

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EMPOWERMENT IN PARA COACHING

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I submit this document as a coaching research abstract (data-driven) for Para coaching.

Introduction

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has positioned the Paralympic Games as an elite global sporting spectacle that foregrounds both performative and cultural ideals relating to 'athlete empowerment' and social transformation (IPC, 2018). Despite growing recognition that coaches play an integral role in achieving social objectives (EU, 2018), there is still a dearth of research on coaching in the Paralympic context (Duarte & Culver, 2014). However, explicate within Para coaching literature, researchers have suggested that athlete 'empowerment' framed as 'independence' was achieved by instilling elite behaviours through the application of coaches' knowledge (e.g. training adaptations) and their benevolent approach to coaching (Douglas et al., 2016; Fairhurst, et al., 2017). These studies have also relied on coaches idealistic views of 'athlete empowerment' which researchers have treated as unproblematic, devoid of contextual influences (e.g. historical, social and cultural) on practice (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Therefore, this study aimed to explore critically how 'empowerment' is constructed in Para coaching.

Method

Participants

Three experienced coaches (Male=2, Female =1; aged between 28-58) and their Paralympic medallists (Male=1, Female =2; aged between 20-30) were recruited for the study using a mix of purposeful and snowball sampling. The coaches had accumulated on average 14.8 years of coaching experience, representing different countries (US, AUS & UK), disciplines (Individual track-based, Team court-based, Individual target-based) and coached different impairment groups.

Design

In order to explore coaches' experiences, a qualitative research design was employed through the use of in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each interview lasting between 2 ½ and 3 ½ hours. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

A constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis was employed (Charmaz, 2000). The analysis process followed abductive reasoning whereby data were inductively reduced into themes. Subsequently, critical explanation of the identified themes, was achieved through a deductive application of Bourdieu's concepts.

Findings

Data illustrated that the construction of 'empowerment' in the Paralympic high-performance context is complex and contested due to its symbolic nature. Indeed, coaches and athletes' construction of empowerment was structured by performative discourses associated with the 'rules of the game'. Supporting the work of Howe and Silva (2016) Para coaching was infused with a cultural rejection of disability in favour of elite athlete identities. For coaches and their athletes, this idealistic construction underpinned a legitimate 'medal-focused' coaching process, which centred on maintaining an elitist normative symbolic order and structure (Townsend *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, adopting such a position provided an illusion of 'empowerment' that masked a coaching process infused with 'control and mastery' (Wallerstein, 1992).

Personal statement

Tabo is a full time senior lecturer in sport coaching and is undertaking his PhD at Loughborough University. His research interests include the development of expert performance and the role reflective practice plays in enhancing effectiveness. Tabo has spent over 20 years in high performance sport, with the latter half coaching and mentoring in the Paralympic sport context.

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