

Holism in Sports Coaching: Beyond Humanistic Psychology: A Commentary

Lynn Kidman

School of Sport and Recreation
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland, New Zealand
Email: lkidman@aut.ac.nz

I was intrigued by Tania Cassidy's article, arguing for a 'clearer understanding of holism' and a suggestion that interpreting its meaning is 'culturally-based'. I wondered where my interpretation had developed, so I dug into my own culture to determine where the word began to be embedded in my writing about athlete-centred coaching.

I owe most of my reflection to Bennett Lombardo's original work on '*Humanistic Coaching*' [1] where he embedded his writing on humanism within the social psychology discipline. Indeed, Cassidy, like Lombardo, confirmed that the influential social psychology humanism theorists, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow were instrumental in focusing lifelong development theories through educational means. Lombardo paralleled their growth and development work and called for coaches to focus on the development of the 'whole' athlete (holism) and encourage them to enable athletes to reflect on the subjective, thrilling experience of sport. Additionally, his humanism discussions were underpinned by Jay Coakley's [2] work, with a sociocultural emphasis of the sport environment and its impact on athletes. Lombardo's humanistic theme, based on social psychology, pedagogy and sociology, came from his frustration in watching undergraduate students' culturally-based education being overinfluenced by what Nash, Sproule, and Horton [3] depict as a "tendency to privilege the technological, biophysical and scientised aspects coach education programmes" (p. 530). Thus Lombardo's intentions were to ensure athlete growth and development was considered holistically, rather than just from the physical domain.

Lombardo's work inspired me, as like his students, my cultural base was largely influenced by the emphasis on the physical. Realising that there was more than just the physical, my interpretation evolved into acknowledging an 'holistic', 'athlete-centred' and 'humanistic' coaching approach. For me, all three terms are about the individual and his or her culturally-based context. With Cassidy's prompting, I reflected on my personal meaning of holism and the importance for coaches to understand training athletes holistically. Retrospectively, holism is based on growth and development research which is embedded in psychosocial [4, 5], human science and pedagogical literature [6] even though human development theory discourses [see 7] claim to originate in humanistic psychology. Growth and development research highlights the importance of considering the person from his or her cultural base, to enable learning to occur [4, 5]. An athlete's ability to learn is dependent on the 'whole' person and is culturally specific to that person. Thus, being humanistic is ensuring that those culturally specific needs are met. Based on my research, I was privileged to join Lombardo [8] and continue to promote humanistic coaching, where sport experiences are used to enhance personal development and understanding. Sport provides an avenue for this humanistic, holistic educational experience so athletes have an opportunity to develop as human beings.

In our work, we use the terms humanistic and athlete-centred coaching interchangeably because both refer to the total development of the ‘whole’ individual [9]. Both terms focus on enhancing athlete self-awareness, and holistic growth and development [8]. For athletes to perform (at any level), they need to be self-aware, and to have ownership and responsibility for their learning [10]. If we want to develop people who are self-aware, we need to provide an environment for athletes to be themselves and for coaches to focus on each individual’s complex culturally-based needs [9]. Indeed in *Athlete Centred Coaching*, Lombardo and I explicitly define our interpretation of holism in a separate section entitled ‘Humanism and Athlete Development’, whereby the holistic needs are identified and explained as physical, cognitive, psychological, social and spiritual. Additionally, Jones and Turner also label factors of holism as emotional, political, social, spiritual and cultural aspects in addition to the mental and physical [11]. The importance of growth and development of individuals cannot be underestimated, however in reflecting on Cassidy’s comments, I believe that the act of merely identifying and labelling the needs on a systematic scale is limiting in and of itself and detracts from the notion that an individual is culturally-based.

Athletes learn verbally and non-verbally, and from hidden messages given in the sport context [9]. An individual’s growth and development accrue as a result of direct contact with people and encounters with various situations, regardless of exactly how the coach behaves or what the nature of the sport environment. An athlete’s interaction with any given environment brings about change (i.e. learning) and therefore any learning which occurs is culturally specific. I would go one step further in suggesting that, like athlete-centred coaching, holism is individually based, but depends on the individual’s cultural context (his or her uniqueness). Holistic coaching is the ability to understand that cultural context, that is the ‘whole’ person and not be limited by finite labels [see 8, 9, 11, 12] on a systematic scale.

Mattson, Hassment, McCullick and Schempp provide further evidence for a cultural base, when they argue that for an individual, the specific nature of the revelations and learnings will vary, paralleling the uniqueness of each person and reflecting the individual’s personal encounter with sport [13]. In their research, they found that an individual’s specific culture is a determinate of how he or she learns and to become good at sport requires attention to several cultural-based needs, such as parents, an environment of fun, athletes’ determination and their discipline for training. Thus, the unique ‘whole’ context of an individual’s culture determines his or her learning.

Humanistic, athlete-centred coaching is about offering a supportive learning environment to help athletes’ growth and development, which requires thinking holistically about the athlete. Through holism we can offer the ‘human’ side of sport. “Lombardo (1987) suggests that the experience in sport is about being authentic, true to oneself, human in every way [8, p.178]”. Athletes have intrinsic experiences that express uniqueness. These experiences are based on holism, the ‘whole’ person.

Interdisciplinary Approach

I agree with Cassidy’s interpretation that humanistic psychology as a discipline has been the essence to humanism, however social pedagogical research suggests that coaching development

is fragmented, that the interdisciplinary purpose where these knowledges “meet, interconnect and dissect” [11, p.(184)] is missing. This interdisciplinary approach reinforces that we need to coach holistically and view athletes as complex social processes, who have a myriad of interacting variables. The interdisciplinary focus attends to Cassidy’s concern where she states, “... becoming familiar with how psychology and other disciplines, such as sociology and education, inform our understanding and practice of holism.” Coach development has historically been fragmented [14] rather than developing coaches to help their athletes from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Additionally, it is refreshing to see an humanistic trend in skill acquisition theory [see 15, 16] where the focus is on the interdisciplinary nature of skill learning is a dynamic process and reinforces the need to be holistic and cater to human needs (humanistic). The dynamical systems theory interprets movement as an interdisciplinary and interacting process where the execution of movement depends on the environment, task and the individual constraints of the of the sport context. This dynamic, interdisciplinary skill acquisition theory attends to human movement in a holistic manner with an understanding that skill is not learned in isolation. Indeed, coaching through the dynamical systems learning is a humanistic entity because “knowledges connect and are expressed through human interaction” and have “creative engagement with novel situations and strategies” [11, p. 189].

Summary

It is perceptive of Cassidy to raise the issue of gaining a ‘greater understanding of holism’, yet I believe that researchers can drown in semantics. In an attempt to critique concepts, we are often paralysed by over analysis. I believe a critical analysis of concepts like holism is valuable at a certain level, however for the ‘ordinary, everyday’ coach, I believe they need a general understanding of the term holism, which is addressing the ‘whole’ person (more than the physical which has historically stymied athlete learning). It is more important for the writings produced to explicitly define the interpretation of holism in each article/book, so there is an understanding of the term in that particular context. One can then read those articles with an eye on the writer’s interpretation. However, just as all the commentators in this issue interpret Cassidy’s message differently, each reader interprets the definitions provided in any reading from their own culturally-based context.

In Cassidy’s summary, she suggests that we need to develop a systematic scale, to understand holism. I contend that her suggestion actually is a paradox to a culturally-based understanding of what makes holism. Coaching humanistically is about enabling people be who they are and coaches encouraging autonomy and freedom of athletes and addressing their ‘holistic’ needs, needs that are unlimited, dynamic and complex for each ‘whole’, unique person.

The humanistic nature of coaching is part of the social world which is important to the dynamic nature of coaching [11, 12]. Contextual social factors play a major role in understanding coaching and learning, thus requiring an interdisciplinary approach. Coaches are responsible for the well being of their athletes. The coaching process is vulnerable to differing social pressures. The movement experiences in sport should be humanising in that they positively influence self-esteem, self-direction, independence and opportunities that can “express intense movement of

joy and supreme well-being” [17, p.85, (as cited in 8, p. 181)]. To attend to these individualised, holistic experiences coaches need to focus on the ‘whole’ person, one who has been socially constructed and has a personal, culturally-based practice and understanding. Coaching using an humanistic, athlete-centred approach is intended to cater for the diverse and dynamic human interaction.

REFERENCES

1. Lombardo, B.J., *Humanistic Coaching: From Theory to Practice*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, 1987.
2. Coakley, J., *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. St Louis, IL: Mosby, 1978.
3. Nash, C.S., Sproule, J. and Horton, P., Sport Coaches’ Perceived Role Frames and Philosophies, *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 2008, 3(4), 539-554.
4. Smoll, F.L., and Smith, R.E., *Children and Youth in Sport: A Biopsychosocial Perspective*, Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque, IW, 2002
5. Berger, K.S., *The developing person through the life span* (4th ed.), Worth, New York, NY, 1998.
6. Siedentop, D., *Developing Teaching Skills in Physical Education*, Mayfield, Mountain View, CA, 1991.
7. Cassidy, T., Jones, R., and Potrac, P., *Understanding Sports Coaching. The Social, Cultural and Pedagogical Foundations of Coaching Practice*, Routledge, London, 2009.
8. Kidman, L. and Lombardo, B.J., Teaching Games for Understanding and Humanistic Coaching. In Butler, J. and Griffin, L. (eds), *More Teaching Games for Understanding: Moving Globally* (pp. 171-186), Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, 2010a.
9. Kidman, L. and Lombardo, B.J. (Eds.), *Athlete-centred Coaching: Developing Decision Makers*, IPC Print Resources, Worcester, UK, 2010b.
10. Lombardo, B.J., Coaching in the 21st Century: The Educational Models. In B.J. Lombardo, T.J. Carvella-Nadeau, K.S. Castagno, & V.H. Mancini (Eds.), *Sport in the Twenty-first Century: Alternatives for the New Millennium* (pp. 3-10), Pearson Custom, Boston, MA, 2001.
11. Jones, R.L. and Turner, P., Teaching Coaches to Coach Holistically: Can Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Help? *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 2006, 11(2), 181-202.
12. Potrac, P., Brewer, C., Jones, R., Armour, K., and Hoff, J., Toward an Holistic Understanding of the Coaching Process, *Quest*, 2000, 52, 186-199.
13. Mattsson, P., Hassmen, P., McCullick, B., and Schempp, P., *Swedish Golf Success: Its History and Future*, 2007, Annual Review of Golf Coaching, USA.
14. Cassidy, T., and Kidman, L., Initiating a national Coaching Curriculum: A Paradigmatic Shift? , *Physical Education and sport Pedagogy*, 2010, 15(30), 307-322.
15. Davis, W.E. and Broadhead, G.D. (Eds), *Ecological Task Analysis and Movement: Understanding Movement in Context*. Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, 2007.
16. Davids, K., Button, C., and Bennett, S. J., *Dynamics of Skill Acquisition: A Constraints-led Approach*. Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, 2008.
17. Workman, G. J., Humanistic Ideology in Sport: Time for a Change, In B.J. Lombardo, T.J. Carvella-Nadeau, K.S. Castagno, & V.H. Mancini (Eds.), *Sport in the Twenty-first Century: Alternatives for the new millennium* (pp. 84-87), 2001, Pearson Custom, Boston, MA.

