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## THE USE OF HABITUS IN RESEARCH ON EXPERIENCE AND COACH DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

Bourdieu's concept of habitus has increasingly been used in research in the sports coaching field and offers a useful concept for understanding how experience comes to shape coaching practice. In this article, we begin by outlining the use of habitus in the sports coaching literature and provide a brief description of it and its relationship with his other key concepts: practice and field. We then examine the potential use of habitus in research on coach development, in which we argue for its importance for research on coach development. We close by exploring its use as a methodological tool and how it can be operationalised and used in conjunction with other constructionist concepts.

### Introduction

Bourdieu's attention to sport has proven to be attractive to researchers working in the sports coaching field and particularly those working on coach development (see for example, Christensen, 2009; Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Jones & Wallace, 2005; Piggott, 2011; Taylor & Garratt 2010), predominantly for his ability to capture and highlight the 'common sense' or taken for granted assumptions of social practice. Of particular interest has been Bourdieu's emphasis on developing a theory of action, which has been used to link coaches' past experiences to their practices (see for example, Christensen, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2003). Used in this way, Bourdieu's work has provided insight into how non-conscious knowledge is acquired through experience and how this shapes practice. In particular this has been achieved through the use of his 'three thinking tools': habitus, practice and field.

Habitus is an expression of an individual's social and cultural history (Light & Evans, 2011). Thus, individuals are influenced by these social and cultural experiences that structure their understandings because the habitus operates at a non-conscious level to 'structure' action. Furthermore, the habitus is constructed over time through the individual's participation in the practices of a specific social field. For example, sport is a social field and sports' coaching could be seen as a sub field. Beliefs and dispositions are formed about a particular activity which, in turn, predisposes one to view this activity from "a filter through which all future experiences will pass" (Cushion *et al.*, 2003, p. 218). The increased use of Bourdieu in the sport coaching literature arises from growing awareness of the influence of social and cultural conditions on coaching and coaches, that has stimulated interest in social theory in sport coaching research (see for example Jones, Potrac, Cushion & Ronglan, 2011).

As one of Bourdieu's key concepts, habitus, operates in relation to his other key concepts: practice and field. Practices and fields are intertwined and contain socio-cultural assumptions, thus, coaching as a field, is value laden, as it is rooted in the culture of the practice (Saury & Durand, 1998) to create a form of social conditioning (Light, 2011). This idea is further enforced by Langer (1992), arguing that any system 'while composed of individual members, has a structure, a history, a way of understanding the world and an institutional culture' (p. 72).

Practice however, mediates between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984). Although, there is no absolute consensus on the universal nature of sports coaching – and arguably an absolute consensus will never

be met – because sports coaching is regarded as a dynamic, social, complex and context specific practice (Cushion & Lyle, 2010). It is, itself, structured and transformed by the very discourse of its dynamicity, sociality, complexity and contextualisation. Whilst these are some relevant difficulties to point out when attempting to categorise sports coaching, it should not impede its theoretical development. Coaches do demonstrate having knowledge of coaching, and this is needed to support and assist the design of coach education. However, this knowledge does not display material properties such as the ability to hold an object; rather it is knowledge that is in many ways unique to each coach, which requires situating and developing it.

This means that understanding how knowledge is developed is important for understanding how and why coaches coach as they do. It has been argued that an understanding of how such knowledge is developed from a socio-cultural viewpoint allows for a better integration of the complexity of coaching, due to the non-reductionist assumptions required for this paradigm shift. However, more attention on this is required in the coaching literature (Cushion & Lyle, 2010). The acknowledgement of coaching as a complex activity that is socially and culturally situated is evident, highlighted in recognition of the importance of tacit knowledge in the process of learning to coach (Saury & Durand, 1998), and situates our argument within knowledge being developed as a social construction.

### **The social construction of knowledge**

The unconscious knowledge acquired from experience has featured in the sports coaching literature and has been commonly described as ‘the art of coaching’ (Woodman, 1993), ‘craft coaching’ (Day, 2011) or ‘tacit knowledge’ (Nash & Collins, 2006). These views acknowledge sports coaching as a complex practice that is socially and culturally situated. Hence, these informal day-to-day experiences have strong influences in developing durable dispositions (perceptions and assumptions) (Bourdieu, 1977). These experiences structure coaches’ actions as one learns the ‘culture’ of coaching through participation in its practices. This is also suggested by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) with their concepts of situated learning, communities of practice (CoP) and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Light (2011) suggests that practice plays a central role; as such this provides Lave and Wenger’s concepts and Bourdieu’s concepts, some common ground.

It is over long periods of time participating in the practices of a particular field (and the constant interaction involved) that the habitus is constructed. With this, is embodied our perceptions and assumptions of the field and its practices. This complex interaction between field and practice is fundamental in creating a coaching habitus; this is the key of Bourdieu’s sociological concept. This has been argued to transcend structuralist thought as it accounts for and engenders the infinite array of practices developed by the conflicts at interplay between each of these concepts: habitus, field and practice (Brubaker, 1993).

This interweaving process embodies itself within the person; the body is in society and society is in the body (Wacquant, n.d.), in turn creating what is known as corporeal knowledge (the social enacted through the body unconsciously). This is the main reason it is argued to be a powerful tool in understanding the coaches’ approaches towards coaching and the practices they adopt; it is over a lifetime of interaction with the field of sport that these coaching skills and inclinations have been acquired to guide their coaching practices.

Despite the argument that habitus transcends the structure and agency divide, the use of it as a tool for coach development is limited (Light, 2012, in press) with the exception of studies on elite rugby coaches in Australia and New Zealand (Evans, 2012; Light & Evans, 2011). This may be a result of the challenges researchers face in putting habitus into practice due to its intended ambiguity and looseness, which, paradoxically, is also its strength. Another challenge of the sports coaching field is that it is hindered by its own division of theory and practice.

## Developing a feel for coaching

Through habitus, Bourdieu illustrates how day-to-day practices become embodied into ‘systems of actions’ to structure individual’s practices and beliefs; Light and Evans (2011) argue that it exists exclusively as a corporeal manifestation of experience that is formed non-consciously and which operates non-consciously. The functions performed by a coach seemingly occur without conscious awareness, and have therefore been acquired over time, and function as this ‘feel’ for coaching.

This unconscious awareness has manifested itself from years of ‘socialisation’ in specific social settings, to provide what Bourdieu (1980) terms *le sens pratique*. Not only do we learn the skills required, but also the attributes pertaining to the social structure. The first author is French and for him, *le sens pratique* has a peculiar significance that is not captured when translated into English as ‘the practical sense’. In fact, he believes it is better portrayed when used as ‘to have sense of what is practical’, a feel for the field. Consequently, this sense/feel lies at the interplay between habitus and field, and generates dispositions required for a given practice (Coles, 2009).

## The situated nature: Learning to coach

Saury and Durand (1998) identified how social conditions affect the attainment of goals. In this regard, sports coaching social theories have been used to promote a deeper theoretical understanding of this social and dynamic activity (Jones *et al.*, 2011). However, coach development is often critiqued for not implementing such social theories to improve coach education (Jones, 2007). As such, social theory marks a dissonance between formal coach education and the reality of the coaching process as a practice that is complex. Yet, education should mirror the dynamic real life situations coaches are constantly confronted with (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004). As a consequence, the growing attention in the coaching literature directed at the implicit aspects of the coaches’ practices strives to provide a more ‘complete’ understanding.

Saury and Durand (1998) demonstrated that coaches use past experiences that are deeply embedded in a “cognitive alchemy” (p.265), to cope with the ambiguous nature of coaching. It is these past experiences that structure particular dispositions. These dispositions developed from such past experiences are what constitute perceptions and beliefs that distinguish our beliefs between ‘good’ practice and ‘bad’ practice. Cushion and Jones (2006) argue that it is linked to broader social structures. This is the reason why unique habituses are socio-culturally constructed, as individuals who share similar social positions, for example head sports coaches, would share similar habituses as the culture and sense of the practice of coaching becomes embodied (Light, 2012, in press). These concepts are proving to be beneficial tools in recognising particular patterns of coaching practices and similarly thus have potential benefits for coach development.

## Habitus and coaching development

Some authors have argued for the importance of the implicitly established beliefs about coaching practices and dispositions toward them, be it directly or indirectly (Becker, 2009; Jenkins, 2010; Nash & Sproule, 2011). This accounts for some of the importance placed on developing a coaching ‘philosophy’ (Jones, Armour & Potrac 2004; Lyle, 2002). With reference to Cassidy, Jones and Potrac (2009), such a philosophy represents “a set of principles that guide an individual’s practice” (p. 57). The associated effects beliefs coaches have, operating at conscious and non-conscious levels, is at present recognised in the coaching literature and marks a break from traditional views of coaching as objective, asocial, linear, rationalistic and unproblematic (Cassidy *et al.*, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Cushion & Lyle 2010). This has allowed researchers to adopt diverse perspectives on coaching and

situate it as a complex and socio-cultural practice (Cassidy *et al.*, 2009; Jones, Potrac, Cushion & Ronglan, 2011; Jones, 2006; Jones 2007). Light and Evans (2011) findings illustrate how social and cultural contexts shape certain dispositions towards coaching, as it is from these experiences within such social and cultural contexts that coaching knowledge is developed over time.

The habitus creates a durable attitude or disposition that operates beyond the scrutiny of the conscious mind (Bourdieu, 1977), which incline coaches toward a ‘coaching style’ and shape their practice without rational consideration of them. In essence this is how habitus operates to reproduce existing practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). It is this relationship between practice and field from which a habitus of “incorporated schemes of dispositions, perceptions and appreciation...orients our practice and gives meaning to them” is constructed (Kay & Laberge, 2002 p.17-18 from Bourdieu, 1984 *Distinction*). Whilst habitus *per se*, is not readily used as an empirical tool for research on sports coaching with a limited number of exceptions (see for example, Light & Evans, 2011), it is more commonly recognised as an important tool to grasp the complex nature of coaching knowledge due to the powerful influence experience plays on forming coaches’ practices (see for example, Christensen 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Light & Evans, 2011).

## The great divide

As Mutch (2003) proposes, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is actually an escape from the ever-present divide between agency and structure. Jarvie and Maguire (1994) are also sensitive to this point as ‘practice is seen to mediate between an individual’s habitus and the social world (*field*)’ (8: 191, italics added). This can be mathematically demonstrated from Bourdieu’s work in *Distinction* (1984), from which a simple manipulation of his equation may detail this point.

(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101)

Here we will offer a brief description of the type of capital that may influence the dispositions of coaches’ for preferring to engage in particular practices. This would fall within Bourdieu’s category of social capital and embodied cultural capital. These include tastes and preferences that influence the experiences coaches are likely to engage in for durable amounts of time and in turn, are likely to construct a particular habitus. Therefore, (habitus x capital) demonstrates that there exists a complex interrelatedness between both habitus and capital. Capital and habitus each generate and predispose one another, and thus create durable dispositions. However, the field is a dynamic space, wherein varied forms of practices emerge. Thus, practice is also generated from the interactions between field, capital and habitus which can be represented by inverting the equation to:

Practice = Field + (Habitus x Capital)

This is a mark of what Light (2011) suggests is a complementary relationship between social theory and learning theory. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) emphasis on practice is developed with their view of CoPs. Despite the fact that Bourdieu accounts for this by acknowledging that a habitus which does not fit with the constraints and opportunities of the field, will probably incite change (Swartz, 2002), most of his emphasis is directed at the embodied nature of the social practices, and how these are socially constructed to shape our developments. These effects are particularly interesting when drawing on the unconscious learning and knowledge constructed through experience, which has shown to be of particular importance to coach development.

## The construction of a coaching habitus in communities of practice

Lave & Wenger’s (1991) work advocating learning as a social practice is complementary with Bourdieu’s ideas on practice. For this reason learning can be seen as an interactive process (constructivist), wherein it is predisposed to social influences. Furthermore, Mutch (2003) argues that

a more precise way of depicting a habitus is to examine the impact of previous experience from Wenger's (1998) focus of identity and meaning that forms a core arrangement within CoPs – a more refined focus on practice stemming from Lave and Wenger's 1991 publication. Drawing on Mutch (2003), Light and Evans (2011) focused on the construction of habitus within CoPs with the aim to provide a tighter focus, thus, enabling the influence of agency to emerge more easily than working with the larger space of field illustrated for the concept of CoPs. Their examination of the construction of a coaching habitus in elite level rugby coaches identified the profound role that long-term membership in CoP such as rugby clubs played in the construction of the habitus.

Although agents (individuals) participate in numerous overlapping CoPs, one is typically dominant as is illustrated in Light and Nash's (2006) study on young people in an Australian surf club. Granting that people participate in multiple CoPs, these are seen to constitute larger sub fields, for example an individual's involvement in a local rugby club is a sub field of the larger field of rugby. This allows the researcher to have a tighter focus on agency while locating the CoP within a larger social arena.

### **Why should we employ habitus in coach development?**

Habitus provides an understanding of the durable effects of past experiences on coaches current practice with Mutch (2003) suggesting that the “unconsciously acquired dispositions... profoundly affect subsequent performance” (p. 393) and, therefore, the need to understand such social origins for education and development. Thus, Atkin (2000) provides an account of ‘lifelong learning’ that Lemyre, Trudel and Durand-Bush (2007) express as the importance of researching the effects of different learning situations within different settings as a confirmation of the importance of the socio-cultural context. However, it would seem that coach education programs are not affected by interpretivist research thus, development in this area remains focused on positivist forms of knowledge. This results in isolating forms of learning, and regard a certain type of ‘knowledge’ as certifiable, which according to Taylor and Garratt (2010) does not provide an understanding of the cultural and social subtleties that affect learning and thus knowledge.

It is recognised that experience plays a crucial role in the development of coaching knowledge and exerts a far more powerful influence than any formal coach education interventions can (Abraham, Collins & Matindale, 2006; Lyle, 2002). Thus, it is of no surprise that coaches see a ‘feel’ for coaching to be the mark of expertise (Nash & Sproule, 2011). Particularly since the constant ambiguities coaches are faced with require practical knowledge, they are renowned for their ‘on-the-field’ know-how (Jones & Wallace, 2005). However, it is important to bridge the gap between theory and practice imminent in the sports coaching field (Cushion & Lyle, 2010). Therefore, habitus as a research tool is capable of transcending the theory and practice debate as it acknowledges the socio-cultural learning that occurs and the culture that is developed from it through practice. From this, we may begin to understand the assumptions and perceptions of a field that are generated and guide the practices of coaches’. Such research is not atheoretical, it is developed and grounded in the activity itself.

### **Conclusion**

Following on from others in the sports coaching field, we have argued in this article that habitus is a very useful tool that can, and has been used for conceptualising how experience comes to form such a powerful influence upon a coach's development. It can make valuable contributions in understanding how experiences shape coaching practices (see for example, Christensen, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Cushion & Jones, 2006). We have also argued that, for it to realise its full potential it should be operationalised in empirical research on coach development. Additionally, by opening up to and recognising the overlap with other constructionist approaches such as those from Lave & Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) CoP that focus on social practice, habitus offers multiple lenses through which to understand the infinite complexities of the social world, which encompasses sports coaching

(Jones *et al.*, 2011). It is not our aim to attempt to simplify the concept of habitus, or to bring closure to it by providing definite answers. We feel that it is imperative that habitus remains complex and that writing and sharing our ideas may help achieve a particular *sens pratique* of habitus.

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