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Coach development as assemblage: mobilising assemblage thinking to examine coach learning within an endurance-running coach development intervention

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the learning of nine high-performance endurance running coaches over a seven-week poststructuralist-informed coach development workshop. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage as a novel analytical framework we explore the production of difference within the context of our learning assemblage, and why thinking and coaching differently remain challenging. Connecting content (e.g. coach learners, coach developers, learning materials and technologies, virtual and physical spaces) and expression (e.g. coaching norms and statements, privileged coach development knowledges and curricula) within a range of empirical materials generated throughout the workshops made visible multiple sociomaterial forces that reproduce coaching as a modernist formation, but also, more hopefully, possible lines of flight for coaches and coach developers (new ways of thinking and practicing) that have the potential to reconfigure endurance-running coaching in ways that are arguably more ethical and sustainable. We conclude by discussing the implications of these for the planning and doing of post-structuralist informed coach development work.

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Introduction

The last decade has seen intensified calls to infuse a poststructuralist sensibility and curriculum content into coach education to better prepare coaches for the complexities of their role and support the development of more

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innovative, effective, and ethical coaching practices (Avner, Markula, & Denison, 2017; Downham & Cushion, 2020; Kuklick & Mills, 2023). These calls have largely been driven by the discursive dominance of modernist¹ forms of formalised coach education and their related problematic implications. Despite a growing body of research linking these to a host of problematic unintended consequences including athlete docility, underperformance, and health and wellbeing issues (see Denison, 2007; Gerdin, Pringle, & Crocket, 2019; McMahon & Penney, 2013), mainstream coach education has consistently privileged bio-scientific and evidenceable ways of knowing in coaching concomitantly reducing effective coaching to the linear and unproblematic application of “best” bio-scientific practices (Avner, Markula, & Denison, 2017; Denison & Avner, 2022; Downham & Cushion, 2020). Ultimately, this discursive orthodoxy develops coaches poorly equipped to question and critique normative modernist “best” practices, maintaining the status quo and constraining coaches’ abilities to think outside the box to devise arguably more innovative, effective, and ethical sport coaching practices, and problem-solving strategies (Denison, 2019; Denison & Avner, 2011; Mills & Denison, 2018).

On a more positive note, researchers are starting to address the calls to infuse a different relational logic within formalised coach education and development through a handful of Foucauldian informed coach collaborations (e.g. Avner et al., 2023; Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019, 2021; Kuklick & Gearity, 2019, 2023; Kuklick & Mills, 2023). Underpinned by a shared understanding of the value of teaching coaches to “think with Foucault”, this body of research has provided important insights into the pragmatic doing of such work. Specifically, it has underlined some of the challenges and opportunities of supporting coaches to problematise the disciplinary and normalising effects of their current temporal, spatial, organisational, and evaluative practices and to develop new, arguably more ethical practices following this work of problematisation (e.g. Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019; Kuklick & Gearity, 2019).

Despite some successes, the above studies also highlighted various challenges and barriers to thinking and coaching differently with Foucault. These included the problematic dominance of physiological knowledge within endurance-running coaching and the cyclical relationship between discipline and physiological knowledge within high-performance endurance running (Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019), and the difficulty of promoting meaningful and sustainable change in formal coach education when post-structuralist paradigmatic assumptions are absent (Mills, Gearity, Kuklick, & Bible, 2022). As Konoval, Denison, and Mills (2019) emphasised, meaningful change was unlikely to occur without first destabilising the dominance of physiology as the “root” knowledge underpinning endurance-running coaches’ use of various disciplinary techniques and instruments.

Foucauldian coach development research has also provided insights into the development of poststructural andragogy (Kuklick & Mills, 2023) and curriculum content ideas (Avner et al., 2023; Kuklick & Gearity, 2019). As these studies emphasised, there is little research around what poststructural andragogical approaches and curricula might pragmatically look like within a coach development context; a clear limiting factor for disrupting dominant modernist bio-scientific ways of knowing and promoting more relational ways of knowing in sport coaching. Spurred to address this “gap”, Kuklick and Mills (2023) outlined nineteen andragogical principles aligning with poststructuralist onto-epistemological assumptions (i.e. scepticism of meta-narratives; power as relational; truth and reality as multiple; and the self as historically, socially, and culturally contingent). As one example, their efforts to promote a scepticism of meta-narratives saw them work to make connections across disciplines to (a) underline the fallibility of singular truth rationales and highlight existing contradictions; (b) model ambiguity; and (c) draw attention to unrealised consequences of specific beliefs, knowledges or practices for athlete wellbeing and performance.

Beyond the higher education context, Avner et al. (2023) focused on coach developers’ efforts and subsequent reflections of how to make Foucauldian theory accessible and relevant to a group of high-performance endurance-running coaches within the context of a coach development intravention and Foucauldian inspired workshop series. Specifically, they reflected upon their efforts to introduce coaches to Foucauldian ideas and concepts, such as the knowledge-power-practice triad, and upon the tensions they experienced in so doing. Tensions were partially related (a) to the power of the theory-practice divide to set expectations around what it means to be an effective coach developer and a high-performance coach, and (b) to their intentions regarding a broader shift in the coaches’ thinking concerning the influence of multiple social forces in the formation of their practices.

Largely absent from this body of work is a focus on the learning of coaches within these coach development settings. Except for Kuklick and Gearity’s (2022) study, which focused on how coaches came to understand Foucauldian informed coaching and learned to problematise disciplinary practices, we know little about coaches’ learning within poststructuralist coach development contexts or the impact of such andragogical intraventions² (Camiré, 2023a). This paper therefore sets out to address this gap by deploying assemblage thinking as a novel analytical framework to examine the learning of nine high-performance endurance running coaches within a seven week-long Foucauldian informed coach development intravention. Unlike interventions, intraventions promote a non-hierarchical, non-linear, decentred and relational understanding of teaching and learning recognising that “multiple forces shape how bodies move and

act” and that agency is not something held by an individual autonomous agent (e.g. the coach or coach developer) but rather “a dynamic and distributive force” (Camiré, 2023b, pp. 5–6) which includes human and non-human entities. Our intent in employing assemblage analysis is not only to “see” new challenges and opportunities for thinking and practicing differently, but also for co-developing and producing meaningful poststructuralist informed coach development.

Mobilising assemblage thinking within coach development

This research project was underpinned by a poststructuralist ontology, epistemology, and ethics. A poststructuralist onto-epistemology emphasises multiple meanings as well as the relational and subjective nature of knowledge and truth (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2014; Markula & Silk, 2011). Given our ambitions for initiating a deeper change in coaches’ thinking and practices through our Foucauldian inspired coach development workshops, we chose to frame this paper through recent sport scholarship that has drawn on “assemblage thinking” (e.g. Camiré, 2023b, 2023b; Carroll, Witten, & Duff, 2021; Kerr, Edwards, & Konoval, 2022) to map and theorise change as a relational, affective, and material-discursive process. As a broad umbrella term, assemblage thinking is mainly used in reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomatic philosophy, however, it has also been used to refer to the scholarship of other relational and materialist theorists (e.g. DeLanda, 2006).

The concept of “assemblage” is of specific interest to this study as it provides a useful analytical tool for thinking about the relationship between change, transformation and reproduction, and stabilisation in non-binary ways, as co-emergent forces, thus highlighting the affective and material-discursive dimensions of any change process. Broadly speaking, an assemblage refers to the continuous (re)assembling of the material and semiotic within production machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As the term *production machine* intimates, assemblages have both material dimensions assembling material bodies or “contents”, both human (e.g. coach learners, coach developers, athletes etc.) and non-human (e.g. various coach education equipment, in person or virtual learning spaces etc.), and enunciative or discursive dimensions assembling and regulating the use of language or “expressions” (e.g. coaching policies, rules and regulations, standardised coach education curricula and accreditation etc.). Together these produce various effects, enabling and constraining ways of thinking, and practices (e.g. what it means to be an effective coach or an effective coach developer). Assemblage theory, therefore, highlights the affective capacities of both human and nonhuman bodies, and emphasises the emergent properties of temporary assemblages, which are always in a process of becoming.

Assemblages are defined by their limits (territories), providing boundaries, coherence, and intelligibility to observable behaviour in social contexts (Markula, 2019). Deleuzoguattarian assemblages are constituted by lines of segmentarity or *territorialisation*, which seek to “stratify, territorialize, organise, signify, attribute” by remaining tethered to the dominant strata and lines of flight or *detrterritorialisation* “down which they constantly flee” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Deterritorialisation happens through processes of experimentation and creative becoming outside of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the “tyranny” of arborescent, tree-like models of thought (e.g. linear and standardised formalised coach education, which promote dualistic ways of understanding coaching practice as either “good” or “bad”, “effective” or “ineffective”). Change can, therefore, be understood as a sociomaterial process, which takes place through the deterritorialisation of forms and functions, and the new connections and possibilities for transformation that are subsequently formed. Here, our use of “sociomaterial” refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) understanding of the relation of reciprocal presupposition between content (i.e. the material) and expression (i.e. the discursive) as mutually co-constitutive.

Intraventions, like the Foucauldian inspired coach development workshop series discussed in this paper, have the potential to act as “lines of flight”³ for coaches and coach developers, destabilising and gradually reconfiguring normative understandings and practices of effective coaching and coach development. However, it is by no means automatic. While lines of flight/detrterritorialisation have the potential to lead to transformation, they are also prone to be recouped and absorbed back into Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) dominant “strata”⁴ (e.g. privileged bio-scientific articulations of effective coaching). This process of recouping and reabsorbing lines of deterritorialisation by the strata is what Deleuze and Guattari articulate as *reterritorialisation*. For example, many humanist informed coaching interventions (e.g. athlete-centred coaching) continue to be presented as radical counter discourses effecting positive and progressive athlete and coach development. However, in practice, they have frequently served to reproduce, rather than challenge dominant relations of power-knowledge and the status quo (see Avner, Markula, & Denison, 2017; Dowling, Mills, & Stodter, 2020; Downham & Cushion, 2020). Therefore, to understand any social phenomenon (e.g. coach development), it is critical to analyse how content (e.g. coach learners, coach developers, athletes, learning materials and technologies, virtual and physical spaces) and expression (e.g. coaching norms and statements, privileged coach development knowledges and curricula) are assembled, the relations that are formed, and the various affects that are produced as this can never be known in advance since assemblages are dynamic arrangements, not static collections of things. As Deleuze and Guattari, echoing Spinoza (1987, p. 257), famously stated,

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passion within it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.

Within the context of this research, we drew broadly on “assemblage thinking” as an underutilised conceptual framework, which we argue holds much promise for exploring the material-discursive dimensions of coach learning and development (Camiré, 2023a; Leeder, 2022). We specifically chose to apply a Deleuzoguattarian analytical lens to our Foucauldian informed workshop as it presented unique opportunities for theorising and analysing change as a complex affective and material-discursive process. This approach usefully extends Foucauldian theorising beyond discourse as the primary unit of analysis to make visible the simultaneous assembling of content (visible) and expression (articulable) (see Deleuze, 1988).

Making the assemblage visible

In keeping with Deleuze’s concern with what a body can do, our analysis focused on “flows of agency within assemblages” (Wise, 2005, p. 84) and how “thinking differently with Foucault” and adopting a new relational coaching logic was both enabled and constrained within the material-discursive boundaries of our specific learning assemblage. The problem we considered was: “why do (endurance-running) coaches focus on a narrow understanding (knowledge) of (endurance-running) coaching?”. Our sources of empirical materials comprised: (a) reflections, field notes, and weekly critical conversations between the members of the research team which were recorded via Zoom; (b) collaborative exchanges between the coaches and the learning facilitators via the coach collaboration application (WhatsApp); (c) coach participant group work and reflective activities generated during the workshops; and (d) online semi-structured interviews recorded via Zoom with the coach participants.

Between the online workshops, coach participants were prompted by one of the learning facilitators via the collaboration application (app) to reflect on their attempt to integrate various Foucauldian ideas and conceptual tools introduced in the workshops into their coaching practice, specifically: how straightforward/challenging they found this process; feelings they may have experienced in doing so; and what impacts these changes made on their athletes and other stakeholders. While the learning facilitators initiated some of these conversation threads through prompting questions, the intent behind the collaboration app was to provide coach-participants with a forum to keep in touch with other coach participants and support each other throughout the duration of the workshops (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020;

Townsend & Wallace, 2016). As such, we saw the collaboration app as an additional tool to promote a community of learning (Kuklick & Gearity, 2019) and to foster a highly interactive, collaborative, challenging, and supportive learning context.

During the workshops, coach participants were asked to contribute to the conversations through various group work and reflective activities, often in small breakout rooms. Google Jamboards (Stafford, 2022) and other online collaborative tools were used to promote coach interactions. The coaches' contributions to the conversation and various activities during workshops were recorded and formed part of the empirical materials of this study. Following the final workshop, coach participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview online via Zoom. Eight coaches agreed to take part yielding a total of 9 hours of interview material. Each interview was arranged at a mutually convenient time and lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. Interviews were designed to explore how/why/if the coaches' practice design had shifted after being introduced to key Foucauldian concepts and a post-structural relational logic, bring to light key challenges coaches face in attempting to "coach differently" (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017; Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019), explore coaches' workshop experiences, and provide feedback on course content, design and delivery. Prior to taking part in the first workshop, coach participants were provided with informed consent forms after they had the opportunity to ask questions about the research. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and coaches were reminded that their choice to take part (or not) in the study would in no way affect their ability to participate in the course. Ethical approval was gained through the first author's institution at the time the study was completed.

In short, to make the coaching workshop assemblage visible, we iteratively worked with theory and empirical material to examine the reciprocal relations between expressions (coaching norms, coaches' statements, coaching discourses) and content (practices coaches implemented, human and non-human bodies).

The workshops

The online Foucauldian inspired coaching workshops (detailed in [Appendix A](#)) were collaboratively developed by the research team around Foucault's (1977) disciplinary framework and seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (see for example, Avner et al., 2023 or Gearity & Mills, 2012). Spurred by our collective desire to move coach education beyond "technical adjustments" (Denison, 2019), the four 90-minute long workshops had a three-fold objective, supporting coaches to: (a) identify the sociomaterial forces that shape endurance-running practices; (b) explain how several endurance-

running coaching norms can negatively impact athletes' performance capabilities, health and wellbeing; and (c) design "next" practices founded on more contemporary understandings of the body and learning. As such, the workshops set out not only to support coaches to problematise current normative "best" practices in endurance-running, but also to reimagine what it means to be an effective endurance running coach. The workshops were spread over seven weeks (running bi-weekly) and were co-delivered by two lead facilitators, both Foucauldian scholars and experienced endurance-running coach developers. The course was advertised by the national Athletics federation where the workshops took place and saw a total of nine high-performance coaches register, five male and four female. Having provided a brief overview of the workshops, we next discuss the learning that took place and the sociomaterial forces that impacted upon our specific learning assemblage.

Lines of flight and (re)territorialisation: the sociomaterial forces that (re)produce coaching as a modernist formation

Making our coach development assemblage "visible" (Figure 1) enabled us to see the relations and forces at work: how these interacted to support/limit the capacity of our intervention to generate meaningful difference and change in coaches' understandings and practices. Although we attempted to capture these complex relations in this figure, it only provides a "snapshot" of the constantly, subtly shifting relations between content and expression.

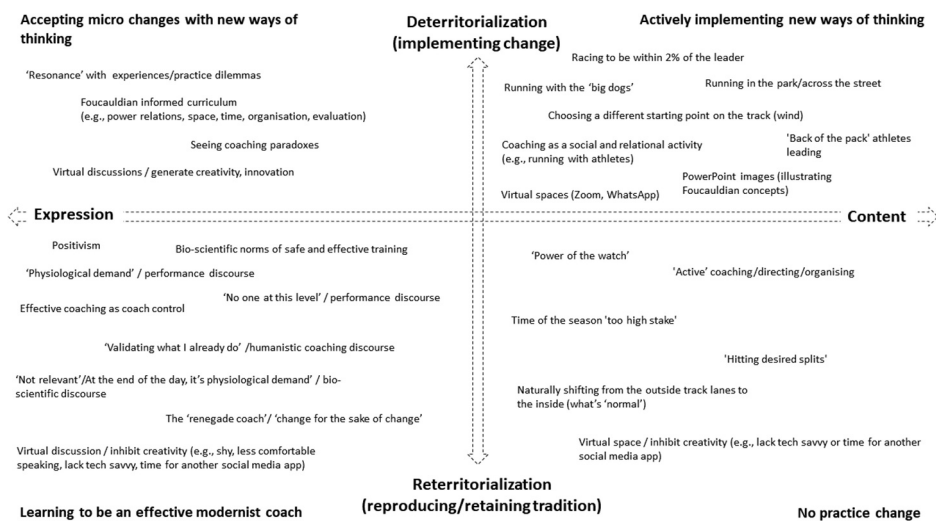


Figure 1. Sociomaterial forces impacting coaches' learning within our coach development assemblage.

As Figure 1 shows, there were numerous material-discursive forces at work in reproducing modernist coaching practices and pulling coaches towards known “striated” organisations rather than new relational “becomings”. For instance, normative expressions of effective coaching that position the coach as in control of the training environment, where coaches need to “look like they are coaching” by actively directing and supervising training at all times, were difficult to change. As Jack (pseudonym) expressed, “when I ran with them (athletes), I was always stressed they would feel I wasn’t ‘coaching’ them enough” (collaborative app extract). Here, Jack’s questioning in response to the facilitators invitation to experiment with removing themselves and/or occupying different positions in space to avoid athletes experiencing a sense of hyper visibility and continuous surveillance was a testament to the enduring power of this normative expression of effective coaching. This finding aligned with that which has previously been emphasised by several poststructuralist informed studies (e.g. Avner et al., 2023; Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017; Mills, Gearity, Kuklick, & Bible, 2022), specifically the very tangible challenges of coaching differently outside of sport’s dominant modernist logic. From a Deleuzoguattarian perspective, this extract illustrated how content (the coach’s reluctance to adopt the practice of running with their athletes) and expression (norms and discourses of “effective” coaching and the associated role of the coach) connected in new ways to (re)produce coaching as a coach-led and coach-centric activity.

Normative expressions and contents of effective coaching also strongly intersected with, and were contingent upon, bio-scientific norms of “safe” and “effective” training as captured in the extracts below:

As for the strength training . . . I am certified and have been trained by a highly respected individual in this industry, so I am very concerned always about form, always. So, I think it’s very important (for the coach to be present) not only for a signal of importance but for safety. (Clara, collaborative app extract)

And

I will be honest that I still think that especially at a performance level physiological demand is still the main reason why you will step up in track and field compared to other sports [. . .] at some point, I had a reflection couple of times that the kind of suggestion that you were making in the workshop were not relevant for high performance running [. . .] I cannot imagine any successful coach, national or international level doing this because my understanding of the demand and what it takes physiologically to go at the next level is more important than this aspect, and maybe I’m wrong, but I’m just sharing my thoughts. And I’m still thinking about how I can find a good balance, adapting my practice, but not going somewhere where I will lose too much on the efficacy of the physiological planning. (Martin, Interview extract)

These extracts echo findings from previous poststructuralist informed research (e.g. Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019), which positioned the dominance of physiological knowledge in endurance running as a significant barrier to thinking and coaching differently. Within the context of this intravention, some coaches did find it easier than others to diverge from the “physiological imperative”, however, in doing so they frequently turned to other bio-scientific knowledges (e.g. biomechanics). While positive in the sense of indicating a “loosening” of the hold of physiological knowledge as the dominant knowledge underpinning endurance-running coaching, the turn to biomechanics still relied on a bio-scientific articulation of the body, training, and performance (Mills, Denison, & Gearity, 2020) and was, thus, somewhat limited in terms of promoting diversity of thinking and enabling more relational understandings of effective endurance-running coaching:

Richard (facilitator): [Name] is a biomechanist and while those ideas can be super helpful and relevant, they also come from a paradigm that is less inclined to think holistically or problematise. So, how as a coach can you use knowledge from biomechanics or exercise physiology but still problematise it? I think being able to answer this question is one aim of our workshop series.

Jack: I think I’m actually stretching myself by going in this direction. In general, I’m pretty dismissive of the role of biomech in distance running. I’m more of a big engine and mental toughness will get you everything you need kind of person. So, I’m trying to be open to new ideas with this stuff. That’s problematising my own approach, in a way.

Richard: It is Jack. Well done. The trick is to be careful not to elevate some new knowledge as now being best, correct or the truest. For example, there is no way I would ever say that sociological knowledge is best for coaching. What I would say is that it’s position at present is marginal at best. And that’s a problem. (Collaborative app dialogue)

The above dialogue was indicative of some of the subtleties and challenges of communicating a poststructuralist understanding of meaningful change as necessitating more than the superimposition or substitution of one dominant model of truth for another (e.g. a coach “control and command” for an “athlete-centred” coaching approach). If poorly communicated, poststructuralist informed coach development runs the risk of being reduced to the injection of novelty or being collapsed with other recognisable prominent coaching expressions and contents (e.g. humanistic athlete-centred coaching approaches) thereby losing its affective capacity to induce change. Rather than instigating a more meaningful disruption of sport coaching as a modernist formation and enabling other forms of coach becoming (informed by a different relational logic), poststructuralist informed coach

development can, in the words of one coach participant, “validate what I already do” (Marc, Interview extract) (see [Figure 1](#)).

The challenge of communicating some of the subtleties of Foucauldian and poststructuralist thinking were further evident in the following collaborative app extract based on a discussion of the notion that substituting the watch (i.e. objective quantitative data) for a focus on how athletes feel (i.e. subjective qualitative data) was not automatically more empowering for athletes:

Leah (facilitator): Hi Jack. I don't think this addresses your questions fully but for me it's more about contextualising those practices. For example, there is nothing wrong with asking an athlete how they feel, in fact it can provide highly useful feedback and information. At the same time, it's important to not think of such practices as automatically empowering. For example, within the highly coach regulated and disciplinary soccer environment I was coached in, in no way shape or form was it empowering to ask me to rate daily how I was feeling. What I am trying to say is that these athlete-centred or “empowering” practices only become meaningful if the broader context and relations of power are attended to. So, if the groundwork of disrupting docility through time, space, organisation, and evaluation practices has been thought through.

Marc: Sorry all, I'm just struggling with this. Just trying to understand the concern because I often ask, “how did that feel?” or “how are you feeling?” because I genuinely want to know, and frankly would like them to get an idea of how certain workouts/paces “feel” rather than being a slave to the watch and track intervals (i.e., time and space!). The feedback from those question allows me to understand if all is well or if something is going on - maybe even some insight into various issues (fatigue from a long run or training load, or even sometimes lack of sleep during exams or something going on in their lives). In my interaction with National Team coaches, I always saw asking for that kind of feedback as a best practice. I'm curious how this can be perceived as “control” if the objective is to create a useful dialogue between coach and athlete?

As this dialogue illustrated, a key challenge for poststructuralist coach developers was effectively communicating that what might seemingly appear as a “counter discourse” and a clear departure from a narrow focus on objective “hard” data to guide one's coaching may not automatically be disruptive (i.e. asking athletes how they feel in lieu of relying solely on the watch). Moreover, without attending to the broader socio-material forces at work, these humanist informed coaching practices were at best ineffective and at worst more damaging and disempowering for athletes. This point was well made by Avner, Denison, and Markula (2019) in their critical examination of coaches' use of “fun” (a humanist coaching construct) as a disciplinary and normalising technology in varsity performance sporting contexts and its role in supporting athlete docility. While their analysis was Foucauldian rather than Deleuzian, it nonetheless illustrated how various humanist constructs (i.e. “fun”, or in

the context of this study “coaching by feel”) frequently work to (re) territorialise rather than deterritorialise coaching as a modernist formation.

Irrespective of the challenge of communicating these nuances within the span of a seven-week long workshop series, most of the coaches in the workshop displayed a willingness to begin to, or further experiment with, practices that aimed to disrupt various social forces, and the uncritical use of disciplinary techniques and instruments related to space, time, organisation, and evaluation. However, they did so with a keen awareness of existing tensions around (a) maintaining athletes’ trust and confidence in their coaching, and (b) managing their athletes’ fears and anxieties brought about by some of these disruptive or novel practices.

On Monday, I asked two of our runners to go first in our 300s. They usually wait and go at the back after most of the others lead off. They were like WHAT? Why? I don’t want to, etc. We told them, for something different, relax, just do your thing. So yes, they were passed by other runners but after they said it was better than they assumed. They are very comfortable existing at the “back”, so it was good to flip it! Builds confidence when we get uncomfortable in areas that sometimes we sit in a box (Clara, collaborative app extract)

Athlete fears and anxieties were, according to the coaches, not limited to practices which sought to disrupt rank, but extended to those which sought to disrupt the “power of the watch” and athletes’ overreliance on quantitative data to guide, organise, and evaluate their efforts. In that sense, athletes’ emotional responses to changes brought about by their coaches’ experimentations with new or next⁵ practices were rendered more acute as these practices directly contravened a dominant narrow performance discourse in endurance running shaped by a focus on “hitting desired splits” and ensuring that training allowed for the “correct and precise physiological demands and outputs” to be met. This was also evident in some of the coaches’ reluctance to experiment with new practices during the workshop at a point in the season they considered to be “too high stake”. This finding has interesting implications for poststructuralist coach developers’ planning to consider when more “disruptive” intraventions should take place in the season.

Interestingly, when discussing and reflecting upon some of their practice experimentations, coaches described not only positive effects on athletes (e.g. Jack describing how some of his “traditionally ‘chase pack’ athletes enjoyed being able to run with the ‘big dogs’ for longer and longer”), but also how some of these practices backfired and/or had unintended effects. For example, Jack again highlighted the “pull” of the track as the “correct” performance workout space on the athletes he coached.

Last night the workout was:

8 × 200 fast/200 jog

10 min cruise

8 × 200 fast/200 jog

They (the athletes) chose which part of the track they started on (for wind). Interestingly they asked me first.

I said go where you want to go. For the 10 min I said go where you want: on the track, around the block, the park across the street. Half chose to stay on the track but in the outside lanes. Interesting again: over the course of 10 min they slid closer and closer to lane 1. I asked if it was intentional and they said no, it just happened. The power of the environment to control! (collaborative app extract)

Here, the track itself and the norms of effective athlete training connected to pull athletes into the “correct” performance space, despite their coach encouraging them to “go where they want”. Beyond illustrating the docility inducing effects of normative habitual training spaces and rhythms, from a Deleuzoguattarian perspective, the above extract also highlighted the need for change frameworks, which (a) de-centre the coach and (b) engage with the relationality and sociomateriality of change which also includes the affective capacities of non-human others (e.g. the watch; the track). This point was made well by Camiré (2023c, p. 10) in their rearticulation of sport coaching as a “performance of shared agency comprising the many human and non-human entities intra-acting in sporting landscapes”.

In addition to acknowledging the affective capacities of various nonhuman entities within any coaching assemblage and the complexity and relationality of any change process, the challenge of disrupting normative practices within our specific intravention was further compounded by (mis) understandings regarding the aim and scope of the type of practice changes we promoted throughout the workshops:

Marc: like a lot of discussion about space and time and like, okay, but we have this space a certain amount of time, and we’re trying to make this work. And I understand the idea of trying to move outside the box a little bit and challenge norms and try new things. But some of the norms work too. So that’s when I sort of was like, okay, what’s the balance that we’re trying to strike here, we just trying to be sort of, we’re trying to approach this like, I’m a renegade coach, and I do things completely different, or this is what I’m going to keep [. . .] So that was my challenge was trying to understand like, are we challenging everything here? Or are we just trying to have a few new approaches. I don’t think reinventing the wheel is the solution. But I do think it’s important to try new things. (Interview extract)

In one sense, we were indeed asking coaches to *radically* change their approach to coaching by problematising the modernist logic underpinning their practices; we were asking coaches to do more than simply inject a bit of novelty or “spice”. However, as facilitators, we

were also careful to nuance our discussion of change by emphasising its relational and networked dimensions, where any change needed to be managed with careful attention to its relational impact on others and how others might affect one's capacity as a coach to experiment with new practices. Essentially, we were asking our coach participants to consider both their ethical responsibility and how their capacities and capabilities as coaches were themselves impacted and entangled with others (both human and non-human). These nuances are nicely, if somewhat abstractly, captured in the following extract from *A Thousand Plateaus*,

They address only those to which the need must be conveyed for caution, for affirmative, step by step, productive experimentation, against the temptation of precipitation. How can we convey how easy it is and the extent to which we do it every day? And how necessary caution is, the art of dosages, since overdose is a danger. You don't do it with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file.

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 160).

Deleuze and Guattari's famous injunction to avoid using "a sledgehammer" and instead "use a very fine file" is an important cautionary metaphor both for coach developers invested in promoting a different relational logic and for coaches interested in devising and experimenting with less disciplinary practices within their respective coaching contexts. Based on this and previous experiences of facilitating Foucauldian informed coach development, it is also vital for the doing of ethical coach development work – that is, how to promote change in a way that is careful, minimises dominance, and recognises the affective and material-discursive dimensions of any change process inclusive of its unintended consequences. For us, these unintended consequences were illustrated in a couple of ways. First, we saw how coaches struggled with thinking differently. For some, instead of freeing, thinking with Foucault reinforced the legitimacy of normalised practices shaped by bio-scientific knowledge. In this sense, they remained firmly located within the territory of typical endurance running practices. While other coaches attempted to use space, time and organisation to question their current practices, they unintentionally reproduced typical endurance running coaching actions and practices. For these coaches, the introduction of Foucault's concepts presented possible lines of flight, however, their experiments ultimately reterritorialised the assemblage space. By introducing Foucauldian concepts, we enabled the creation of different relations between content and expression to emerge, yet these "new" relations reproduced typical coaching actions and practices. In short, Deleuze's concept of assemblage allowed us to see the nuance behind the (re)production of coaching practices. In what follows, we explore some of the sociomaterial forces that facilitated the development of more exploratory and

experimental coaching practices within our coach development assemblage (deterritorialisation).

Lines of flight and deterritorialisation: the sociomaterial forces supporting other more relational coach becomings

This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the possibilities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential lines of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there [. . .] (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 161)

As a “how to guide” to disrupt normative processes, the above quote positions deterritorialisation as a process of creative experimentation, necessitating flexibility and agility, and the capacity to respond to unfolding opportunities to foster new connections. As facilitators, we sought to “lodge [ourselves] on a stratum” by: drawing on existing connections within the Athletics federation; highlighting the endorsement of our work by a well-known columnist who contributes to various running magazines underpinned by popular science; and emphasising that the changes we advocated for did not entail “throwing out the watch” or discarding physiological and other bioscientific knowledges. We “experimented with the possibility it offers” and sought out possible lines of deterritorialisation by deploying various curriculum content ideas (e.g. the Knowledge-Power-Practice triad, see Avner et al., 2023) alongside several andragogical strategies and practices (e.g. highlighting various coaching paradoxes, such as the paradox of highly structured and coach-led training practices vs. the unpredictability of athlete run races). Lastly, we sought “to produce flow conjunctions here and there” by: facilitating coach sharing and interactions through collaborative online spaces; springboarding from coaches’ examples to draw connections between coaches’ experiences and the Foucauldian concepts we introduced; discussing our own (laborious) journeys of experimenting with Foucauldian thinking; and adopting a fluid approach to our Foucauldian curriculum to ensure that we remained responsive to coaches’ engagement with our Foucauldian informed content.

Related forces at work in supporting coaches’ exploration and experimentation included the degree of “resonance” between the concepts and ideas introduced and coaches’ own experiences, as well as their prior interest in developing a better understanding of power-knowledge relations and their impact on athlete performance and well-being:

I agree that the sharing has been super, super helpful. I’ve always found it really fascinating that we kind of treat athletes as machines. And we focus on making ourselves or others faster and stronger and really, really, good at hitting splits, when, in reality, races [are] absolutely nothing like that. Nine times out of 10, nine

and a half times out of 10. So, it feels in a way like we're not preparing athletes for the actual task (Lara, Workshop 4)

Our coach development assemblage and intravention was also productively impacted by positive athlete feedback and “tangible changes” following the coaches’ experimentations with “next” practices as the course unfolded:

But the biggest success I had. I think we talked about this a few weeks ago, but I actually told the athletes about the course and the whole dissociating from social hierarchies and whatnot. One of my athletes was racing. And in his race, he's ranked like as a percentage of the winner. He's the best guy. And so, [name] always wins. My athlete said, “my goal is to be within 10% of him”. I was like, well, what if [name] has a bad day? Like, you're training really well, you're on the upswing here, but like, don't put [name] on a pedestal. And he listened. He went out with [name] and [name] beat him, but he was like, 2%, back instead of 10% which would have been success previously. So, I thought that was pretty cool (Lara, Workshop 4)

In that sense, it was evident that our intravention's capacity to facilitate new connections was contingent upon myriad intra-active factors, for example, the degree to which the ideas presented within the workshop series resonated with coaches' own experiences and coaching dilemmas; the degree of attachment coaches had to their existing coaching programme and approach to coaching; and their related willingness to experiment with different practices, to name but a few. These, in turn, were highly contingent upon a host of other factors including the time of season, how established each coach/coaching programme was, the competitive focus/aspirations of each programme, and the degree of associated “risk” perceived.

Conclusion

In this paper we sought to explore coaches' learning experiences within a poststructuralist informed coach development intravention and to make visible the various sociomaterial forces that worked to enable and limit our intravention's capacity to produce meaningful difference and change. To do this, we drew on assemblage thinking, as an underutilised analytical framework, to consider change as a complex affective and material-discursive phenomenon based on an intraventionist, rather than interventionist stance in sport coaching (Camiré, 2023b, 2023b; Leeder, 2022).

The process of connecting content with expression enabled us to draw attention to the numerous sociomaterial forces at work in pulling our coach development assemblage towards “known becomings” or reterritorialisation (retaining modernist coaching practices). Our study lends strength to a body of research, which has highlighted the challenge of promoting change in high-performance sport given its disciplinary legacy and dominant modernist logic (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017;

Konoval, Denison, & Mills, 2019). These forces included a range of normative expressions and contents, which reproduced effective coaching as a coach's linear application of established "best" bio-scientific coaching practices (e.g. the formulation of training plans, which allowed for the correct and precise physiological demands and outputs to be met) and a range of normative expressions and contents, which steered coaching and coaches towards other "known becomings" (e.g. coaching by feel and other humanist athlete-centred coaching practices, which do not necessarily challenge dominant power-knowledge relations in endurance-running coaching).

However, assemblage analysis also allowed us to see potential "lines of flight" and "flows of conjunction" by: (a) connecting Foucauldian concepts with coaches' existing experiences and concerns; (b) highlighting various contemporary coaching paradoxes; and (c) fostering opportunities for experimentation and coach sharing through small group discussions and a collaborative online media platform. While some of the resulting "next" practices sat closer to an injection of novelty or spice rather than a meaningful disruption of the dominant modernist social forces continuing to shape endurance-running coaching, we were nonetheless encouraged by some of the coaches' thoughtful reflections and commitment to continue to experiment with the ideas and concepts introduced within the workshop series. In our eyes, this indicated the possibility of loosening the physiological imperative and enabling more relational ways of knowing in endurance-running coaching and thus, other coach becomings.

Future inquiries might build from some of the limitations of our coach development and research assemblage, for example, through deploying inquiry tools that move beyond "textualities" and other more traditional research method(ologies) and "afford more space for the sensory, emotional, and affective dimensions of knowledge production to emerge" (Thorpe, Brice, & Clark, 2021, pp. 46–47). Designing a research assemblage with affect in mind may itself provide opportunities for new lines of flight and for developing disruptive coach development that promotes more diverse and ethical ways of knowing and challenges coach developers and coaches alike to think and practice differently. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 161) encouraged,

We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency [with its] continuum of intensities. You have constructed your own little machine, ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines.

As such, Deleuzian inquiries not only demand more radical interrogations and disruptions of systems of thought but also encourage us to

experiment and “speculatively re-imagine and materially recreate, the possibilities for thinking and for living” (Stark, 2017, p. 2)

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Notes

1. Modernist forms of coach education refer to didactic forms of coach education that are underpinned by the philosophical assumptions of modernism/enlightenment (i.e., truth as singular, the self as independent and autonomous, human progress as linear and tied to scientific rationalism). Modernist forms of coach education thus privilege technocratic rationality and tend to reduce effective coaching to the linear application of technical and bio-scientific knowledges towards a best practice. Postmodernism/poststructuralism both as social/cultural movements and theoretical perspectives were born respectively out of critiques of modernity and structuralism and a rejection of universal metanarratives, dualistic understandings of power and the humanist self (Markula & Silk, 2011). For a more in-depth discussion of sport coaching as a ‘modern discipline’, please see Denison, Mills, & Konoval (2017) or Denison, Mills, & Jones (2013).
2. While the term ‘intravention’ was not available to us at the time of the design and delivery of our workshop series, we nonetheless lean heavily on this concept within this paper given that it captures so well what our poststructuralist informed intentions were with respect to mobilizing more relational ways of knowing in our workshop series. While no social theory or ‘thought system’ can claim ownership of a word, we recognise that our use of Camiré’s concept of ‘intravention’ is based on the Baradian concept of ‘intra-action.’ However, there are clear synergies between Deleuze, Latour, Barad and Foucault with respect to how they scrutinised the making of society. Our use of the of intravention throughout the paper is a deliberate attempt to forward a broader and more inclusive reading of the ‘posts’ anti-foundationalists tenets.
3. Lines of flight are lines of escape which can enable the deterritorialisation of assemblages; however, it is by no means automatic. Lines of flight are frequently blocked or recuperated by the assemblage from which they escape (Thornton, 2020).
4. Strata are “layers, belts, or articulations that stratify, code, and territorialize material” (Markula, 2019, p. 20). Deleuze and Guattari outlined three major strata; the physio-chemical or inorganic, the organic, and the anthropomorphic or alloplastic (human). Strata are constituted by a double articulation of content (the visible) and expression (the articulable) which interact according to the principle of reciprocal presupposition.
5. Next practices acknowledge Foucault’s understanding of the importance of reactivation marginalised knowledges. In that sense many next practices are not necessarily new, rather they are presently marginalised or not actualised.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Designing ‘Next’ Practices

A Relational Approach to Coaching Endurance Athletes

This online course will consist of four 90-minute workshops spread over seven weeks where coaches will reconsider a number of endurance coaching assumptions related to their practice designs. Coaches will learn how to think critically about their so-called “best” practices and how to develop and implement new or “next” practices that challenge a range of taken-for-granted coaching maxims.

The course will move beyond coach development as “technical adjustments” and instead look at how the context of a practice and the relationship between coaches and athletes, or what we call Relational Coaching, affect coaches’ practice designs. Along with providing coaches new tools to critically examine their practices, this course will enable coaches to *rethink* their coaching philosophy by reimagining what it means to be an effective endurance coach.

Workshop Format

Each workshop will be highly interactive, collaborative, challenging and, most importantly, practical. The workshops will run bi-weekly to enable participants to bring the ideas presented back to their practice environments and try them out. Participants will also reflect on what they are learning in an online discussion forum with the other participants and the two learning facilitators.

Because questioning deeply engrained assumptions can be a daunting task, each workshop will adopt an open and flexible format to support coaches to rethink what they “normally” do. More specifically, upon the completion of this course participants will be able to:

- (1) Identify the sociomaterial forces that shape endurance coaching practices.
- (2) Explain how a number of endurance coaching norms can negatively impact athletes’ performance capabilities, health, and well-being.
- (3) Develop “next” practices founded on more contemporary understandings of the body and athlete learning.

Brief Workshop Details

Workshop #1: Relational Coaching

This workshop will introduce coaches to the idea of Relational Coaching by explaining how the connection between knowledge, power, and practice influence what coaches say and do on an everyday basis. We will then use these ideas to examine the many *unintended consequences* (e.g. underperformance, injury, ill-health) that can result from the uncritical use of seemingly “best” coaching practices. Coaches will then be put into small groups to consider any unintended consequences of their current practices.

Workshop #2: The Birth of the Modern Coach

In this workshop we elaborate on the idea of Relational Coaching by discussing how various long-standing coaching norms have led to a strong coach-athlete power imbalance. We will show how coaches can move beyond some of these traditions and expectations to coach in ways that support their athletes' wellbeing, skill development, and performance goals. Coaches will then build on these ideas to better understand the implications of their practice design decisions.

Workshop #3: Learning Beyond the Limits

This workshop will continue to broaden coaches' understanding of Relational Coaching by helping them recognise the importance of designing practices that prioritise athlete learning as a key coaching outcome. To do this, we will introduce various coaching paradoxes as a basis to discuss how coaches can think more carefully around their intended practice outcomes, activities, and evaluation procedures. Coaches will then apply some of these considerations to some of their everyday practices to better understand how learning is not an automatic process but something that must be planned for carefully.

Workshop #4: Next Practices

The final workshop in this course is intended to support participants' ongoing development of a relational approach to coaching. We will help coaches develop and implement a series of "next" practices intended to foster more ethical, effective, and sustainable learning and performance environments. Coaches will collectively and individually develop a series of next practices and discuss the various details concerning how these practices can be implemented effectively. The learning facilitators will then conclude the course and suggest a series of follow-up steps to continue to support the participants' growth and development as relationally minded coaches.