

Power, consent and resistance: an autoethnography of competitive rowing

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This study builds upon existing socio-cultural work into sports coaching by probing the meanings and varieties of the shared coach–athlete experience. Specifically, the paper utilises an autoethnographic approach in an attempt to chart the complex and dynamic relationship that existed between me, the principal author, as a rowing coxswain and my coach during the preparation for a national rowing championship. Data were drawn from a training diary, emails (both sent and received) and memories during the six months I spent with Coach. The data are presented through three separate yet inter-related stories. Here, the plot of the tale hinges on the tension between my personal perceptions of effective coaching and those employed by Coach. The findings are principally theorised through Nyberg's and Giddens' concepts of power and resistance, as a fruitful relationship between Coach and me (and the crew) soon turned into a dysfunctional one. The conclusion emphasises the importance of recognising the power-ridden nature of coaching and the value of the autoethnographic genre in exploring it.

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Journal entry. July 12.

Coach left today. She had been offered a position at another rowing club, one which was allegedly more suited to her interests. I feel a bit torn. Part of me is relieved as things had taken a turn for the worse. It seems like such a long time ago that I was so excited and positive about her arrival. I would have never predicted the soured relationship we would have upon her departure. Maybe I was too critical of her behaviour. What was it about her that caused so many problems? She was young. She wanted total control. The crew wouldn't let her have it. We put her through her paces, we tested her, we pushed her, but in turn, she did the same to us. Maybe I should have given her more feedback, cut her more slack? Maybe then she would have lasted more than six months ... No, she wasn't happy. We weren't happy. Maybe it was for the best ...

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Introduction

In examining the literature on sports coaching, its limitations in terms of assisting our understanding of the inherent social power dynamic within the coach–athlete relationship become obvious. For example, most of those studies which have been undertaken exploring this dynamic have been from the coach’s viewpoint (e.g. Potrac *et al.*, 2002; Jones *et al.*, 2003, 2004). Additionally, those carried out on athlete perceptions emanate either from a psychological perspective derived from standardised instruments and inventories (e.g. Chelladurai, 1993a, 1993b; Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995; Allen & Howe, 1998; Kenow & Williams, 1999), or tend to view power as being almost exclusively wielded on athletes by coaches (Shogan, 1999; Johns & Johns, 2000). Furthermore, much of this latter work has been limited to a Foucauldian analysis (e.g. Johns & Johns, 2000; Burke & Hallinan, 2006). Although such studies have provided valuable findings, it could be argued that they have not sufficiently concerned themselves with the social and emotional processes that influence the interpersonal nature of the coach–athlete relationship and subsequent task completion (Hovelynck & Vanden Auweele, 1999; Vergeer, 2000). Additionally, with the exception of recent work by Cushion and Jones (2006), while recent qualitative studies (e.g. d’Arripe-Longueville *et al.*, 1998; Poczwadowski *et al.*, 2002; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003) have examined athlete perceptions regarding desirable and problematic coaching relationships, they have not directly or adequately addressed the concept of power and its various manifestations within such relationships.

To partially address this neglect, this study examined the transient and fluid nature of the power relationship that exists between coach and athlete from an athlete’s perspective. Rather than viewing power as located in one person or place or as a part of a binary relationship, the purpose was to shed some light on the transformative nature of power within the coach–athlete relationship by exploring the ways in which it is constantly fashioned and refashioned through a ‘play of powers’ (Westwood, 2002). By utilising such an approach, Westwood (2002) argues that it is possible to develop ‘an analysis of power that is not located simply within a homogenous view of [it] but within its multiplicities’ (p. 3). Such a conceptualisation not only permits us to bring previously unexamined coaching issues into sharper focus, but allows us to create accounts of coaching that are both textured and nuanced and, subsequently, are more true to the social power-ridden nature of coaching itself (Jones *et al.*, 2004).

Autoethnography and stories: my chosen methods of research and representation

An autoethnographic approach was adopted in an attempt to chart the complex and dynamic relationship that existed between me, the principal author, as coxswain of a competitive rowing crew, and my coach during the preparation for a major regatta. The plot of the story told hinges on the tension between my personal perceptions of helpful and appropriate coaching behaviour and those used by Coach. However,

rather than simply providing a description of my feelings, thoughts and perceptions, the aim of the study was to explore the unique structure of the power relationship that existed between Coach and me, including the various and constantly changing measures of compliance, co-operation, and resistance that the crew and I demonstrated towards her and her programme (Locke, 1985).

In recent years, the value of utilising autoethnography to further our understanding of human behaviour in the sporting context has been increasingly recognised (e.g. Denison, 1996; Tsang, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a). This method of inquiry requires authors to draw upon highly personalised accounts of lived experience for the purposes of extending our sociological understanding of particular phenomena (Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2000). According to Hockey (2004), autoethnography can be distinguished from autobiography by its emphasis on utilising experiences within the writer's life to illuminate wider cultural or sub-cultural aspects. Indeed, it is through the process of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall that the autoethnographer strives to relate the personal to the cultural (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Richardson, 2000; Ellis, 2004). In this respect, Bochner *et al.* (1997) argue that the stories that people tell about their lives become a means of knowing for the rest of us, as well as serving as an avenue for disclosing about the social worlds in which we live.

To date, scholars in the sociology of sport have largely used autoethnography to explore concepts of identity construction and reconstruction among others (Sparkes, 1996; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999; Duncan, 2000; Tsang, 2000). More recently, Haleem, *et al.* (2003) and Jones (2006) have suggested that autoethnography represents a valuable tool for investigating the social complexity of the coaching process. In particular, they believe that by adopting an 'insider's' perspective on the social and emotional worlds of individual athletes and coaches, a fuller understanding of the holistic nature of the coaching process is likely to result. Similarly, I believe that using such an approach has the potential to shed some light upon the mundane or everyday aspects of sports coaching, which remain a clandestine, largely taken for granted world, particularly where issues of power are in question (Gardiner, 2000). Consequently, an attempt is made to delve beneath a surface account of ordinary practices, what Kosik (1976) termed the 'pseudo concrete', in order to develop a critical knowledge of the 'connective tissue' that exists within the coach-athlete relationship so we are to better able to understand its complexity (Gardiner, 2000).

Autoethnographies can be written in many ways depending on where the author positions him or herself on the continuum of art and science (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These texts can be presented in the form of short stories, memoirs, textual fragmentations, poems and presentations. For the purpose of this paper, I rely upon short stories to bring to light the ambiguities and contradictions of everyday life within a coaching context. The stories that I tell stem from my experiences as a female student-athlete and of the coaching I received. In constructing my tale, I have drawn upon a variety of sources, including my training diary, emails (both sent and received) and my memories. The training diary was kept over six months with entries

made after each training session (sometimes twice a day). The stories constructed are based upon 'critical incidents' which occurred throughout my time in the rowing club. These 'critical incidents' were significant issues and/or key events in the individuals' or group's life, and around which pivotal decisions revolved (Measor, 1985). It could be argued that many such critical events occurred while I was present, so why did these particular incidents and not others resonate with me? They did so not only because they appeared to encapsulate general trends and, as such, were manifestations of developing emotional undercurrents, but also because they definitively led to a further hardening of attitudes.

While the stories are largely based on actual events, some identifying factors have been changed to protect the privacy of characters portrayed (Ellis, 2004). Consequently, although grounded in experience, my tale could be most accurately interpreted as creative non-fiction as it contains the fashioning and dramatisation of real feelings and, to some extent, events. In this respect, it is as much concerned with evocation as with 'true' representation (Sparkes, 2002a). The resulting 'remembered' and elaborated upon happenings form the cornerstones of the story told, making the reality portrayed something of a selective one (Koleva, 1999). Doing so enables me to privilege the previously unexplored complex power-related issues in coaching complete with their 'inherent contradictions, ambivalences and emancipatory tendencies' (Gardiner, 2000, p. 19). Although fictionalised in this sense, however, like Jones' (2006) recent coaching autoethnography, I utilised what Ellis (1997) referred to as systematic sociological introspection to understand and frame my experiences. It was from such reflexive activity that the stories, grounded in my notes, journal entries and memories, were crafted.

For the purpose of this paper, my experiences are represented in three separate but progressive stories. The first, constructed primarily from excerpts in my training diary, *'Taking to the water: the start of a new season'*, addresses my early relationship with Coach. In particular, it focuses on how my interactions with her led me to, initially at least, buy into her programme. Here, issues relating to expert knowledge, directive leadership and shared beliefs and goals, and how they influenced my perceptions of her, are described. The second story, also constructed from training diary excerpts, *'Creating wake: choppy waters'*, recalls events that occurred some two months later. This story explores how my initial positive perceptions were overcome by feelings of frustration and anger, brought about by the way Coach communicated with us (the crew). The final story, based on email communication between myself and the athletes, some additional notes as well as training diary entries, *'The storm'*, charts how we ultimately openly resisted and challenged Coach's power. Here, the narrative describes how a poor performance at the major regatta served as the catalyst for heated conflict. The stories then, chart the developing relationship between Coach and myself and, although presented as snapshot incidents, can be read as part of a wider unfolding inter-linked drama in which issues of power increasingly came to dominate.

While the stories constructed could stand by themselves, I have decided to use existing social theory to make sense of the experiences recounted. Why? Principally

because, in line with developing thought, I believe that as an autoethnographer I should be trying to do something more than 'just tell a good story', to break readers' hearts, or to understand myself 'in deeper ways' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738). Rather, I should also be trying to do something that is critical; something that tries to explain to myself and others 'the socially organised powers in which our lives are embedded and to which our activities contribute' (Smith, 1999, p. 8). In other words, to make ambiguous experiences more visible and apparent to readers. Consequently, I consider that an element of post-modern theory should be inclusive within our post-modern research practice; that there should be some telling, that is, a suggested interpretation of the events being written about, as well as showing (Jones, 2006). Such a stance protects against the danger of aestheticism, in which the 'writing exhausts itself in the pleasure of the text' (Sparkes, 2002b, p. 230). Finally, the decision was also driven by a desire to contribute to a developing theorisation of coaching. Indeed, while it is hoped that the stories provide an evocative description of the relationship I had with my coach, the identification of 'essential features' and 'patterned regularities' from my narratives may serve to further increase our theoretical understanding of the sociological concept of power as it relates to the coaching process.

The stories and a preliminary analysis

In an effort to make sense of the power relationship that existed between Coach and the crew, Giddens' (1984) work on power, agency and the dialectic of control is primarily drawn upon. According to Giddens (1984), power is a feature of all social life and refers to the capacity of individuals to transform (to some degree) the social worlds that they inhabit. Rather than being an unlimited capacity which one person wields absolutely over another or others however, Giddens' conceptualisation of power suggests that subordinate individuals or groups have some resources (both authoritative and allocative) at their disposal which they can utilise to change the nature of the power relationship (Layder, 1994). Although this does not necessarily mean that power relations 'will be equalised or even turned around, ... it does mean that people are never entirely helpless when subject to the power and control of others' (Layder, 1994, pp. 137–138). Such a conceptualisation was used to highlight some of the ways in which the balance in power that existed between the Coach and the subordinate group, in this case the crew and me, changed over time and, specifically, as a result of our attempts to exploit the resources at our disposal.

The second principal interpretive framework comes from Nyberg's (1981) work in education, which focuses upon the notion of 'power over power'. In it, he articulates how people in any social or organisational relationship must consent to power being wielded over them before such power can be effective. As such, rather than being in the hands of the presumed power wielder, which in the sporting context is often the coach, power is considered to be in the hands of the person or persons on whom power is being wielded (i.e. the athletes). Specifically, his writings with regard to the

types of consent (i.e. attitudes and actions), the ‘continuum of consent’, and the tactics that individuals employ when choosing to withdraw their consent to power being wielded over them appear particularly relevant in this context.

Story 1: Taking to the water: the start of a new season

Journal entry: October 10.

Coach officially started at the rowing club today. She seems like a lot of fun. I think it’s going to be really cool having her around the club. She has a strong technical knowledge of the sport and has worked with some of the world’s top coaches, so that means she knows what she’s talking about. She also has a tough training attitude which is awesome. Coach says the rowers have been slacking off in their training regime so now she wants them to work. She takes the sport seriously and that’s the type of attitude you’ve got to have to be successful. None of this social rowing stuff—you either go hard or go home! She’s going to challenge us, raise the standard of the club, make it more competitive, and that’s what I like. The best part is that she’s familiar with my former rowing club, she knows my old coach. I hope she makes the club more like the one I came from. It’s nice to know that she comes from the same system as me, the athletes are in for a real shock. She’ll show them proper training and proper technique.

It is a big change for the athletes, but during training they seemed to listen to her when she told them to do something differently. It might take them some time to get used to her though, the rowers have never had such a structured programme nor have they had a female coach. But I’ve been telling them that she knows her stuff and if they want to be successful, they’d better listen. I can’t believe she’s worked with the world’s top rowing coaches, and now she’s working with us! I can’t wait for her to pass on her knowledge, I could learn a lot. It never occurred to me that there would be jobs for young female rowing coaches, it would be something I would love to do and now I have the perfect mentor.

What’s really great is that she’s the same age as most of us so she’s not intimidating. Being new to town, we’ve gone out for coffee and to the movies a few times, so not only do I have a new coach, I’ve got a new friend. She’s so easy to talk to, not intimidating like my other rowing coaches. She even asks my opinion about things around the club, training sessions and possible crew combinations. It’s so nice to have a coach who cares about what I say. She says I’m her assistant, how cool! Now we can turn the programme around and make it more serious, more competitive. This season is going to be fun with her at the helm. I’ve finally got something to look forward to!

My initial unconditional support for Coach was very much based upon my belief that she looked and behaved like a coach should. Indeed, I was very impressed by her coaching qualifications and expertise, her record of success, her enthusiastic nature, and the challenging goals and high aspirations that she had for the crew and me. This view was further reinforced by her appearance and the way she acted both in and around the boathouse, and on the water during practice sessions. She looked professional, established clear routines for us to follow, and led very structured

practice sessions. When making this judgement, my experiences of other coaches provided a discursive framework against which I 'measured' her. Social rules were being obeyed, not in respect of formalised prescriptions but the accepted routines of everyday life (Giddens, 1998). I felt comfortable, secure and safe in her charge and, as such, was willing to consent to her coaching practices (Layder, 1994). Indeed, Giddens (1984) confirms that such acceptance or confidence in the practice of others results from, and further develops an increase in, one's ontological security. Generally speaking, ontological security refers to a sense of confidence, continuity, and trust in society, and can be understood as the security of being (Giddens, 1984, 1991). In this respect, a person's ontological security is the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice. In this case, I was secure in her presence, in the person she appeared to be.

My early consent to Coach's programme could also be understood in relation to the work of Nyberg (1981). According to Nyberg, consent occurs when an individual accepts the claims of a power claimant and delegates power to them. Furthermore, he suggests that the complex concept of consent can be conceived of comprising two main categories of meaning, namely consenting attitudes and consenting actions. Here, he notes that 'these categories can be separated for purposes of analysis, and [that] it is possible to maintain that a consenting attitude need not lead to a consenting action, and that a consenting action can be effected without an attitude of consent' (Nyberg, 1981, pp. 46–47). In addition, Nyberg argues that an individual may be asked to consent to three parts of a power relationship. These are the plan or system of ideas to be implemented, the person in the delegating position, and the particular assignment given to an individual.

In the context of my narrative, I initially consented to Coach's methods in terms of both attitude and action. This was the result of having a clear understanding of what she wanted us to achieve as a crew, valuing the role she assigned to me as an individual within this process, and my warming to her enthusiastic and dynamic personality. In this regard, her apparent interest in helping me develop as a coxswain and her willingness to listen to the thoughts and ideas that I had regarding training activities, race tactics and seat order in the boat led me to respect her as an individual as well as a coach. Indeed, I considered our working relationship to be 'special'. This point is crucial, as Nyberg (1981, p. 51) points out:

If people are treated merely as behaving organisms, as operational units, with no regard or their sense of purpose and their need to know, all that can be expected is temporary compliance and a tendency toward minimizing every effort—except the effort to escape from the power relationship. If people understand or at least think they understand what it is going on, why it is going on, and what part they play in a system of purposeful activity, the chances that cooperation will replace compliance increase considerably.

This certainly appeared to be the case in terms of my early relationship with Coach, when I felt valued and needed.

My positive outlook towards Coach can also be linked to Bourdieu's (1991) discussion of the complicity of the dominated. Here, Bourdieu noted that such complicity is necessary if symbolic subjugation is to be achieved, explaining the concept by declaring that 'one is only hooked if one is in the pool' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 89) (and I was definitely in the pool!). In the context of coaching, Bourdieu's work could be understood to reflect a situation where athletes are willingly submissive to, and compliant with, coaches' discourse within a particular sporting context and culture (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Similarly, I willingly submitted myself to Coach's programme and offered nothing in the way of resistance. This was because I fully believed that her approach and methods were not only legitimate but were also motivational (Cushion & Jones, 2006). I thus became engaged in a process of 'entanglement' with her (Stevenson, 1990). Specifically, my belief that Coach 'had the key to unlock the secret to successful athletic performance' (Lopiano & Zotos, 1992, p. 278) resulted in me developing a very personal relationship and strong bond with her (Prus & Irini, 1980; Jones *et al.*, 2005). In keeping with the findings of Jones *et al.* (2005), Coach's knowledge, persona and enthusiasm led me to view her with an element of reference, admiration and respect. She was, initially at least, somebody I wanted to learn from, please and trusted.

Story 2: Creating wake: choppy waters

Journal entry: February 1.

Well, I was wrong! REALLY WRONG!! I was so excited about working with this coach and things were going well, but the athletes were having a tough time buying into her programme, now I see why. All this time I've been trying to help her 'sell' her programme by telling the athletes that she knows what she's doing, after all, she's worked with some of the world's best rowing coaches. I still support her technical feedback, but she is so grouchy. This morning, out on the water, I was in the coach boat and the athletes were in small boats (singles and doubles). One of the athletes innocently asked what stroke rate to use for the upcoming exercise and Coach replied angrily 'wait and I'll tell you!!' Then she told the athletes to go but did not tell them who went first (Guys? Girls? Heavyweights? Lightweight? Singles? Doubles?). So someone in the fleet called out 'which ones?' Coach aggressively snapped 'you all should be ready!' You should have seen the frustration and confusion on each face. This has become a typical reaction from her in the morning. Because I was in the coach boat, she must have felt the need to justify the tone of her response by blaming the athletes for not listening. But how can they when no one can hear her over the roar of the coach boat? Raise your voice—yes, but don't bite their heads off! They can't read her mind but she has such little patience with them. Maybe she didn't get enough sleep, but why coach rowing if you can't handle the early mornings??? Rowing *is* early mornings.

Nationals are coming up in a few weeks. I'm really worried that the crew is falling apart. Lately, practises have been void of enjoyment, they are a chore. The guys used to crack jokes all the time, they used to chat when we would spin the boat, now

the boat is quiet. The physical schedule is not over the top, but each athlete is working or studying as well. Coach snapped at me when I could only spend a couple of hours loading boats yesterday. I couldn't help it, there were so many deadlines—a course to plan, a grant proposal to write, and an abstract due. I can't afford to spend an extra two hours on top of the four hours already spent at rowing today. Has Coach lost sight of life outside of rowing? Technically she's great, but she seems to be missing the whole 'social' component of being a good coach. Why be a coach if you can't interact with people? She needs to work *with* the athletes although it almost seems as if she is constantly at odds with them.

She thinks she's the Boss, that she knows best so doesn't need any feedback or help with decision making. Last night we had a meeting about our upcoming trip and she spent the whole time telling us what to pack. It was so condescending, does she not realise that we're adults? I'm surprised she didn't tell us to look both ways before crossing the road! What's she doing? It seems as though she just wants a bunch of robots who will do whatever she says. I'M NOT A ROBOT. Rowing isn't fun anymore. Where has that 'cool' coach gone—the one from the beginning of the season? The one I was excited about? I was talking to her today about the upcoming season. A few months ago she said that I would cox the men's eight for a university regatta. Today she told me that I would have to trial for the seat. What gives? She tells me I've got the seat and the next thing she tells me I have to trial for it? She says there are a couple of school coxswains going to university so I'll have competition. After all the time I've put in the programme, all the time I've spent on the water, suddenly she has lost faith in my abilities?

Journal Entry: February 15.

I have to confess that I was being deliberately awkward at practice this morning. When coxing the eight she asked me to switch from the drill I was doing to another. I was still mad at her for telling me I'd have to trial for my seat, but there was also something about her tone that put me off. She was barking orders but she's hardly been coaching us all week. Why should we suddenly listen to her? She had ignored us on the water—left us to our own devices—and now she's acting like she's in charge of the boat! I don't even think she cares about this boat, just wants medals for her CV. Why should I listen to her anymore? I kept going, ignoring her request. After a few strokes, she yelled at me again to switch drills. I stared at Matt who was stroking the boat. He gave a knowing grin, I nodded my head, and counted five more strokes before I switched the drill. And for those five strokes there was nothing she could do. She could yell until she was blue in the face, I wasn't going to give in and, from Matt's grin, I knew the crew would support me. It was as if she didn't trust that we could think for ourselves. I was sick of it. All this time I'd been trying to 'justify' her behaviour so that the crew would have more faith, but not anymore. I couldn't. This early morning face-off was the result of each time she had snapped at us or treated us like robots, for every patronising comment, for the humiliation of being treated like school kids, for thinking we weren't capable of taking care of ourselves, for making me load that bloody truck, and for not recognising my commitment to the programme. Today, I wanted control. I wanted to show her that she couldn't run everything. It was our showdown and for five short strokes I felt I had won.

Despite my initial enthusiasm for Coach and her methods, the relationship that existed between her and the crew and me began to deteriorate just a few months later. The problem was not caused by a perceived deficiency in terms of her expertise or knowledge, but of how she chose to interact and communicate with us. As illustrated in the second narrative, her enthusiastic style was increasingly replaced with a stern, unfriendly approach. My dissatisfaction with her, however, went deeper than just a dislike of authoritarian behaviour, curt responses and patronising comments. Rather, the shared power relationship with me that she had initially promised (and to some extent delivered) had been taken away without explanation, in what I perceived to be a conceited, disrespectful way. I was left feeling angry and frustrated. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. My expectations had been disappointed. The unwritten contract between us had been broken. She also did not seem to appreciate the sacrifices that many of us had to make in order to maintain the high level of commitment to the programme. Such a state of affairs led to a collective feeling of dissatisfaction and echoes the findings contained within Haleem's (Jones *et al.*, 2006) autoethnographic work and in Jones *et al.*'s (2005) ethnography of an elite swimmer, both of which track the course of a coach-athlete relationship from reverence to dysfunction as a consequence of perceived uncaring coaching practice. The point here, of course, as in previous work (Jones *et al.*, 2005, 2006) is not to unquestioningly criticise a hierarchical coaching structure, but to raise awareness of the social consequences of such manifest actions on human relationships.

Although much of Giddens' theorising relates to understanding groups' long-lasting characteristics (e.g. through ontological security), he also recognised that every practice holds some opportunity for innovation. In this respect, he believed that the consequences of social practice can never be fully plotted in advance (Cohen, 1998). This formed the basis of his theory of structuration, whereby social groups are structured by commonly accepted and reproduced practices with individuals holding the potential to act with consciousness. In this context, the dissent displayed by the crew (including myself) can be interpreted as being motivated by a desire to regain our ontological security; our familiar surroundings in the company of unthreatening others. Taking away this security results in anxiousness and anomie (Cohen, 1998); feelings that soon became frequent companions.

I was not alone in challenging Coach's authority, the crew also did so by referring to her among themselves as 'Seagull'. The condescending nickname resulted from the crew's perception that Coach spent most of her time screaming incomprehensibly. Using it repeatedly had a significant effect on the crew's attitude towards the training programme. According to Nyberg (1981), the ultimate act of withdrawing power is through laughter, as 'authority fears no threat more than the laughter that comes from scorn' (p. 53). Here, the athletes' used sarcasm to infiltrate and resist Coach's domination and was illustrative of growing organised dissent against her.

According to Willis (1977), humour, banter and aggressive sarcasm directly question authority by subverting the language in which it is normally expressed. Giving Coach this nickname allowed the crew to exercise some power over her through 'transforming' the circumstances in which they found themselves (Giddens, 1984) and also echoes the findings of Cushion and Jones (2006) in professional youth football. Here, the players occasionally withdrew best effort as a means of exercising a degree of control over their environment. Indeed, Giddens believed that power is always a mix of autonomy and dependence, as even the powerful depend on the less powerful to carry out certain practices (Cohen, 1998; Light, 1999). This dependence can be exploited by subordinates to lever concessions or openly resist perceived oppression. It also illustrated that the crew (and to a certain extent myself) came to view the coach as a structure to work against, as they (we) searched for ways to cope with an oppressive social environment (Willis, 1977). Not surprisingly such an environment, and our response to it as athletes, had a negative influence on the programme and Coach's leadership of it.

Story 3: The Storm

It was a particularly sunny day and we had just gotten into the 8+¹ about forty minutes before our race. The crew was healthy and had raced well all weekend. It was our final event. Our goal was to make our mark, to leave an impression with the competition. As we 'shoved off' from the dock, Coach mentioned that she wanted to check something with the boat. She suggested a couple of the guys make some changes with their foot-stops.² The launch area was getting congested as a race had just finished and several 8+s were coming to shore, we needed to get out of the way. I looked at Coach to see if she wanted us to relocate, but she looked angry. She yelled something, turned and walked away. I didn't know what she wanted, so we rowed away from the dock. She didn't meet us, so I proceeded with the warm up.

After the half hour warm up and still a few minutes before our race, we decided to practice our starting sequence. I gave the commands: 'Sit up ... attention ... and ...' I heard yelling from the bow. They weren't ready. I gave them a few more seconds but I could hear them complaining. That was ridiculous. We had been struggling all season to have quiet in the boat. They knew the rules, only the coxswain speaks, so I started again; 'sit up ... *shut up* ... and ...' that caused more yelling from the bow. The other athletes shook their heads. Matt, the stroke, turned in his seat and yelled 'sort it out', but instead of shutting up, the bow pair began arguing with the rest of the crew. Trying to maintain some sort of order, I excluded the bow pair and asked the remaining six rowers to paddle us into the starting blocks in time for the race. We sat ready in the gates, but I was not in the mood to race. It felt as though a black cloud had fallen over the boat and we were smothering in it. What was the problem?

Our goal for the race was to leave an impression, and we certainly did. It was horrible. It felt as though eight people were doing different things every stroke for 2000 meters. Our hearts were heavy, and no matter how much pleading or cajoling, there was no commitment. But why should there be? We had just had a huge fight.

We rowed back to the dock exhausted and irritated. I sat in silence, in shock, completely confused. Was it my fault?

Coach met us at the dock, and she could tell from our expressions that something in the boat had gone drastically wrong. She stayed quiet and watched us as we put the boat away. I replayed the event in my head. What started it? What had happened? Where did we go wrong? When the boat was safe and the oars put away, Coach called us together to talk about the race. We stood in a group in front of her, all except for Pat who maintained a distance by standing about ten feet away under a tree. She asked him to join us. He refused. The rest of us stood at the boat, baffled, what was going on? Coach shrugged off Pat's stubbornness, faced the rest of the crew and asked what had happened. No one spoke, heads were down and we stood in awkward silence. After a few moments, I began to talk about how I thought it was my fault because I had told the crew to shut up before the race, but Pat interrupted . . . He announced that I had not been the cause of the problem. Oh good, big relief, it wasn't me . . . but what was it then? He became animated as he expressed his outrage with Coach—the nerve of her to turn her back and walk away from us before our race. What kind of message had she sent us—we weren't worth her time? I stood with my head down. I was embarrassed. What would happen now? Coach looked sullen but listened as Pat continued his verbal attack. The message was finally out. There was to be no more dancing around the issue, no more talking behind her back, questioning her motives or questioning her ability, no more silent evaluations of every move she had made and every thing she had said. When Pat finished, there was silence. Coach turned her back on us and walked away. Meeting over. I had been too scared to make a sound. I'd never seen quite a showdown. I couldn't help but feel sorry for her because Pat had been cutting, ruthless. What must she be feeling? What would I feel? How will she react? What was Pat hoping she would do? What will happen now between her and Pat? So many questions.

The following week Coach called a crew meeting, without Pat, and announced that he was no longer part of the 8+ crew. The 8+ was a prestigious race and Pat had consistently been one of the top athletes but now had lost his place in the boat. Without him in the boat, could we do well? Coach was willing, however, for him to race the 4⁻³ as he had been training for it all summer. The news hit the crew hard. I guess we now had to accept that, without Pat, the chance we once had to stand on the winner's podium was now slim.

At the next regatta, we were surprisingly met by Pat, who asked if he was still racing in the 8+ because he had heard a rumour that he was not. Wait a second. Coach had given the impression that Pat had been informed he was no longer in the 8+. Did he travel all the way here not knowing that? Should I tell him? I nonchalantly told him that Coach knew the boating order and it would be best to speak to her. He explained that he had not been able to get in touch with her but if he wasn't in the 8+, he wouldn't have made the trip, there was no point. Uh oh. A huge mis-communication—Coach had announced to the rest of the group that he was not in the boat but she had not informed him. What a mess. I immediately chased her down and mentioned that he was asking about his status in the 8+. I asked her why he hadn't been told. She hadn't had time to tell him. Hadn't had time to tell him?!!! She had found the time to tell everyone else! From that moment I knew I had too many questions about her and, as a result, I would never be able to take her seriously. I needed a coach whom I could trust. I needed a coach who I

wouldn't second-guess. But mostly, I needed a coach who could manage the training environment, the people and the interactions within it. Like everyone else, I needed to know what my role was and where I stood.

My discontent with Coach deepened when I learnt she not had not told Pat that he was excluded from the crew. She had announced it to the other crew members but not to Pat himself. Hence, I came to not only question her as a 'competent and knowledgeable professional, but also as a person' (Potrac *et al.*, 2002, p. 198). After the National Championships were over, I withdrew from the programme. It turned out that Coach's time there was also short lived. As 'authority cannot survive without respect', losing the deference and esteem of the athletes proved to be a crucial factor in her professional demise (Nyberg, 1981, p. 53). In essence, she had also lost her ontological security as the group turned against her. Hence, she, like us, lost her taken-for-granted competence in negotiating familiar ways. She had misplaced our trust, an integral aspect of ontological security (Cohen, 1998). The 'rules' (i.e. 'taken as procedures of action') which governed our relationship, through which the social practice of coaching was sustained, had been broken (Giddens, 1998, p. 124). The strength of the response from us as athletes was considerable, something Giddens (1998) warns us not to underestimate. Indeed, for him, of all the variety of tactics used by agents during interaction, of particular significance and power 'are those involved in sustaining ontological security' (p. 125). The options for Coach were limited; she moved on to another post to escape her own feelings of frustration and helplessness, and to 'work out a comfortable *modus vivendi* again' (Cohen, 1998, p. 284).

The importance of keeping athletes' respect has been highlighted recently by several authors (e.g. Potrac *et al.*, 2002; Jones *et al.*, 2004, 2003). Indeed, the elite coaches interviewed in this body of work were at pains to express the effort they expended into various strategies to ensure that athletes' respect was maintained, as without it they couldn't function. Such strategies included the development of an expert persona, someone who was in control of events, who knew what they were doing, while also portraying an understanding, caring image of having the athletes' best interests at heart. The sincerity of the coaches' actions were not the issue, just that the athletes perceived them to be; enough that respect was granted so that suggestions, desires and instructions were carried out with best effort. This appeared to be the 'bargain' that was struck; the exchange that was obligated. Subsequently, many of the coaches studied here put great store in, and took great care about, how they interacted with athletes as it was here, in the way the spoke, appeared and generally 'were', that this all important concept of 'respect' was engendered and secured (e.g. Potrac *et al.*, 2002).

Further discussion and concluding thoughts

The aim of this study was to explore the unique structure of the power relationship that existed between Coach and me over the months preceding a major regatta.

Drawing upon work by Nyberg (1981) and Giddens (1984) among others to understand my experiences in an elite rowing programme, the study attempted to increase theoretical understanding of the sociological concept of power as it relates to the coaching process. The power that was present in the coaching environment under study involved various and constantly changing measures of compliance, co-operation, and resistance (Locke, 1985). At the heart of the matter lay a coach's insensitivity to the feelings and perceptions of those she coached. Although, initially her actions boosted my ontological security and confidence, her subsequent behaviour threatened and undermined it. The rules of practice (Giddens, 1998), which at first resonated with comfortable familiarity, were soon stretched and abused. In response, both the crew and myself found ways to resist and, to a degree, subvert the perceived oppression.

In many ways, the findings build on those of previous research (e.g. Potrac *et al.*, 2002) which determined that, if effective coaching is to be achieved, coaches need to be sensitive to, and never take for granted, the various forms of power inherent within the coach-athlete relationship. In this respect, the findings illustrate Giddens' and Nyberg's theses regarding the diffused nature of social power, which is something many coaches appear to have difficulty grasping (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Jones and Wallace (2005) further suggest that coaches should expect to exert variable but always limited control over athletes; the social context being too complex and problematic to allow anything else. Indeed, according to Giddens (1998, p. 122), 'every competent social actor is, *ipso facto*, a social theorist'; someone who knows the 'rules' of interaction in order to achieve desired ends. Hence, sociology's importance to coaches and coaching comes to the fore, as the social rules implicated in practice need to be tacitly grasped by practitioners so that irretrievable relational breakdown, as in this case, can be avoided. This is not to say that there should be no change or innovation. Indeed, Giddens was at pains to emphasise that risks and risk-taking are inherent in social practice. For Giddens, however, such risk was tied to the concepts of reflexivity and 'life politics' which refer to how we live our lives particularly in relation to others, and how we deal with threats to our ontological security (Cohen, 1998).

In reflecting on why the relationship between Coach and me turned into a dysfunctional one, two crucial issues come to the fore. Firstly, her subsequent adoption of a discourteous, disrespectful manner broke what I considered to be behavioural norms; a fracture that went much further than a simple dislike on my part for authoritarian practice. Indeed, like the athletes in d'Arippe-Longueville *et al.*'s (2001) study, I could have accepted such actions if I understood why they were done, were consistent with her previous rhetoric and were obviously getting results. What exacerbated the dissatisfaction, however, was my perception of a crushed promise. Similar to Anne, the elite swimmer cited in Jones *et al.* (2005), I had bought into my coach's programme totally which made the fall all the harder to

take. As a coxswain I was in a position to be the intermediary between the coach and the crew, a position of influence; my hopes and aspirations to fulfil such a role, however, were ignored. Feeling hurt and rejected, I reacted by siding with the rowers in the ensuing struggle. I wanted to show everyone concerned that I still had some power; that I still mattered.

Autoethnography was chosen as the method of research because it has the potential to construct the personal, complete with micro-power issues and consequences, within a public macro social milieu (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). For this potential to be realised, however, a believable, engaging, evocative and authentic tale has to be told (Sparkes, 2002b). For such authenticity to be secured, individual experience should be explicitly linked to culture. Indeed, this is what I've tried to do here; to highlight the elusive everyday complexity of power and resistance which permeate the coaching context through personal experience (Strean, 1998). Although I believe that the autoethnographic genre represents a valuable means for investigating the realities and problems of human interaction, which are an essential feature of sports coaching, I'm also aware that it has numerous shortcomings. Consequently, it is not advocated as *the* method through which to examine coaching, but as another complementary one (Jones *et al.*, 2006). Also, although I've tried to write an evocative account based on real events, the autoethnographic endeavour naturally dictates that it is done so from a single, that is, my perspective. I'm sure Coach would have another.

Notes

1. The largest sweep oared boat containing eight rowers and a coxswain.
2. Where the rower puts his/her feet when sitting in the boat.
3. A shell rowed by four rowers, each with one oar.

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