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Multitudes - The lived realities of primary performance coaches in artistic gymnastics

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Keywords: Photography, Documentary, Performance, Reality, Gymnastics

The ethics and effectiveness of performance sport coaching has come under scrutiny in recent years with high-profile reviews of culture within medal winning Olympic sports, such as The Whyte Review in gymnastics. As part of policy responses, interventions involving the coaching workforce have been recognised but the majority of these could be perceived as actions to be done to coaches rather than mechanisms which are empathetic to the realities of performance coaches and support the avoidance of influences which may result in unethical, abusive practice emerging. There is a sense that the coach as a human within the system has been lost or forgotten.

This study seeks to witness, give voice to, and represent the lived reality of performance coaches in artistic gymnastics, embracing the centrality of emotion within the social, relational process of coaching (Portrac et al., 2017; North, 2017). Arts-based approaches are increasingly promoted in the academy (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Evans et al., 2021) recognising their power to precede the intellectual with more aesthetic ways of knowing (Leavy, 2019). Visual methods are a powerful and effective way to access, construct and convey the sensory, emotional, embodied aspects of everyday life (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Rose, 2023; Pink, 2021) positively promoting critical reflection and potentially inspiring change in the audiences (Ward & Schortt, 2020).

An ethnographic documentary photography methodology (Pink, 2021) has been used to produce researcher generated images that attempt to capture and evoke the affective qualities of the coach's reality (Rose, 2023); moving beyond the descriptive to the interpretive (Pink, 2021; Rose, 2023). Although utilised within visual sociology for over sixty years (Harper, 2016), this methodology is atypical within sport coaching contexts, where visual methods have tended to be more aligned to photo-elicitation approaches (see Cope, Harvey & Kirk, 2015).

An initial 'sketchbook' process combined narrative fieldwork descriptions and audio recorded conversations alongside the photographic images to facilitate construction and sense-making of narratives and connections (Pink, 2021; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Coaches were invited to collaborate with the researcher to co-construct knowledge and insight of their everyday reality (Horsley, 2021) through a discussion of their interpretations of a selection of images (initially of their own, and subsequently of other coach's, situated realities) (Pink 2021). This approach enabled a layered relational ethical approach to informed participant consent recognising the overt ethical challenges within visual methodologies (Pink, 2021).

Study findings are presented as a gallery of photos outside of the oral presentation. In line with 'The Letting Go Perspective' in Sparkes & Smith (2014), the suggested criteria of Barone & Eisner (2012) are the proposed basis for critical judgement of the work. While we the researchers, feel the work meets this bar, it is the response, engagement and reflection of the viewers that is of relevance, and of interest to examine (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Pink, 2021). To that end, we invite delegates to actively participate in a collaborative, critical dialogue, through direct written comments on the images themselves or via recorded discussion, of performance coaches lived realities.

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