

The fine art of coaching: instructions, social support or democratic participation?

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Abstract: Although coaches are of extreme importance for how the many visions associated with sports are fulfilled, we know little about who coaches are and how they practise coaching. This paper responds to this challenge by answering two sets of questions empirically. First: Who are the coaches? Which athletes have which coaches? Second: How do coaches coach? How do we explain differences in coaching practices? Theoretically, the paper is based on a framework where the roles a coach might inhabit are inferred from the many visions and expectations surrounding modern sports. The results show, first, a heavily and doubly gendered distribution of coaches. Second, they indicate that relatively instructive and social coaching practices are common, but that they vary considerably by gender, age and competitive level. The paper is based on a random sample of members in Norwegian Sport Clubs.

Keywords: coaching, youth, democracy, instruction, voluntary organization.

Introduction

Sports and physical activity are supposed to fulfil significant social functions in our late modern societies. First, sports are seen as important contributions to peoples' physical health (Lüschen et al., 1996). Next, sport is often presented as an activity providing pleasure, fun, excitement or meaning for those involved (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Novak, 1994; Mandelbaum, 2004). A third function often ascribed to sport is social integration in a wide meaning of the term: as an arena where people meet, culture is communicated and individuals are socialized (Harris, 1998; Jarvie, 2003; Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). Fourth, given that many sports, at least in a European context, are organized and practised in voluntary organizations, sports are also often expected to generate social capital: social networks, generalized trust and political and social interests of importance outside the field of sport (Uslaner, 1999; Seippel, 2002b).

At the same time, sports in modern societies are heavily criticized for not fulfilling these visions (Prettyman & Lampman, 2006). As a central person in the administration of most sport activities, the coach is obviously of utmost importance for how well such visions are accomplished. In addition to the qualitative importance of the 'sport-visions' listed above, coaches are also of importance simply because there are so many people (quantitatively) involved in sports and also because a large proportion of these sport participants are young people. All in all, this makes the question of who the

coaches are and how they actually perform their tasks and lead their athletes important for both substantial and quantitative reasons.

While there is a large amount of literature and research on the question of the medical, technical and strategic aspects of sports, the literature, especially with an empirical flavour, on the social dimensions of the coaching-process is so far quite sparse.¹ Thus, the purpose of this article is to focus more on the social aspects of the coaching process, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, the aim is to contribute to a theoretical framework – inspired by role theory – applicable for a study of both descriptive and causal analyses of the social aspects of the coaching processes. Empirically, there are two sets of research questions guiding the discussions of this paper. First, two questions are descriptive and concern the background of the coaches: Who are the coaches? Which athletes have which coaches? Second, two questions (and related hypotheses) address the quality of the coaching process: How do the coaches actually coach? How can we explain differences in coaching practices? The analyses are based on a data set comprising a random sample of members in voluntary Norwegian sport organizations aged 13 and above.

The next section will present data and the Norwegian case. The third section will answer the first set of empirical questions: Who are the coaches and which athletes have which coaches? Fourth, I will outline the theoretical framework applied in the analysis of coaching practices and the assumptions and hypotheses guiding these analyses. The subsequent section presents operationalizations of the theoretical dimensions. The sixth section brings the answer to the second set of empirical questions: First, the prevalence of the various coaching practices is described. Second, explanations of variations in coaching practices are put forward. The article ends with a summary and a discussion.

Data and the Norwegian case

There are three ways to study coaching processes empirically: to observe the process 1) from the “outside”, 2) from coaches’ perspective and 3) from athletes’ point of view. In this article, the last option is possible thanks to data from the Sport Club Study 1999-2000. The data consists of a random sample of members over 12 years old from a sample of voluntary sport organizations.² 9,377 members were sent a question-

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- 1 “While it has been recognized that the coaching process is vulnerable to differing social pressures, including those which are situational, ideological, cultural and ethical in nature (...), coaching science has developed largely along bio-scientific lines” (Potrac et al., 2000, 187).
“Instead, we support the idea that this developmental or progressive view of coaching as ‘a knowable sequence’ (...) is unacceptably one-dimensional because the essential social and cultural nature of the coaching process receives little attention within it” (Jones et al., 2002, 34).
“Unfortunately, a sport coaching as a process has received far less attention than the study of the athlete’s performance” (Lyle, 1999a, 3).
 - 2 From a population of about 7000 clubs, a random sample of 549 clubs was sent a questionnaire. 294 clubs responded to the questionnaire, which gives a respond rate of 54%. Compared to the

naire, and 1,660 answered, which gives a response rate of about 30%.³ A decisive question is how this response rate affects the quality of the data. The most relevant available information on the population (member of sport organizations) is its gender and age composition. For gender, the relevant population consists of 38% females, 62% males, our data respectively 39% and 61%. For age, the population has 20% in the age 13-16 years, 80% 17 years and more, our data respectively 22% and 78%. Owing to this good correspondence between our sample and the population, we have found it worthwhile to apply the data in spite of the disappointing response rate. If there are systematic biases in the data, it seems reasonable to assume that those more interested in or devoted to sports or the sport organizations have tended to answer our questionnaire. This could give a too “positive” image of the sport activity (in this case the evaluation of coaches), a fact to keep in mind when interpreting the following analyses.

The history of Norwegian sports and its voluntary organizations shares many characteristics with other Western European nations (Hargreaves, 1986; Olstad & Tønneson, 1986, 1987; Heinemann, 1998). As a background for the subsequent analyses, it is timely to notice that a relatively large proportion of the Norwegian populations – around 30% – is affiliated to a voluntary sport organization. Among the most central characteristics of these organizations is their size; they are small, 36% of them have fewer than 50 members, 54% have fewer than 100 members, and no more than 3% of the clubs have more than 1,000 members. Furthermore, in two thirds of the clubs, all work is done voluntarily (including coaching), in only 10% of the clubs is less than 90% of the work done by volunteers (Seippel, 2002a, 2004). Finally, there is a close link between the state and voluntary sport organizations in a Norwegian context. The state supports these voluntary sport organizations financially, but also has a clear sport policy of which the overall aim is “sport for all”. In short, Norwegian sport in focus in this paper means mass sport, taking place in organizations run by volunteers, to a large

size of the organizations in the population, these data correspond well to the population (Enjolras & Seippel, 2001).

- 3 Several factors contributed to this lower than expected rate of response. First, because it was necessary to cover a very broad spectrum of age groups without knowing the age of the members, various versions of the questionnaire had to be included and people were asked to choose the right one. Second, because of restrictions given by “The Data Inspectorate”, several age groups needed permission from their parents (a signature) whereas some just had to inform their parents of their participation. Third, the questionnaire was sizeable (20 pages at most). Moreover, this rate of response reflects two factors which is partly caused by the lack of quality of the lists of members provided by the sport organizations. First, many questionnaires were returned by the postal service (1149) and many communicated that they were not, and in some cases had never been, members of a sport club. Together, misdirected questionnaires were estimated to amount to about 2,000 respondents. Next, the age of most of the sample was not known, so it was estimated that 1,725 respondents in the wrong age-group (below 13) received the questionnaire. The end-result then is 1,660 answers from a sample of 5,654 “valid members”, which, in turn, gives a response rate of 29.4%.

extent dependent upon public funding, which has in turn an overall policy aim of “sport for all”.

Who are the coaches? Who do they coach?

To understand, how the coaching process develops, it is important to know who coaches are. As a background to the more theoretically informed analyses below, this section gives a straightforward answer to the question of whether one has a coach or not, and the gender and age of the coach.

Table 1. Do you have a man (boy) or woman (girl) as your most important coach in the sport organization?

	Among all members %	Among those having a coach %
Man (boy)	50.3	80.6
Woman (girl)	12.1	19.4
Do not have a coach/trainer	37.6	
Total (N) 100%	(1,432)	(894)

There are two things worth paying attention to in table 1. First, a large proportion of the respondents report that they actually do not have a coach. This reflects, first, the fact that a relatively large proportion of members of sport organizations are passive members (18%) and, unsurprisingly, do not have a coach. This absence of coaches might also reflect the fact that to a large extent sport activities taking place within voluntary organizations are self-organized: a session simply consists of a group of people who meets regularly to exercise (or play football etc.), and do not represent an activity which necessitates a division of labour (which a position as coach implies). A second finding is the massive male dominance among coaches – 81% men against 19% women –, which is significantly higher than for membership numbers (about 35% women against 65% men) and almost as high as among leaders of sport organizations (respectively 18 to 82). This is in itself worthy of note, and more so if it is interpreted in the context of other gender differences – kind of activity, values, motives, social bonds – found both in and outside sports. Regarding the coaches’ age, the mean age of a coach is 37 years, and the coaches are mostly spread out in the age interval between 20 and 50 years (not in table). A more interesting finding becomes apparent when looking at the age of the coaches among respectively male and female coaches.

Table 2. Age of coach by gender of coach (among those having a coach)

	male coaches %	female coaches %
Under 20	1.8	6.5
21-30	19.3	34.9
31-40	32.4	31.4
41-50	36.6	16.6
More than 50	9.8	10.7
Total (N) 100%	(703)	(169)

What is apparent from table 2 is the fact that the age of female coaches is significantly lower than of male coaches. This is probably due to two processes which have been in focus in sport politics recently. First, there is a higher proportion of women among younger athletes than among elderly ones, and given that coaches to a large extent are recruited among active members, the youth dominance among female coaches is probably a finding resulting from these new patterns of sport activities. Second, the problem of drop-out from sport organizations has been more evident among girls than boys (Breivik & Vaagbø, 1998; Seippel, 2004), and this influences the ratio between women and men in the older age cohorts. While the first process is conducive to a skewed female participation (younger coaches) in sport, the second is detrimental to female coaching in general, but especially among older ones.

Given an assumption that different coaches might represent different coaching practices, it is also essential to sort out whether different athletes have different coaches. Table 3 discloses the gender composition of coaches among male and female athletes respectively.

Table 3. Gender of coach by gender of athlete (among those having a coach)

Gender of coach	Gender of athlete	
	female %	male %
male	60.6	96.9
female	39.4	3.1
Total (N) 100%	(388)	(489)

The numbers in table 3 again illustrate that sport is doubly gendered. First, most coaches are men, and second, there are clear differences as to the gender of the coach of respectively male and female athletes. Furthermore, even among women/girls there is a clear male numerical dominance among coaches. The relatively few female coaches that actually are active train girls.

Table 4. Age of coach by gender of athlete (among those having a coach)

Age of coach	Gender of athlete	
	female %	male %
Under 20	3.6	1.8
21-30	27.4	18.6
31-40	28.7	35.1
41-50	31.8	33.7
More than 50	8.5	10.8
Total (N) 100%	(390)	(490)

Looking at the age of women's and men's coaches respectively, we again find significant differences: girls do have younger coaches than men.

Beside social background, both sport activity in itself and the context of the activity are supposed to influence the coaching process. Pertinent questions then become whether there are differences when it comes to characteristics of coaches within specific sports and at different competitive level.

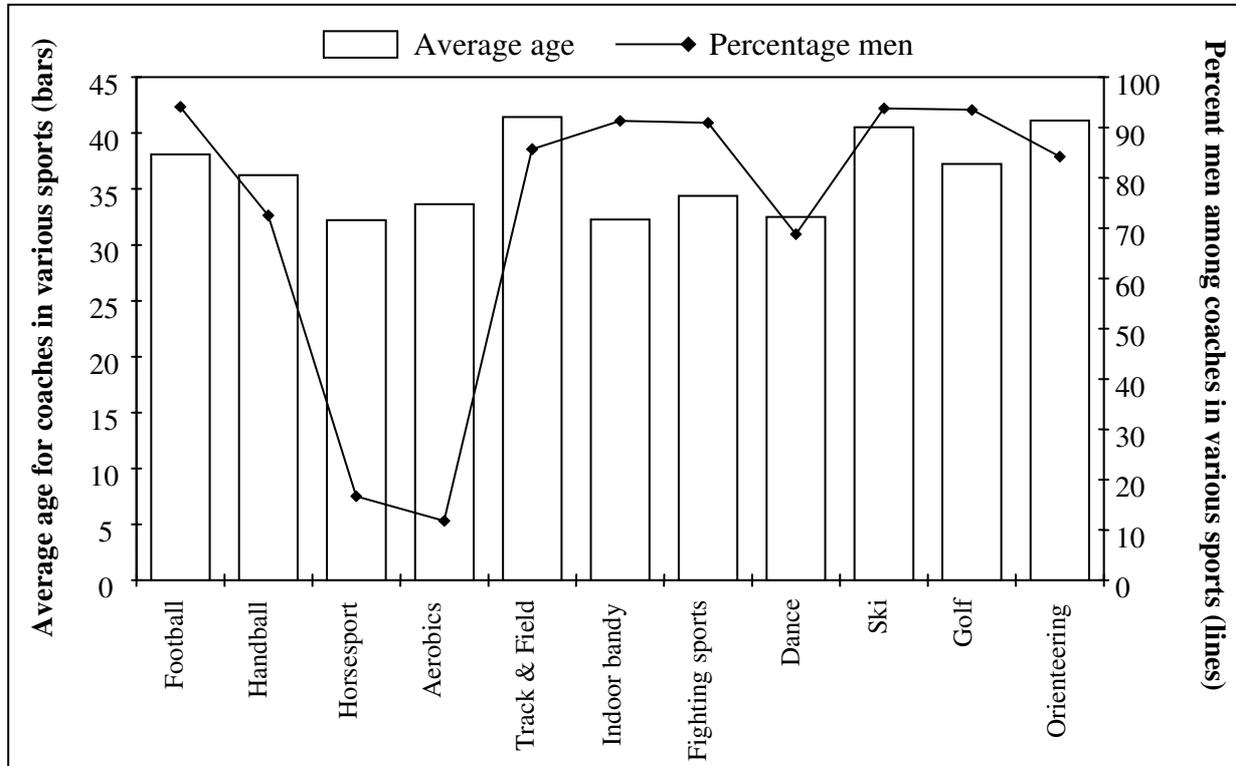


Figure 1. Age and gender of coaches in various sports

Figure 1 presents proportions of male coaches within some of the most popular sports. The figure clearly strengthens the impression of a gender-segmented sport arena: the male dominance is near total in most sports, except for a few women-dominated sports: equestrian sport and aerobics. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that even in what now is reported as the largest female sport – football – the male representation is clearly above “sport-average”. Looking at the age of coaches in the same manner indicates a pattern where some individual sports (possibly in part because they are rather technical: track & field, skiing, orienteering) have on average older coaches. There might also be a tendency for the sports assumed to be on the wane (having the most severe problems with recruitment) to have the eldest coaches.

Apart from the male dominance within sport in general and some sports in particular, it is also important to ascertain whether different coaches are attracted to the perhaps most distinct difference between sport activities: the competitive level. Table 5 shows proportions of female/male coaches among athletes reporting their competitive level.

Table 5. Gender of coach by competitive level (among those having a coach)

	Not competing %	Low competitive level %	Medium competi- tive level %	High competitive level %
Male	52.5	82.8	88.5	94.7
Female	47.5	17.2	11.5	5.3
Total (N) 100%	(179)	(238)	(340)	(113)

Beyond any doubt, a very clear picture of an association between male dominance and competitiveness emerges. Whereas the gender differences are small for those not competing, it increases gradually with competitive level, and at the highest competitive level, men make up 95% of the coaches.

In sum, this first empirical section on the social background characteristics of coaches has revealed a very clear pattern of gender and age differences and an interaction between the two. First, coaches are mostly men, between 20 and 50 years. Second, female coaches are younger than their male counterparts. Third, men do not have female coaches, whereas most women have male coaches. The gender dominance is further accentuated by women being in majority only in certain female sports, whereas they are below average even in the largest female sports (as football). Men dominate even more than average in the more competitive contexts.

Theoretical perspectives: expectations, roles and coaching practices

There are two theoretical challenges to the subsequent analyses. First, a framework describing the coaching practice is needed. As indicated in the introduction, there are many visions related to sports. These visions express different expectations of coaching practise (Strean, 1995; Cross & Lyle, 1999), and distinguishing between these expectations makes it possible to outline a set of roles a coach has to, more or less consciously, relate to and combine somehow (Fine, 1987; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). The way a coach chooses to combine these roles together makes for his/her coaching practice, which in turn affects how sport activities are experienced by athletes (Horn, 1987), and how sport visions are fulfilled. The question then is how these visions are transformed into concrete coaching practices.

At the definitional core of sport we normally find “rule-directed physical competition” and this definition also immediately indicates what coaching is about: teaching rules, tactics, strategies, technique and physical improvements to succeed in competitions. This is an inevitable factor in most coaching, and should be expected to be a central dimension in most coaching practices. A common perspective for a critique of this instrumental and achievement-oriented approach to sports (Guttmann, 1978; Lasch, 1991; Morgan, 1994) is inspired by the concept of “Homo Ludens”, pointing to sport as play: “Nevertheless it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play” (Huizinga, 1955, 3). Doing sport and being physically active is documented as being conducive to, in a wider sense, subjective well-being (Thrane, 2001).

Accordingly, a coach is also expected to organize sport activities in a way that increases enjoyment and subjective well-being within sport.

Next, as exemplified in the English sports tradition (Mandell, 1984), sports are also in most contexts supposed to socialize: to teach and promote certain values making up specific sport cultures. First, following from the competitive ethos, the ability to achieve and to face a challenge is learned in a more general sense, and also supposed to be transposed into non-sportive social arenas. Of non-competitive values, the most obvious is “fair play” (Loland, 2002), and beside fairness, one is also taught to respect others, to cooperate, to show an element of solidarity – putting the team before individual benefits – and to take care of one’s body (health). The relations between these expectations are rather complicated. On the one hand, they might seem antagonistic: we cannot all win. Or, to be fair: winning cannot be the only aim. On the other hand, they appear as mutually reinforcing: in team-sport we learn to co-operate by winning, or, we win when we cooperate.

Sport as social integration is also a vision expected to be dealt with by a coach. The challenge is to develop a friendly, cooperative and competitive atmosphere, to give opportunities to establish social networks and to experience some kind of social cohesion, to achieve the most without unnecessary exclusion; there is a thin line between competitive success and social failure. And again, these factors are both contradictory and supplementary; a friendly and cohesive environment might enhance achievements, while losing might have a disintegrative effect.

As sport activities in a Norwegian context to a large extent take place in voluntary organizations, they could be assumed to generate some kind of social capital for those involved. On one level, this is achieved when athletes are involved in discussions and decisions regarding their own activities. On a second level, social capital could be the result of having an organizational or administrative position in voluntary sport organizations. The expectations and ensuing roles facing a coach are illustrated in figure 2 (see next page).

The second theoretical challenge is to explain variation in the coaching practices described so far. Taken together, then, there are several expectations directed at a coach among which (s)he must take a position to develop a specific practice and coaching style. Since these various expectations potentially both support and contradict each other, there is a genuine possibility (must) for the coaches to influence how this role is fulfilled. So, it is not easy to determine exactly which factors are conducive to what kind of coaching behaviour. Yet, building on both previous sociological research and specific social-psychological studies, there are at least five different possibilities for how coaching practices are influenced by social characteristics and the sport practice.

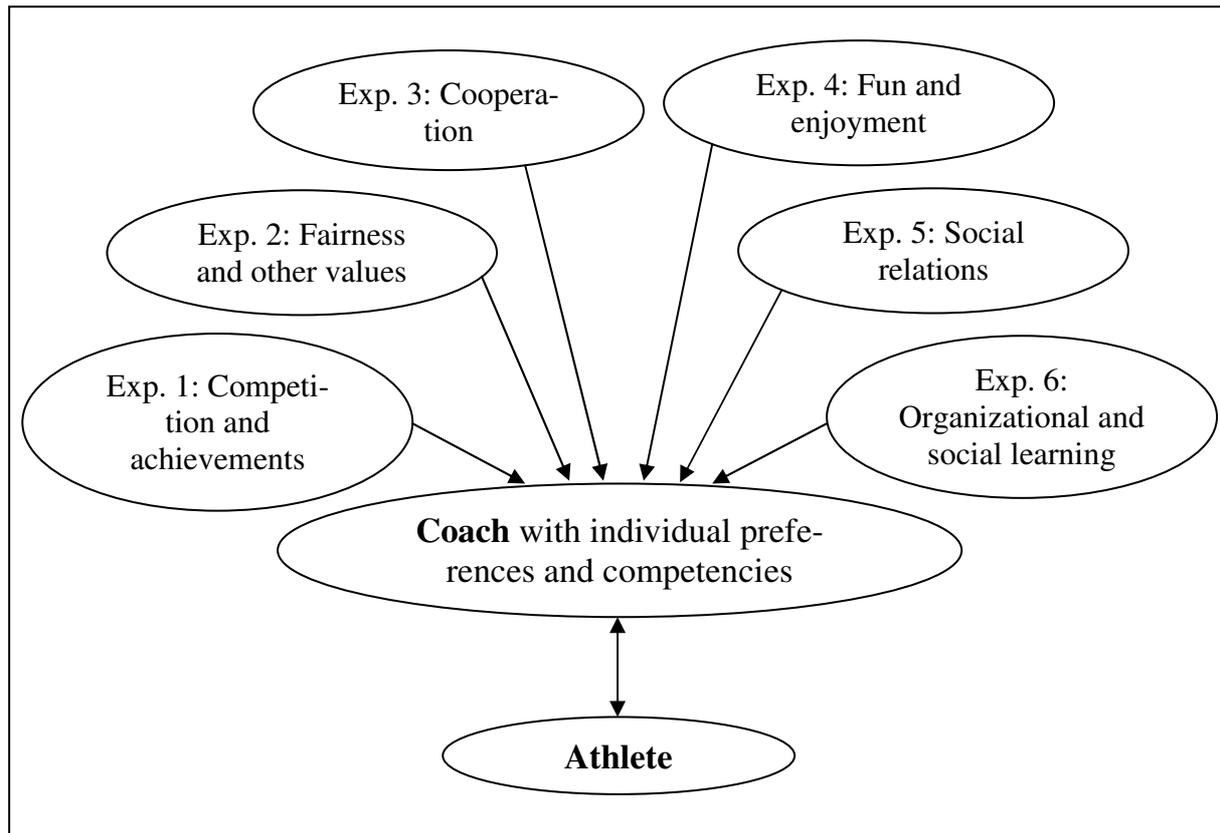


Figure 2. The coaching role reflecting various expectations to the outcome of sport activity. (Exp. 1. to Exp. 6)

A first type of explanatory factors is what I will call the coach-habitus, where a habitus is “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). Based on studies of values and attitudes among men and women – both inside and outside sports – one could expect men to be more instrumental and competitive and women to be more social and supportive as coaches. It could also be that age has implications; that younger coaches are less sensitive to the social and/or democratic aspects of sport. A second set of explanatory factors are characteristics of the athletes which could also influence the coaching process. Youngsters are more in need of instructions, but are (if practice is in line with official sport policy) not exposed to the same competitive pressures as elders, and, girls are, possibly, treated more socially than boys. There could also be an interaction effect between characteristics of coaches and of the athletes where, for example, men could be more social and supportive to girls/women than to boys (or vice versa). Thus, both the habitus of the coach and the social characteristics of athletes (and their interaction) might influence how the coaching processes actually occur.

A further set of factors more associated with the sport activity than the persons involved are also supposed to influence coaching practices. First among these is the competitive level, where one could assume that the more competitive, the more emphasis is placed upon the instrumental and technical aspects of the sport activity. The socially exclusive mechanisms are probably also more brutal and direct at high com-

petitive levels. Yet, this assumption should be modified, because recent studies have indicated that these relations are more complicated and that competitiveness also does have “positive” social effects (Seippel, 2002b): winning requires time together which breeds social cohesion and enjoyment (for those completing the process). A second contextual dimension is related to what kind of sport one is involved in, where first, and foremost differences between individual sports and team sports could be of importance for how coaching is carried out. Two assumptions apply: that team sports require a more social coaching practice and that team sports call for a more democratic leadership style where athletes are more often included in discussions and decisional processes.

Operationalizations

On the one hand, there is a large literature and much research on the medical, technical and tactical aspects of sports coaching. On the other, it is claimed that there is a lack of research on the social aspects of sport activity and the coaches’ role in this process (Lyle, 1999; Potrac et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2002). The sociological theoretical framework outlined above is an answer to these criticisms. Still, the challenge is to transform these sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) into empirically useful concepts and concrete measures. Moreover, and in spite of this critique, there are, within a social-psychological tradition, at least three helpful contributions to this problem (for an overview, see Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998). First, Smoll & Smith (1989) point out central dimensions of the coaching process – both of an instructive-technical and social character – and how various aspects as individual differences (for both coaches and athletes) and situational contexts influence the coaching process. Second, Chelladurai and colleagues (1980, 1988, 1990) have developed what they call a “Multidimensional Model of Leadership” with a sophisticated and thoroughly tested measurement apparatus. This is also tested and found applicable in a Norwegian setting (Johnsson, 2001). A third approach, also developed by Chelladurai et al. (op. cit.), is more concerned with the normative dimensions surrounding the coaching process.

Among these well-tested measures outlined here, I have chosen to apply a selection of ten Chelladurai measures – ten “questions” to tap five theoretical dimensions (table 6) – instead of developing new and less reliable and less validated measures. Compared to the theoretical framework above, “training and instruction” corresponds to “competition and achievements”, “social support” and “positive feedback” give insights to the “social relations” in the coaching process, whereas “democracy” and “autocracy” indicate how “cooperation” and “social learning” are taken care of. The theoretical dimension which is not appropriately covered by these measures is “fun and enjoyment”.

Table 6. Dimensions and operationalization of the coaching process in sports (based on Cheladurai, 1990)

Dimension	Description	Indicators (statements)
Training and instruction	Coaching behaviour aimed at improving the athletes' performance by emphasizing and facilitating hard and strenuous training; instructing them in the skills, techniques and tactics of the sport; clarifying the relationship among the members; and by structuring and coordinating the members' activities.	Q1: The coach is concerned with explaining the techniques and tactics of the sport we are taking part in. Q2: The coach explains to each and one of us our tasks
Democratic behaviour	Coaching behaviour which allows greater participation by the athletes in decisions pertaining to group goals, practice methods, and game tactics and strategies.	Q3: The coach often asks for our opinion on how to organize the training Q4: The coach includes us when deciding on strategies for important competitions
Autocratic behaviour	Coaching behaviour which involves independent decision-making and stresses personal authority.	Q5: The coach seldom explains his actions/choices Q6: The coach makes his plans independent of us in the team
Social support	Coaching behaviour characterized by a concern for the welfare of individual athletes, positive group atmosphere, and warm interpersonal relations with members.	Q7: The coach encourages and compliments Q8: The coach helps us when we have personal problems
Positive feedback	Coaching behaviour which sustains an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance.	Q9: The coach behaves in a way that makes us trust him/her Q10: The coach tells us when we perform well.

Instructive, supportive or participative coaching practices?

The next step is to study how coaches in Norwegian voluntary sport clubs are perceived by those active in these clubs in the light of the five empirical dimensions introduced above, and why we find systematic differences between them. First, I will chart, in a descriptive manner, how the coaches are perceived on a general level. Then I will see how various coaching practices might be explained by social and contextual factors.

Figure 3 presents percentages of athletes agreeing (strongly or moderately) and disagreeing (strongly or moderately) with the different statements presented as indicators of the various dimensions of coaching practices.

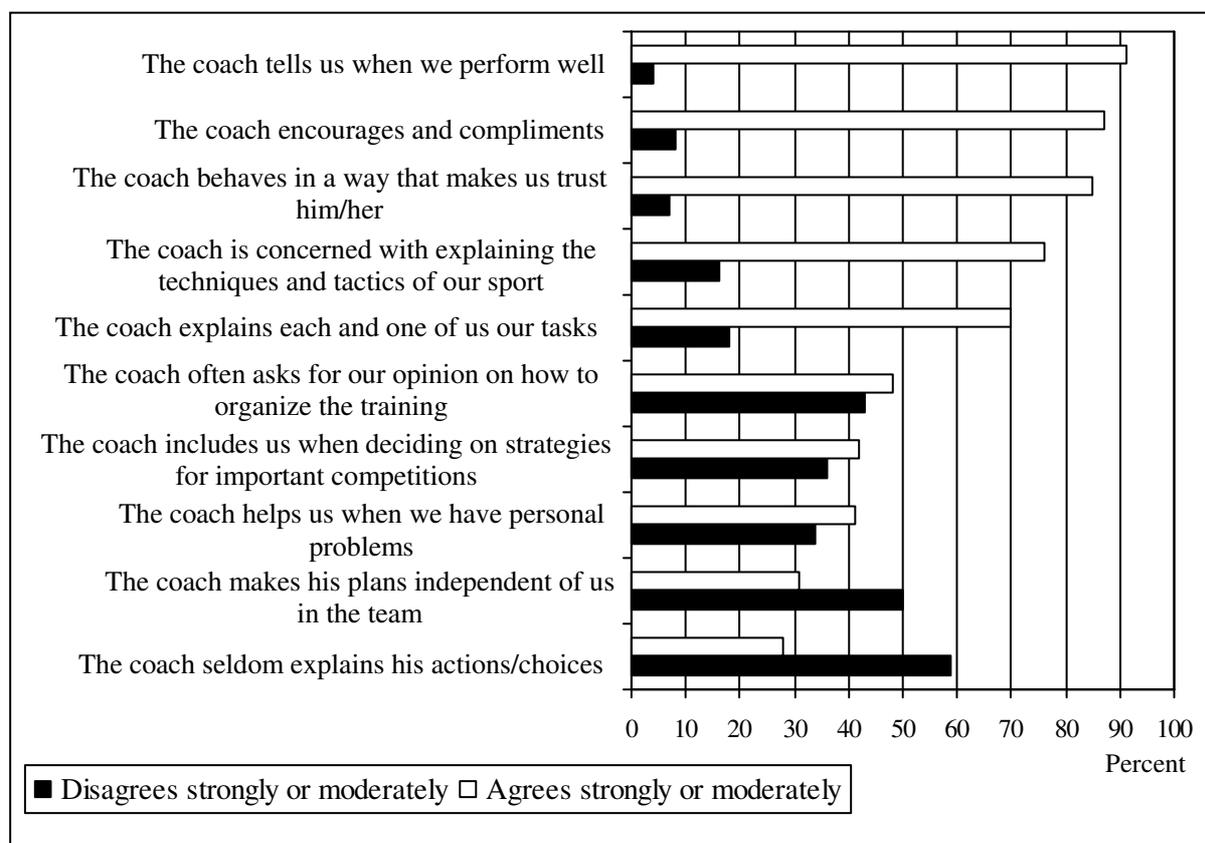


Figure 3. Athletes' evaluations of coaches

The first, and somewhat surprising finding, is that the dimensions where the coaches get the highest score are the social dimensions (“social support” and “positive feedback”), even though the more demanding version of social support – “the coach helping us when we have personal problems” – have a considerably lower score than the three other items measuring the social dimensions. Thereafter, the two statements measuring “training and instruction” follow. Thus, on a general level, the athletes seem almost unanimously satisfied with the social work accomplished by their coaches, and it also seems that the instructive aspects of the coaching process are acceptably taken care of. Coming to the democratic/autocratic dimensions, the score is considerably lower, and fewer than half the athletes support the statements indicating that coaches lead their training sessions in a “democratic” way. However, even fewer explicitly support the statements indicating autocratic behaviour.⁴

4 One should notice here that especially young athletes give a perhaps too positive picture of their coaches, because they do not have comparable experiences. There is also the possibility of biases in the sample producing too positive answers to these questions. And there is obviously the fact that those less satisfied will leave sport activities rather rapidly.

Based on the five empirical dimensions of coaching practices, five indexes were constructed, each based on two statements (items).⁵ As indicated in the theory section, one should expect coaching practices to vary both with the social background of athletes and coaches (gender and age), the sport activity (team vs. individual) and the social context (competitive level) of the coaching context. In the subsequent analyses, I will study how each of the five coaching style dimensions are explained by these six assumedly most pivotal independent variables.

Table 7. Explaining coaching styles by social background, sport activity and context. Multiple Regression. Coefficients ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

	Training and instruction	Democratic behaviour	Autocratic behaviour	Social support	Positive feedback
Constant	8.34**	6.05**	6.59**	7.59**	8.90**
Athlete's gender	-0.08	-0.19	0.21	0.12	-0.06
Athlete's age	-0.11**	0.14*	-0.22**	-0.10*	-0.12**
Competitive level	0.22**	0.63**	-0.30 *	0.18*	0.10
Indiv. vs. team sport	-0.06	-0.20	0.16	-0.21	0.03
Coach's gender	-0.08	0.05	0.13	0.31	0.12
Coach's age	0.04	-0.04	0.14	0.01	0.05
R ²	0.08	0.09	0.05	0.04	0.06

In the light of the theoretically inferred assumptions outlined above, three findings stand out as central, even though it should be noted that the level of explained variance (R²) is relatively low. First, the athlete's age has a significant effect for all five coaching practices: the young athletes assign a higher value to the two social aspects – social support and positive feedback – and the instructive aspects of the coaching process. For the participation dimensions, young athletes give a low value to the democratic values and a high to autocratic behaviour. In sum, then, young athletes are instructed and taken care of, but only to a limited extent included in the administration of coaching processes. The second factor of importance is competitive level, which has a “positive” effect in four of the five cases. On a high competitive level, the coaches are seen as more instructive, more democratic/less autocratic and more socially supportive. Apparently, a third (non-)finding is the lack of significant influence of characteristics of coaches: especially by gender. What seemed a most plausible influential factor – gender – is not found to have significant effects in table 7. A methodological problem here, however, is the fact that boys very seldom have female coaches. Running the same analyses as in Table 7 only for female athletes shows that for women, female coaches are reported to have a more social coaching style than male coaches. Although this finding is not generalizable, it indicates that there are, at least in some cases, im-

5 The alpha cronbachs for the five indexes are as follows: training and instruction: 0.7; democratic behaviour: 0.8; autocratic behaviour: 0.5; social support: 0.6; positive feedback: 0.9.

portant differences between male and female coaches. Prior research also reports that the male coach/female athlete's relationship is problematical in many respects (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997).

Summary, discussions and conclusions

The background for the analyses in this article is the social importance assigned to sports in late modern societies as well as the massive critique against sports for not fulfilling these visions. Immensely important factors for how such social visions are realized are the coach and coaching practice. Since not very much is known about who the coaches are, how they practise their "vocation" and how their practice affects the outcome, the questions leading the discussions of this paper have been: Who are the coaches? How do coaches coach? How do we explain the existence of different coaching practices? The analyses are based on a Norwegian set of data and tell us how the coaches are perceived from the point of view of members (age 13+) of voluntary sport organizations.

Sociological theories on sport point to the many, both contradictory and supplementary, visions associated with sport, the ensuing expectations facing coaches, and, as a corollary, the role-conflicts, coaches have to cope with. Furthermore, it is also assumed that coaches truly have a decisive influence on how the various expectations are met, and – through their coaching practice – how the sport activity is actually carried out and experienced. This sociological framework was substantiated and operationalized with the help of social-psychological measures (Chelladurai).

The empirical results showed, first, a heavily gendered social arena where men were in a very clear majority as coaches at a general level. Moreover, the gender-segmentation was strengthened by the fact that male athletes (almost) never have female coaches whereas female athletes, to a large extent, have male coaches. The analyses also showed that women/girls tend to have younger coaches than men. Even more conducive to the gendering of the sport arena is the fact that female coaches are over-represented in a few "women's sports" and under-represented the most popular female sports and at higher competitive levels.

The descriptive analysis of coaching practices revealed a high score in the social supportive dimensions, a relatively high score in the instructive dimensions and a lower result for the democratic aspects. At a general level, then, the conclusion seems to be that Norwegian athletes are taken good care of socially, they are instructed, but only to a certain extent included in the organization of their sport activity. These last findings might indicate that the amount of social capital produced through sport activity is rather low (Seippel, 2006, 2008).

Explaining the incidence of various coaching practices revealed three interesting findings. First, younger athletes gave a higher score for both social and instructive dimensions, to their coaches, but a lower democratic score. Second, competitive level had a positive effect on social, instructive and democratic dimensions of the coaching. Third, even though the sport field is heavily gendered and gender is, theoretically, supposed to be consequential, no effect of coaches' gender appeared in the overall ana-

lyses. One reason for this absence is the fact that men almost never have female coaches. Running separate analyses for female and male athletes, however, revealed that female coaches have a more social coaching style than male coaches towards female athletes.

These findings have implications for sport policies. First, and even though the male dominance come as no surprise and is already incorporated in official sport policies, this is a timely reminder of how thoroughly gendered sports are: found at all levels of sport, both in individual activities and social structures as well as cultures (see Knoppers, 1992, 1994). Second, voluntary sport organizations have to take a position on the question of how to meet the need of various age groups. It is of course very welcome that children and adolescents are offered high qualitative sport activities. Yet, if an aim is to reach an older section of the population, there is a problem. Even though it seems reasonable that athletes at a high competitive level are coached at a high level, along all dimensions, included in this study, a true “sport for all” approach should not accept that athletes at a lower competitive level should have a lesser offer qualitatively (although the offer obviously should be of a different kind).

For future research, at least five challenges stand out. First, an appropriate understanding of how coaches operate should include more information on the coaches, especially whether they have some kind of relevant sport and coaching experience and, not least, relevant education. Second, when it comes to the athletes, one should be able to distinguish better between different sports. Theoretically, it should be possible to develop a more complex theoretical model, and also work towards the specification of how various social mechanisms operate in this context. Methodologically, an answer to this challenge – to get a better grasp of coaching processes – could benefit from qualitative studies focusing in more depth on what actually causes the differences found in the quantitative studies. For future quantitative studies, there is also the need for a more fitting empirical measure for sociological studies than the one borrowed from sport psychology for this occasion.

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