical language with the players, I mean, it
353 would throw me off, but you compensate that with clear demonstrations".
354
355 "Yeah that's important with these boys. You're right though I just can't help it
356 sometimes. I've got to the point now where I just don't give a shit anymore".
357
358 As we completed our lap we reached the rest of the coaching staff who were sat by
359 the changing rooms.
360
361 "Oh, here they are look, bet that was an interesting chat" the assistant coach chirped.
362 The physio chuckled.
363
364 I faked a laugh, "actually, mate, we were discussing coaching, funny how you never
365 ask me for feedback on your coaching?" I smirked. The head coach turned to his
366 assistant with his eyebrows raised.
367
368 "yeah, it's because I don't respect you as a coach!" the assistant coach laughed.

369 (Field notes).

[5]For a further explication of the assumed relationship between high levels of playing competence and coaching expertise, see Blackett *et al.,* (2015).
[6]For example, during one of my first training camps, one of the players mistakenly referred to me as a former professional player. I never corrected him.

370 In this interaction I was inserted into a “struggle for status” (Aune, 2011: 429) - a network of
371 power relations where cultural capital was used as a ‘weapon’ (expressed as ‘banter’), defining
372 the “limits of competence” and therefore the “right to speak” (Bourdieu, 1984: 412). The
373 relationship between the researcher and the participants was characterised by the composition
374 and volume of capital each member possessed and the extent to which they recognised similar
375 forms in others. Indeed, Atkinson and Gibson (2017) contend that power is central to
376 understanding the production and distributions of practices and systems of knowing, creating
377 ‘social facts’ – in this case - assigning symbolic power to certain understandings of coaching
378 disabled athletes. Thus, for Bourdieu capital is central to the process of domination that defines
379 the orthodoxies within the field, that is, the way things were ‘done’.

380 ***“Let him have it” – (Re)producing the orthodoxy***

381 Reflecting on my scholastic point of view; the “dispositions, productive of unconscious theses”
382 (Bourdieu, 1990b: 381) which were acquired through sustained engagement with critical
383 disability studies (e.g. Thomas, 2007) inevitably shifted the emphasis and orientation of my
384 analysis throughout the fieldwork onto the construction of disability. What was immediately
385 observable in the coaching context was a concerted effort to ‘leave the disabilities at the door’
386 of the training hall and to reinforce the high-performance nature of the squad. Though the head
387 coach in particular resisted this designation, the practical effect of this was that the coaching
388 staff endeavoured to look beyond the players’ ‘disability’ in the design of practices, skill
389 development, target and goal-setting and lifestyle modification. Together, we as a coaching
390 staff operated according to a shared and implicit framework of disability ‘empowerment’ that
391 involved high levels of ‘challenge’ for the athletes. As a result, maintaining and occupying my
392 coaching ‘role’ required an acceptance of the pre-existent conditions that constituted the field
393 – i.e. a doxic order (Bourdieu, 1977) related to a culturally-specific understanding of disability
394 and the patterns of response embedded in social practice (coaching).

Over time my relationship with these doxa changed. Initially, I could (and still can) recognise this as a 'positive' coaching approach. Nevertheless, at a conceptual level – and away from the urgency of practice – I felt that there were serious limitations to approaches that downplayed the immediacy of impairment. The impairment(s) that an athlete presents has a *direct* and important influence on the role and function of the coach (cf. Thomas, 2007) particularly in a social world which had been shaped by and was contingent on the players' *disabilities.* The literature was clear – looking past impairment blurred the lines with ableism (Campbell, 2009). However, as a member of coaching staff immersed in the everyday demands of coaching, I embodied the ideologies of 'challenge' and discourses of empowerment that underpinned the coaching process enthusiastically. This analytic act did not sit comfortably.

Throughout the fieldwork, as a coach I was implicated in, and a producer of, practices that emphasised "a particular kind of self and body" (Campbell, 2009: 5), that is, practices designed to shift the orientation of the coaching environment towards high-performance. These ideas were seductive, couched in positive rhetoric and encouraging of an 'empowering' view of disability coaching practice. They were 'common sense'. To challenge this focus felt like it was against the 'rules' of the game, or 'disempowering' for the players. Assuming I could articulate and voice concern, I risked alienating myself from the other coaches, providing empty critique. So, while I recognised and problematised some aspects of the coaching process, as Adkins (2003: 36) argued, simply "the habitus will always submit to the field":

> During the individual skills work at the last camp, I worked with A in a batting practice. My directive was to feed the ball quickly, quite short and straight, therefore likely to hit A in the chest, ribs or head. A was expected to "make a decision" to either get out of the way, to defend, or to play an aggressive shot. As we settled into the practice, my 'feeds' gradually became faster until I let him 'have one'. The ball leapt up and thudded into A's ribs. He crumpled almost immediately.
>
> I jogged over to him.
>
> "are you okay, mate?"

He was on all fours, his back rising and falling quickly as he struggled to control his breathing.

"Sorry mate, I didn't mean to, you know what you did wrong though?"

He didn't speak to me. Just shook his head before getting to his feet.

As I returned to my position, A faced up, and I fed a visibly slower, fuller delivery to which A played a tentative shot.

I looked across the hall at the head coach. He'd seen what had happened. With a grim face, he said:

"Don't let up, don't back off. Let him have it".

The next delivery was faster. A barely moved before it hit the back net, flashing past the grille of his helmet.

Again.

The next delivery. Fast and short. The ball thudded into the back net.

A walked out of the net. As he walked towards me his face showed a grimace of pain. With tears in his eyes he croaked "I'm done". I just nodded.

After, I quietly approached the physio to ask if he had 'taken a look' at A.

"Yes, he came over to me. He said he'd been hit by a ball. End of conversation" He laughed.

(Field notes).

Such was the weight of the high-performance doxa that I consciously facilitated practices designed to encourage 'failure'. This was a performative response to the expectations the coaching environment necessitated and demanded. As coaches we constructed an ongoing discourse of dominant ideas about the 'correct way' of coaching in this context that was reinforced from the top down:

> You know I still think we've got, there's still a bit of a patronising culture I think sometimes towards disability and I think some of our coaches have had it when they've come but I think they soon lose it once they start working with the guys and they see the ability. I don't think disabled people want continuously reminding of their disability, they want to be spoken to as (athletes). (Performance Director - Interview).

466 In my role as a coach, these discourses had all the appearance of a common-sense response to
467 oppression. In the closeness required for the fieldwork, however, I failed to recognise the
468 highly individualising, ableist (Campbell, 2009) and masculinist coaching gaze that framed
469 these practices. As a coach, working to emphasise the high-performance nature of the team,
470 the coaching staff and I were drawing on a set of co-constructed beliefs and ideas that were
471 linked to a collective (mis)recognition that disability empowerment could be achieved through
472 association with performance-level sport.

473 However, the social relations that structured these ideas and beliefs were inherently
474 unequal – the dominant group (coaches) imposed a valued identity on the players creating a
475 powerful social framework for the development of collective habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Such
476 was the power of this coaching approach that the coaches *and* athletes were oriented towards
477 a singular and common purpose:

> 478 Coaching practice today was focusing on playing off the 'back foot' at pace. There were
> 479 four 'working' nets, each with a bowling machine with a different task to be completed.
> 480 They were generally presided over by the players who moved between nets in groups
> 481 of three and four, feeding each other six to twelve balls each before swapping. The
> 482 assistant coach presided over one net, with me observing, and we worked with a player
> 483 (J). As I observed the practice, I noticed the level of intensity in this particular net. It
> 484 involved J repeatedly facing balls out of the machine upwards of 75mph, generally
> 485 directed towards J's chest, neck and head. J's directive was to "get in a good position".
>
> 486 Time after time the ball flashed past J's head, thudded into his gloves or crunched into
> 487 his rib cage. More than once J ended up in a heap on the floor, getting to his feet shakily.
> 488 As this happened, the rest of the players began to watch. As I stood next to the coach,
> 489 I could see J's face getting redder and redder, his eyes wide, but not backing down. The
> 490 coach continued to feed the balls into the machine, giving J little respite as the ball
> 491 continued to strike him on the pads, into his thigh-pad or whistling past his head. There
> 492 was a hushed silence from the other players, broken only by loud exclamations from
> 493 the coach. I could see that the player was in pain and getting anxious and upset, despite
> 494 not taking a backward step. This practice continued until eventually there were no balls
> 495 left, and J walked out of the net in tears.
>
> 496 (Field notes).

497 Collectively, we as a coaching staff produced a situated and practical understanding of
498 disability coaching that was "commensurate with the interests of dominant groups (and the

499 assumed interests of subordinated groups)" (Campbell, 2009: 11). At times, of course, these
500 practices were productive, reinforcing the use of such methods as a means of disability
501 'empowerment':

> 502 It's good for the other players to see a player of his (J's) stature struggle. [It] is a massive
> 503 message that, hang on here, well J's struggling, I'm allowed to struggle. For me that
> 504 was a defining moment because it became an *acceptance amongst the boys*, that
> 505 actually you know what, we don't have to get it completely right every time, failing
> 506 occasionally is okay. You know, I'm not going to get things completely right every
> 507 single time, and to me that was a defining moment, a big statement that, a big statement.
> 508 (J) was always going to bounce back, he's that sort of lad, he's keen, there's a wider
> 509 context to it, he's always messaging me, he's looking for reassurance, he wants to
> 510 improve his game, he wants to be the best he can be, so it wasn't, it was done in the
> 511 right way. The intention wasn't to upset him. (Assistant coach – interview).

512 Thus, the framework on which practice was based therefore had all the appearances of an
513 enabling structure that, in the coaching field, made 'practical sense' and was firmly embedded
514 and internalised within the coaching culture through positive discourse and collective
515 acceptance (Silva & Howe, 2016; Purdue & Howe, 2012). My sense of unease and disquiet
516 with these practices, however, continued:

> 517 J: I will confess last year I had a bit of a shock to the system in terms of how much I'd
> 518 been challenged in the past although I'd been challenged it was still relatively within
> 519 my comfort zone.
> 520
> 521 I: we took you out of your comfort zone.
>
> 522 J: It really did, I will confess as well, I actually broke down in one session and it took
> 523 me a while to get over it.
>
> 524 (Player focus group).

525 **Ethics, self and a sense of one's place**

526 As Ball (1990) argued, in ethnography, maintaining the research self "is a deliberate process
527 unlike many other social interactions" (p. 158), requiring careful and sensitive responses to
528 other actors in the field. As such, while a researcher I also had to maintain my identity as a
529 coach whose responsibility towards the players was that of utility and care, and at the same
530 time managing my professional responsibilities towards the institution. At times, however, the

immediacies of fieldwork were troubling. These are what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as ethically important moments. For example, one afternoon while observing the players taking part in a fitness session, the strength and conditioning coach described his frustration at the players' lack of physical fitness and remarking to me how "dumb" they are. Though such language is not uncommon in many sporting interactions, considering the context I was immediately confronted with a wave of shock and laughed nervously in response. My complicity and silence, however, were embedded in a relational hierarchy and habitual response to protect my position. Responding critically was not an easy, or – I felt – available, choice to make. In this encounter, I felt that my position in the 'field' was not sufficiently stable that I felt I could challenge this, and, more invidiously, for the purpose of obtaining authentic, 'good' data, discretion was as much a social accomplishment as frankness (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In reflexive consideration of my role, the unique social dynamics and the immediate politics of academic research, I stood to lose more than I had to gain by resisting the relations of power. My laughter ultimately is an example of what Pillow (2003: 192) argued is a "failure of our language and practices" as researchers, and the guilt of being complicit as an agent of ableism (Campbell, 2009) continues.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that such situational ethics can be messy and difficult to navigate. Throughout the fieldwork the choices I made, while confronting and uncomfortable, were ethical acts that were reflective of a "sense of one's place" (Bourdieu, 1989: 17). In order to 'maintain my rank' with the coaches, and 'keep my distance' from the players, I displayed the symbolic competencies expected in that role (i.e. a high-performance coach). Furthermore, to add a layer of complexity, on the face of it I *agreed* - and still do - with the situated and practical ideologies that framed the practices (though not always the practices themselves). Indeed, Bourdieu (1989: 17) suggested that agents who "occupy similar or neighboring positions are placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings",

556 and therefore may consciously or unconsciously acquire similar dispositions (and therefore
557 practices) that imply an adjustment to the position occupied in the field. As I actively
558 participated in social practice I passed through the field, internalized it, and shaped my thoughts
559 and actions in order to profit from it. My failures to confront these seemingly 'natural limits'
560 that shaped my coaching practice – and subsequently my research - meant that I was an
561 accomplice in the reproduction of the doxic order, mainly as it was in my *interests* to do so.

562 **Crossing Fields, Crossing Back**

563 This paper is anchored in what Ball (1990) described as the 'self-doubt and distrust' of my
564 ongoing analyses. What followed was an attempt to highlight my relation to my object of study
565 (Wacquant, 1989). Crossing fields as a reflexive device provided access to the 'blind spots' –
566 structured by doxic acceptance of the conditions of the field – that were immediately
567 unobservable. The use of a reflexive method therefore illustrated the "difference between
568 practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge" (Bourdieu, 1988: 1), and particularly the
569 difficulties involved in breaking with 'inside experience'.

570 It was at times easy to forget the gap that separated the interest that I had in coaching
571 as a researcher who set out to understand and to collect 'good' data, and the practical interest I
572 had in conserving this same system as an ambitious, keen coach (cf. Bourdieu, 1990b). In
573 particular, field crossing highlighted how I conformed to the logic of the field and became an
574 'artifact' of the field to the extent that while I recognized and problematized many of the
575 practices, I continued to invest in, and see the value of, 'playing the game' in the coaching
576 field. Furthermore, there were advantages to being in a relation of belonging; money, travel,
577 association with an international squad, bespoke kit, support for my coach development, and –
578 importantly - closeness and friendship with players and staff. These tensions are accentuated
579 by the ethical implications of the unequal power relations between the athletes and I, both as a
580 coach and as a non-disabled person. I was in a position in which I was able to control and

581 influence the transmission and exchange of capital for the players, while at the same time
582 placing the athletes as *subjects of* the research that I controlled (cf. Walmsley, 2004).
583 However, in blurring the lines between academic and coaching fields, and providing
584 "secondary explanations" (Bourdieu, 1977: 20) for what I was observing and experiencing, my
585 sense of unease with the methods and assumptions within the environment was ever-present
586 and inhibiting of total investment. Indeed, field crossing prompted reflection upon the multiple
587 and conflicting roles and responsibilities as a researcher, coach and critical voice in disability
588 sport. My reluctance now to share these reflections is anchored in the dilemma of whether or
589 not I risk alienating those whom I worked alongside.

590 **Implications and lessons learned**

591 The rigour of any ethnographic work rests firmly upon the researcher's awareness of what it is,
592 and what is not, possible to say (Ball, 1990). In this paper we have discussed how through the
593 use of epistemic reflexivity – enacted through the practice of 'crossing fields' – researchers can
594 make sense of, and perhaps challenge, that which 'goes without saying' in stratified sites of
595 ethnographic inquiry. Importantly, "objectifying one's own universe" (Wacquant, 1989: 33)
596 does not come 'naturally' (Lynch, 2000). As Bourdieu (1990a) argued, aspects of habitus owe
597 their specific efficacy to the fact that they are not easily accessible, which explains why
598 reflexive analyses tend to be "circumstantial and contingent" (Lynch, 2000: 36) on the
599 researcher's social location. It is therefore important to analyze the relationship between the
600 researcher, their object of study, and the broader field conditions in which both are situated
601 (Maton, 2003). Field crossing creates the conditions for an ongoing dialogue with theory,
602 reflection on the genesis and consequences of one's actions, and close scrutiny of our research
603 practices, which are seldom disclosed yet crucial in establishing transparency in the production
604 of research.

Ethnography has much to offer the development of research in disability sport through providing insight into patterns of interaction, complexity and social context. Increased critical scrutiny on the impacts of situating disabilities within high-performance coaching cultures is particularly valuable for understanding disability sport as a site for resisting and reproducing disability. However, these reflections on conducting research in disability sport coaching should be seen not as confessions or 'hand-wringing' (Pillow, 2003; Gibson and Atkinson, 2018), but an attempt to decentre the analyst in relation to the field itself. The 'method' of crossing fields highlighted how a socially instituted position as a researcher placed "outside of the urgency of a practical situation" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 381) enabled critical reflection on the hidden mechanisms and ideologies functioning within the coaching process that appeared commonsense and natural.

For ethnographers, this research prompts critical questions on the extent to which researchers can succumb to the practices and belief systems of a field, and how we can reconstruct our research practices to provide useful challenge and critique. For social scientists, ethnographic accounts that take a reflexive position are therefore better placed to problematise the seemingly productive or unquestioned aspects of social life and how they intersect with macro-structures such as – in this case - disability. In presenting this reflexive analysis, we hope to provide a frame of reference to better understand the process of 'doing' ethnographic research in socially significant yet contested social fields. To produce better research, we encourage a reflexive gaze that recognizes and focuses attention on the ways that researchers are situated across multiple intersecting fields, locating the foundations for knowledge production and methodological rigour in networks of power and ideology, as a means for the possibility of liberation from them.

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