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Citation:

Holmes, P and Light, R and Sparkes, A (2020) The influence of early life experiences on English and Australian Super League coaches' learning. Sport, Education and Society. pp. 1-12. ISSN 1357-3322 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1710698>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Sport, Education and Society on 7th January 2020, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13573322.2019.1710698>

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# **The influence of early life experiences on English and Australian Super League coaches' learning**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the influence of early life experiences and socio-cultural context on coach learning in the sport of rugby league. It draws on the findings of a study that investigated the influence of cultural context on the development of elite level rugby league coaches in England and Australia. The article focuses on the influence of experience from early childhood to the end of compulsory schooling on the development of three English and three Australian rugby league coaches who, at the time of the study, were working, or had worked, in the Super League.

**KEYWORDS** rugby league, England, Australia, coach learning, experience, class, habitus

## Introduction

The sport coaching literature recognizes the powerful influence that experience as athletes plays in shaping coaches' beliefs and practice (see, Cushion, Nelson, Armour, Lyle, Jones, Sandford & O'Callaghan, 2010; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) with this "pre-coaching experience" (Côté, 2006) having a powerful influence on players'/athletes' decisions to pursue a coaching a career and on how they coach. Studies on elite level coaches in particular, identify how they model their approaches on what they liked about their own coaches and particularly in the beginning of their careers (see, Rynne & Mallett, 2014, 2012).

Belief in experience as athletes as being essential for success in coaching is particularly strong at high performance and elite levels, where it is assumed that it develops what are seen to be essential attributes, such as gaining player/athlete respect, having a practical sense of the game, leadership skills and practical coaching skills (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2017). The perceived importance of playing experience for coaching is so prominent that it can be seen as the 'exclusive preserve of former players (Kelly, 2008) and a 'fast track' pathway to head coach positions (Blackett et al., 2017; Rynne, 2014)

Interest in how experience as players in the same sport, and competing at the same level, influences coach learning is not matched by interest in earlier experiences of sport, and experiences outside sport, on coaching in later life (see, Caminé, Trudel & Forneris, 2012). Research on the pathways of successful coaches reaches back to consider early experiences (see, Nash & Sproule, 2009; Piggott, 2012; Stephenson & Jowett, 2009) but, there is a lack of research *specifically* focused on the influence of early life experiences on coaching in later life. To

address this oversight in the literature, this article focuses on the influence of early life experiences and socio-cultural context on coach learning in the sport of rugby league by drawing on a study that inquired into the influence of culture on the development of elite level rugby league coaches in England and Australia.

The study used a narrative and life story approach (Atkinson, 1998; Smith, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to inquire into the development of English and Australian Super League (rugby league) head coaches (see Author reference). We seek to illuminate the processes of such development via a focus on the first phase of the study that inquired into the experiences of the coaches from early childhood to the end of their compulsory schooling, around the age of fifteen to sixteen.

### **Theoretical framework**

In this article we identify the implicit, embodied learning that occurred over childhood and early adolescence for the coaches in the study with a focus on their participation in the practices of the rugby league communities they lived in. To understand and explain the influence of socio-cultural context, and class in particular, on coaching later in life, we draw on the analytic concepts of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. This facilitated our understanding of how sets of durable dispositions developed up to the age of fifteen to sixteen, shaped the coaches' future beliefs about, and practice of, coaching rugby league.

Bourdieu's key analytic concepts provide an effective means of conceptualising the implicit learning of culture and the development of beliefs, values and dispositions through sport, with habitus, practice, and social field being key concepts of his intellectual project. Habitus is the key to Bourdieu's

circumnavigation of the sociological tensions between agency and structure in his challenge to a cognitive bias in sociology (Waquant, 2007). As one of the earliest sociologists to pay attention to sport (Bourdieu, 1978) Bourdieu's concepts have proved popular in the sport coaching and physical education literature with his concept of habitus used in studies on coach learning (see, Blackett et al., 2017; Light & Evans, 2013). Habitus comprises sets of dispositions and inclinations developed over long periods of time that structure action and thinking (Bourdieu, 2002) and offered a means of understanding how the early experiences of the participants in this study structured their beliefs about and practices of coaching later in life. Habitus is constituted through the individual's participation in social and cultural practice within particular social fields, or subfields, such as the field of sport, or the subfield of rugby league. While individual life trajectories can be different, those that pass through similar fields tend to develop a similar individual habitus that reflects social experience within particular environments. Individual habitus is shaped by collective habitus and, for Bourdieu, none are more important than class habitus, which is highly relevant to this study and is the focus of the next section.

### **Rugby league, class and habitus**

In his seminal article on sport and class, Bourdieu (1978) outlines how sport, as we now know it, emerged from the nineteenth century English public schools that appropriated popular folk games to suit their educational aims and aspirations (see, Mangan, 1981). The rationalisation of folk games into rule-bound and organised sport in the schools of the rising middle classes was embedded with the middle-class notion of amateurism as an expression of their moral and ethical ideals

(Collins, 2006). Class differences between the north and south of England led to the class splits that saw the emergence of rugby league in the north of England and Australia as a game that embodied and expressed working-class values. As a sport of the working classes, rugby league expressed and reproduced a class habitus with games developing into spectacles created as mass entertainment for the working classes. Through his key analytic concepts of habitus, practice and field Bourdieu captures the complexity of social existence with the relationship between the individual and his/her social world as one of mutual possession in which: ‘...the body is in the social world but the social world is in the body’ (Bourdieu, 1982, cited Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 20)

The working-class environments that the coaches in this study grew up in had a profound influence on the construction of their habitus and thus, on the development of their values and dispositions toward coaching. In this section we provide a brief historical explanation of rugby leagues’ development as a practice for the expression and reproduction of class habitus. Rugby league in England and Australia retains strong working-class values with the game born from class splits in England in 1895 and in Australia in 1907. In the industrial North of England at the end of the nineteenth century, the miners and factory workers who played rugby had to take time off work, for which they were compensated. This was seen by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), as the governing body, to challenge its Victorian, middle class and ‘amateur’ view of sport (Collins, 2006) and its control over the sport. Growing tensions located in class differences between the north and south came to a head in 1895 when 22 northern clubs broke away from the RFU. By 1910 they had evolved into a distinct sport with a culture based on the working-class virtues of the industrial north of England that lay in stark contrast to the ‘purity’ of

the middle-class and exclusively amateur RFU game (Collins 2006). The class-based split in Australia also emerged from class tensions with the main issue also being the compensation of injured players who were unable to maintain an income. This led to the formation of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) in 1907.

### ***The Super League***

Over a century after its formation, and despite the widespread changes involved in the commodification of sport on a global scale over the past three to four decades, rugby league has stayed close to its working-class roots (Maguire & Passamin, 2005). The Super League is the top-level professional competition in the Northern hemisphere for the sport of rugby league that comprises 11 teams from England and one from France. The Super League was developed as an attempt to globalize and commercialize a parochial and local sport in an increasingly interrelated, globalized sport industry but rugby league has retained its working class values that includes the fiercely competitive way in which northern rugby was, and still is, played (Maguire & Passami, 2005; Collins, 2006). Indeed, Maguire and Possamai (2005) argue that it is a sport that continues to engender fierce rivalries between towns that are sometimes only a few kilometres apart as a ‘working class sport associated with the origins of the industrial revolution and a subculture that values a tough masculine style’ (87).

### **Methodology**



This study adopted a narrative inquiry methodology as the study of the ways in which humans experience the world (Connelly and Clandinnin, 1990) as a way of understanding the coaches' experiences as told by them through their life stories.

### ***Participants and settings***

Three English and three Australian rugby league coaches who had been, or were, head coaches in the English Super League at the time of the study, were purposively selected to participate in the study. They were selected as people who were able and willing to provide the information required due to their knowledge and experience (Bernard, 2002). The criteria used were that they had to be head coach of a Super League team at the time of the study or have had this role over the past decade. All coaches were males with the mean age at the time of data collection was  $48.2 \pm 8.7$  years, the mean experience of playing professionally was  $9.8 \pm 4.6$  years, the mean experience as an assistant coach was  $6.3 \pm 4.5$  years and the mean experience as a head coach was  $7.8 \text{ years} \pm 6.6$  years. This was an elite coaching cohort with extensive experience of playing and coaching, as both assistants and head coaches, in rugby league. They all provided written informed consent with pseudonyms used to protect their anonymity.

### ***Data generation***

The field work began in 2013 and the study was completed in 2017. Following university ethical approval, three Australian coaches and three English were invited to share their experiences individually in a single life story interview on experience from their earliest memories up to the year of the interview. Atkinson (1998) defines the life story as follows.

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person wants to remember of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime...A life story gives us a vantage point from which to see how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time. (125-126).

For Atkinson (2007) there may be no equal to the life story interview for revealing more about the inner life of the person in terms of how they see themselves at this and other points in their lives, and how they want others to see them. In considering the life story as a resource, Plummer (2001) notes that besides their ability to access subjectivities and meanings, life stories always involve a dual focus on history as it is concerned with time in the life and time outside the life. The former is how the life is lived over phases, careers, cycles, and stages and the latter is how historical moments play a role in shaping individual lives.

This article draws on a single life-story interview with each of the six coaches conducted by the first author at a time and place convenient to them as the first stage of the larger study. The interviews lasted from ninety minutes to two hours, were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were semi-structured in nature with a view to encouraging the coaches to tell their stories of

their experiences from early childhood to the end of their compulsory schooling around the age of fifteen to sixteen. The first author also asked each coach to tell him about play and their sports involvement from early childhood and the influence, if any, they felt their family and community had on their involvement in rugby league growing up. During the interview they were also asked about playing organised RFL (Rugby Football League), about watching it, and the influence of their coaches and any other role models they had in rugby league. Each interview was supplemented by observations of the coaches in action at their clubs made by the first author during the fieldwork phase of the study and were recorded in a field diary. Only the data generated in the interviews are used in the analysis that follows.

### ***Data analysis***

The interview transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Sparkes and Smith (2014). This involved the first author immersing himself in the data by listening to the interviews several times each before undertaking repeated readings of the transcripts to get a ‘feel’ for the data and generate some initial ideas about the meanings given by the coaches to various experiences in their youth. Next, descriptive exploratory comments were made about the data, for example, reoccurring phrases were underlined, and key events highlighted. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) this level of initial notes ‘is very much about taking things at face value, about highlighting the objects which structure the participant’s thoughts and experiences, thinking about the participant’s experiences in terms of their relationships to the important things which make up their world’ (p. 84).

Following this, initial codes were generated for each interview transcript prior to comparing these codes across all the interviews to identify similarities and differences in experiences between each coach. This led to the development of a number of sub-themes, such as: (1) being born into ‘rugby league families’, (2) experiencing a lot of free play and competition during childhood and their early youth, and, (3) showing talent and leadership qualities early in their lives. The sub-themes were eventually subsumed under the two core themes of the influence of socio-cultural environments and participation in sport that, in combination, captured the ‘essence’ of the early part of the life stories as told by the coaches.

Throughout this process, similar to McCarthy and Jones (2007), a concurrent inductive and deductive content analysis was used in relation to the interview transcripts. Thus, drawing on the theoretical concepts offered by Bourdieu (2002) a deductive analysis was used to code comments by the coaches in relation to issues of habitus. Alongside this, an inductive analysis was used to generate codes from the data that could not immediately be accounted for by previous research into coach development. Thus, various issues relating to family interactions merged inductively in the analysis of the transcripts that then led later to a deductive analysis of the same issues drawing on the work Gordon (2015) who draws attention to the socialization and sociability functions of narratives that circulate within families. Throughout this concurrent inductive and deductive content analysis the third author played a key role by acting as a supportive but ‘critical friend’ who provided a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations of the data as it was generated (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

## **Findings**

Here we present rich details of the two main themes explaining the values and beliefs developed from early childhood to the end of compulsory schooling as the collective stories of the participants. The Findings comprises the two main themes and a section linking these themes to how and why the participants coached rugby league in later life. The two themes are, the influence of (1) The socio-cultural environment and (2) Early participation in sport. These are followed by a section (3), The influence of early experience on their coaching, that draws on the findings of the larger study to link early experiences to how and why they coached rugby league in later life

### ***1. The socio-cultural environment***

#### *Community and working-class values*

The English coaches in the study grew up in coal mining towns and villages in northern England. One Australian coach grew up in the suburbs of Sydney, one in Brisbane and one in a country town north of Sydney. In all of these locations, rugby league was the dominant winter sport in terms of playing and watching with professional clubs and their associated social clubs and networks at their core. The working-class rugby league communities that the coaches grew up in exerted a profound influence on their personal growth and the construction of an individual habitus that structured their thinking, action and behaviour as they grew up. This was evident in their values and dispositions toward playing rugby league that shaped their coaching and which resonate with the working-class values of their communities and the sport of rugby league:

I think it (the rugby league community) impacted massively because your family life and your leisure time, and your peer group, obviously shape a lot of your values, your morals and your beliefs, and I think that's exactly what happened there. My dad was a coal man and his big drive in life was to make his family as comfortable as possible through hard work, but also to make sure his sons didn't go down the pit, which I think that was a goal and an aspiration of a lot of dads with the lads in that area. (Steve, England)

In reflecting upon what they most valued in their players as professional coaches they invariably nominated similar values to those emphasized in the communities they had grown up in as a type of informal learning (Hassanin & Light, 2014; Nelson et al., 2006). They valued players who put the team above personal interests, had a strong work ethic, who were ruthlessly competitive and honest. In the communities they grew up in, it was common sense for young boys to play rugby league in these communities as young children:

I never had to go and look for the game. It was just there. I can always remember having a ball and playing, it's not like something I watched one day ... I can never remember watching telly and saying, 'I'd like to do that', it was just there, and I just remember being part of it. (John, Australia)

### *Families*

Rugby league dominated conversations within the coaches' families in both countries as they grew up. Their dads, uncles and brothers played rugby league and were all respected for their toughness, commitment, loyalty and willingness to put their bodies on the line for their club, their town and their communities. This is what the coaches grew up watching, talking about and emulating where they could. These were the practices of their communities and the subfield of rugby league through which the individual habitus and the subfield of rugby league were mutually constituted (see, Bourdieu, 1984). They went with family members and relatives who passionately supported the local team every weekend. They fondly recalled being taken to watch their dads, uncles and/or brothers play in local teams from around the age of six and said how they had developed a strong bond with the game by the early years of primary school. Bob (Australia) was born in a country town near Sydney where rugby league was the dominant sport:

My father played rugby league. He ended up going to the city and played down there. He went on to represent the city and our state. My cousin went also to the city and played there. He represented the state and Australia. My brother was also a rugby player. He went on to captain the state and Australia and played in the city. So, we all played, all eventually went to the city and played for the same club.

The situation in England was similar as Paul's recounting of his childhood experiences suggests:

We'd go and watch him (my dad) play and my mother would take us into the tearoom before the game. Obviously, she'd have a cup of tea or whatever she was drinking with the rest of the wives. We'd play with the other kids... We'd take a ball. If we didn't have a ball, we'd get an old beer can and after the game we'd go on the pitch and kick the cans over the sticks. We'd go in the changing room to see our dads, get the tie ups, what we used to do, and generally as a young kid it was just great fun.

The coaches' parents promoted working class values of hard work, discipline and togetherness, which were qualities they later felt were essential for success in rugby league as players and coaches in professional rugby league. Their fathers in particular promoted the same values and enacted them:

I remember from junior school right the way through grammar school where I used to hold the sacks. He'd fill the sacks with coal, and I'd help him. When you're sixteen/seventeen you can pick them up and put them on the back of the coal lorry, but you wouldn't as a kid. It was that work ethic I think he instilled upon me and along with that work ethic there was the honesty value that he was a great believer you get out of life what you put into it. Most dads are a massive influence on your life. (Steve, England)

Despite the broader social and cultural differences between England and Australia the Australian participants' experiences seemed similar in this regard:



My old man was a butcher. He had to work his stones off to do what he had to do.... it was all about family first. He wasn't a big drinker, no flash holidays. Wasn't any flash cars or clothes. They (my parents) just potted along and put us where we wanted to be...they just wanted their kids to get the best out of life as possible. It was very hard work for them. (Bob, Australia)

### *Clubs and local heroes*

The participants all talked passionately and fondly about watching their local teams and players that they described as 'heroes' play when they were children. This early engagement seemed was the beginning of an immersion in rugby league and strong identity with their local clubs. For example, John (England) fondly recalled how he watched his local team as a child and how it encouraged him to want to play rugby league and be like the players he watched:

I can also recall starting to watch my team at a very young age, firstly being taken by coaches – being taken as a team. We would always stand behind the posts at the northern end of the field at the oval and watch the famous red and white and I suppose there was no real thought of coaching at that point but making it as a player.

For Paul (England), the success of his local club in the final of the (national) Challenge Cup at Wembley Stadium was even more significant because his dad was the coach:

They went to Wembley, won in a massive upset, and he (father) got named Man of Steel...so it was just a major, major...when we look back now, it was something special that... that was. I'd have been ten or eleven. That was a major event in my life. I can remember... you can imagine a small mining village like that. It was just huge.

Although they played other sports at times such as football, cricket and rugby union, the participants' childhoods were mostly spent playing, watching and reading and talking about rugby league with the local professional club playing an important role in the development of what several participants described as an obsession. Steve (England) explained one particular factor in his obsession:

I went to school just around the corner (from my local club) and when we played rugby league, which they did then as 13-a-side even at junior school, we played on the club's training field, so there's a link there. They (the professional club) used to train Tuesday and Thursdays, and I used to always go down and watch them, and play touch and pass behind the posts, and see them. I mean... it were just... my whole life has been steeped in it (the club and rugby league).

## ***2. Early participation in sport***

### *Free play and competition*

All six participants had fond memories of free play as young children in back gardens, on the street, in local parks and fields, with brothers, neighbours and

school friends of different ages. This can be seen as participation in cultural practices and discourses through which they learned the culture of their rugby league communities. Participation in these practices also mediated between habitus and the subfield of rugby league in the ongoing construction of the individual habitus and the class habitus within which this occurred.

All the coaches had brothers they played with and four had older brothers who they said helped them develop the toughness needed for the sport. They saw the hard treatment they received from older brothers as being important for their development of the toughness, enjoyment of physicality, and extreme competitiveness that they valued in their players. They were learning the ‘tough masculinity’ that characterises rugby league (Maguire & Possami, 2005). The contribution the participants saw this brotherly competitiveness making toward their development as rugby league players is evident in some other studies (see, MacNamara, Button & Collins 2010), including one on Indigenous rugby league in Australia (Light & Evans 2018).

The Australian climate provided a more play-friendly environment for the three Australian coaches as young children with longer daylight hours and a warmer climate more conducive to play:

There weren't as many distractions (in those days) and Australia provides you with the climate to get outside and go and do it, get down to the park, get in the cricket nets, go and kick a ball around, go and do whatever you need to do, so it was almost like second language it was just like a second language. You just did it and if you didn't do it, it was almost frowned upon you know ‘what's wrong with you?’ ...I had a go at Australian rules, I had

a go at football, I had a go at hockey, I had a go at basketball. I wasn't so much into athletics, or swimming and all that, but you're getting to have a go at everything because I just loved sport. (Mike, Australia)

The English coaches appeared to be just as competitive with both cohorts developing a very competitive approach to sport early on in their lives and the highly competitive nature of their games being a feature of both the English and Australian coaches' experiences, and of working-class communities. Light and Evans' (2018) study on elite level Indigenous rugby league players in Australia identified how the participants laid the foundations of expertise through 'deliberate play' (Côté, Baker & Abernathy 2007) with older brothers and uncles that was highly competitive. Paul (England) was sure of the positive impact this early and competitive play had on him and his friends and particularly in terms of how it encouraged the development of creative play in rugby league:

Well, I know that a lot of my skills were picked up then, you know. People term it 'backyard skills' now, but learning how to manipulate a three on three, learning how to throw a post-line offload as you're falling to the floor, gripping the ball, different kicks, things like that. It's probably no coincidence that a lot of the guys that played with me then were creative players in the teams they went on to play (professionally) with.

### *Early leadership experience*

Early experiences of leadership from primary school age on and the impressions made on the participants by coaches and teachers at school who they saw as leaders

made a significant contribution to their interest in becoming coaches. They all represented school teams from primary school through to high school and played for local junior rugby league clubs by the mid-stage of primary school. All six also played in higher age group teams such as playing under 13s when aged 11 and were selected to play at representative level for their town or area during high school years, again including football and cricket and not just rugby league.

The six coaches all played in key decision-making positions, such as scrumhalf or standoff and/or had leadership roles as team captains or vice captains at school. Steve (England) played in the school under elevens as a seven-year old at primary school, captained the under 11s at nine years of age and was either captain or vice-captain every year at secondary school, which included being captain of the first 13 in his final year at school. Mike's (Australia) experience of leadership at school were typical of both cohorts:

I captained the rugby league team and I also captained the cricket team, so I was fortunate to be recognised with some sort of leadership skills probably. Although I didn't realise that at the time, but looking back, I guess there was a recognition... there was some leadership and some decision making able to be done.

The coaches had mixed experiences of school, but they all loved PE and sport. They respected their PE teachers with some interested in becoming a PE teacher while at school and most suggesting their later interest in coaching had its roots in their experiences at school and of being impressed with the work of their PE

teachers. Apart from PE, Dave (England) did not enjoy school and was a regular truant:

We had a PE teacher called Bill McGrath and I'd not been to school for a long, long time and then they come to my house, the school, and says 'If he comes into school we promise him he can just do PE all day every day.' So, I never missed another day after that [laughs]. In my last year they had me playing badminton and basketball and we went off doing school sports days to different schools.

### ***3. The link between early experiences and professional coaching***

To identify links between early experiences and the participants' beliefs and practices as elite level coaches we draw on the findings of the larger study focused on post-compulsory schooling experiences that involved generating a second life history interview and noted observations. The links between their professional playing careers and their coaching beliefs and practice were far more explicit than with early experience but, the values, beliefs and dispositions they developed early in their lives shaped these ensuing experiences and their beliefs about coaching. Early experiences shaped sets of dispositions that influenced what and how they learned from playing as professional players onward as a 'practical mastery' of the imminent necessity of a game (Bourdieu, 1990). This is 'a mastery acquired by experience of the game below the level of conscious control and discourse' (Bourdieu 1990, p.60) in relation to working class culture.

From their first taste of rugby league to appointments as Super League coaches, the participants learned its working-class culture. The practical ways in which they

learned how to play rugby league was reflected in their beliefs about coaching rugby league as the embodiment of the subculture of rugby league and working-class values. The participants saw coaching as an art or craft associated with feel and intuition through which they learned to play, more than as a science. This reflects how they learned to play rugby league and developed 'backyard skills' through informal games in a socio-cultural environment that valued action over words and promoted learning through 'feel' and experience rather than through formal instruction. It was learning by doing rather than through language and rational, conscious cognition. They also valued the relationships and shared values developed through this practical learning and the subjective understanding developed through a holistic approach to learning. Although they said they valued the use of science, such as for performance analysis, they were inclined toward a more humanistic and holistic approach to coaching, which reflects how they learned as children and young people and the values of the rugby league communities they grew up in. For example, Steve (England) valued the use of game statistics but saw coaching as teaching and an art:

...that's very much the science. I think the teaching or the improvement or the development aspect is far more fascinating and I think that's the art of coaching or the art of education. I think coaching is an art that's backed up by science and many people might disagree with that but that's just my belief.

The coaches emphasized the need for subjective understanding of athlete progress and experience, empathy, understanding their players as people and how having

good communication with them built good relationships. In reflecting on his development as a coach, Mike (Australia) said that, 'Understanding the player was a big thing for me...understanding what makes a player tick...understanding what their needs are.' Each one wanted to be a 'people person' who based decision-making on 'feel' or 'gut instinct', and on what felt or looked right. They saw a good coach as being someone who is able to feel, and know what is happening and adapt instinctively to it as Paul (England) makes clear in explaining what he felt was most important in coaching: 'I just think that no coaching manual will ever give you that feel. It's just a naturally ... whether it's intuition, whether it's experience of being around the game, whether it's people and being a people person.'

Despite their highly competitive nature there was more to coaching for most of the six coaches than just winning. They all had different views on the relative importance of winning and learning or showing what they saw as positive values. Two valued winning more highly with the other four generally seeing the development of better people being more important. This is not to suggest strongly contradictory positions and it is too difficult to specifically link to different early experiences but the importance of values for all coaches is linked to the common values that permeated the English and Australian communities they grew up in. They saw themselves as 'father figures' and rugby league as a vehicle for developing better people by focusing on the whole person and caring about the players lives outside rugby league. For example, Bob (Australia) said that: 'I honestly believe that as a coach you've got a responsibility to try and make the individual a better person and better player, and that's the be all and end all of being a coach.'



## Discussion

The sets of beliefs and dispositions developed by the participants from early childhood structured their behaviour, thinking and action, as they grew up and moved into coaching careers. These beliefs and sets of dispositions reflect their working-class habitus and the values of the communities that they lived in within the subfield of rugby league and are evident in their approaches to coaching. There was no clear and easily identifiable direct link between early experience and coaching, but we suggest that the values and dispositions developed from early in life in their rugby league communities structured their interpretation of later learning experiences from the age of sixteen through to their experiences as professional rugby league players. This, then influenced their learning from sixteen onwards as a sort of experiential continuum (Dewey, 1938) from early childhood to taking up positions as head coaches. Despite the increasing influence of business on sport over the past thirty to forty years on a global scale (see, Wagner, Storm & Neilson, 2017) the working-class origins and values of rugby league are reflected in the values and beliefs of each of the coaches.

Stodter and Cushion (2017) hint at how prior experience influences coach learning by suggesting that coaches learn by integrating multiple experiences that are shaped by their pre-existing biographies. The influence of working-class values learned within the communities of the coaches in this study was also evident in how they described the practical knowledge they developed as ‘feel’, ‘intuition’ and ‘gut instinct’. Operating at a non-conscious level, this learning does not occur as a purely conscious, rational and cognitive process. Instead, it is evidence of the

habitus in action and, therefore, a lifetime of participation in the practices of the subfield of rugby league.

Although our focus is on experiences in local communities, these communities sit within, and are shaped by, the larger subfield of rugby league that is, in turn, shaped by the field of sport and overlapping social fields such as business. While the coaches' learning can be explained at an individual or community level Bourdieu's analytic concepts allowed us to locate these experiences and the communities they occurred in within larger, macro, social influences such as that of class.

Habitus (see, Bourdieu, 2002) has been used in studies on coach learning over time to explain why it is so difficult to change coaches' practice by locating it in their histories of past experiences, within particular social and cultural contexts (see, Blackett et al., 2017; Hassanin & Light, 2014; Light & Evans, 2018; Piggott 2012). Learning implicitly through experience up to the end of compulsory schooling shaped the coaches' inclinations and dispositions toward coaching as part of their habitus that shaped and structured interpretations of later experience and the learning emerging from it. Early life experiences for all the coaches in our study contributed to the construction of a class specific habitus within the subfield of rugby league as a system of durable, transposable, cognitive 'schemata or structures of perception, conception and action' (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 27). These schemata operate to both generate and limit the individuals' sense of possibilities linked to their social position in a stratified society (Bourdieu, 2002).

The congruence of the habitus with the subfield of rugby league for these six participants and the communities they grew up in, created a comfortable fit and sense of place for them within rugby league communities through their

accumulation of the embodied cultural capital valued in this subfield and its communities. Cultural capital refers to the cultural ‘assets’ of the individual that includes the embodied form we refer to here as well as in objectified and institutionalized forms, with the accumulation of capital determining the individual’s social position.

## **Conclusion**

Experiences as athletes forms a significant influence on coach learning at conscious and non-conscious levels but, this study suggests the significant influence of early life experiences. Seeing this as part of an experiential continuum occurring within the context of working-class rugby league communities helps to understand how early life-experiences shaped the participants’ later decisions to pursue coaching careers and their beliefs about coaching rugby league as does accounting for the subtle, non-conscious influence of habitus. This article, thus, contributes to expanding our understanding of the complex mix of factors shaping coach learning and may encourage researchers working in coach learning to consider the less explicit factors shaping it. In terms of developing knowledge about coach learning through experience, it encourages us to account for the depth and breadth of coach learning that takes place. This is learning that coaches are likely to be unaware of and that is typically difficult to identify but, as this article suggests, plays a part in the bigger picture of coach learning.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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