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The realities of utilising participatory research and creative methods to explore the experiences of non-heterosexual coaches

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ABSTRACT

Participatory research is “with”, “for” and “by” participants, rather than “on” or “to” them, thereby moving away from a traditional subject-researcher relationship towards a cooperative approach. Participatory research seeks empowering and equitable ways to conduct research with participants, which is pertinent with marginalised groups that have historically been side-lined by traditional methods. This article explores the value of participatory research with non-heterosexual coaches, and the importance of centralising participants’ lived experience and knowledge in research. Given the limited use of creative methods within coaching research, attention will be focused on the realities of deploying such methods. We argue that coaches in research should have the opportunity to authentically express their experiences, and insights through methods of their choosing. In doing so, diverse, intersectional knowledge may be shared, and opportunities created to support the exploration of sensitive, complex topics that exist within coaching practice.

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Coaching literature is historically underpinned by the experiences of white, male, heterosexual, non-disabled coaches (Zehntner, McMahon, & McGannon, 2021), which does not reflect the complex, intersectional identities of the UK sports coaching workforce. Recent literature highlights the ongoing battles coaches experience regarding racism (Roche & Passmore, 2022), sexism (Norman & Simpson, 2022), homophobia, (Roberts et al., 2023), ableism, (Townsend, Huntley, Cushion, & Culver, 2022) and intersectional oppressions (Clarkson, Parry, Sawiuk, Grubb, & Kavanagh, 2022). Yet academic explorations of non-heterosexual coaches (i.e. coaches that identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.) is limited globally, and within the UK (Norman, 2011, 2013). Moreover, literature on gender

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and sexual minorities in coaching is dominated by traditional research methods (Kauer, 2009; Krane & Barber, 2005), e.g., interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups (Kara, 2015). While such methods remain valuable, non-heterosexual communities may require methods that reduce power inequalities between researchers and participants by engaging in non-verbal forms of communication, completed how, when, and where individuals desire (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina, & Cannella, 2023). Indeed, Jones, Santos, and Gilbourne (2012) suggested that by expanding beyond existing methodologies towards alternative creative means, scholars can examine the nuances and complexities of coaching that may not be captured using traditional methods. This article reflects upon the rationale, and realities of utilising participatory research and creative methods within coaching research, particularly with minority groups.

Participatory research

Participatory research (PR) differs to traditional research, being “with”, “for” and “by” participants, rather than conducting it “on them” (Chavalier & Buckles, 2013), with intention to promote inclusion, and recognise the diverse voices of individuals and communities (Aldridge, 2014). PR has numerous meanings. Common terms include co-operative inquiry (Reason & Heron, 1995), co-production (Smith, Williams, Bone, & The Moving Social Work Co-production Collective, 2022), participatory (Aldridge, 2015), participatory action research (PAR; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993), co-creation (Jull, Giles, & Graham, 2017), emancipatory (Barton, 2005), transformative (Deshler & Selener, 1991), collaborative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997), participatory appreciative action and reflection (PAAR; Ghaye et al., 2008), and community-based participatory research (CBPR; Schinke, McGannon, Watson, Busanich, & Galily, 2013). This list is not exhaustive, yet highlights the complexities of language-use regarding PR. PR designs differ between objectives and methods (Conrad & Campbell, 2008), yet all prioritise the lived experiences of participants and the reflective role of researchers, thus moving away from the traditional researcher role (i.e., driving and defining the research objectives, questions, and design) towards participant empowerment (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Spencer & Molnár, 2022). Within traditional approaches, while participants are recognised for their contributions, pre-existing power imbalances are reinforced, questioning whose knowledge is valued and disseminated (Spencer & Molnár, 2022).

Due to the collaborative approach, the role of the participants within PR is more significant and may be more challenging dependent upon participant populations. However, we, as researchers, are encouraged to seek empowering and equitable ways to undertake research. For instance, in

a coaching context, PR prioritises coaches' lived experience and knowledge, and actively involves them in the research process by encouraging them to have agency over how they share their experiences (Aldridge, 2015). Creative methods lend themselves well to PR (Wiles, Clark, & Prosser, 2011), by enabling participants to become co-creators of meaning, blurring the traditional divide between researcher and participants (Grisoni, 2008). Accordingly, the methods outlined are data production procedures, where knowledge is “produced with” participants rather than “collected from” them (Mannay, 2015).

Creative methods

PR often incorporates creative methods, including art forms and written creations (Conrad & Campbell, 2008), providing participants with the opportunity to go beyond standard, verbal approaches and share insights in ways that are authentic to them (participant-driven methods). However, it is important to acknowledge that some participants may prefer traditional methods, and therefore should have a choice regarding their engagement with research. This, in turn, invites participants to play a greater role in the research process, thereby having more ownership of their stories (Aldridge, 2015).

Creative methods are often effective when exploring sensitive topics, as they facilitate the expression of feelings that are challenging to articulate (Ward & Shortt, 2018). Barker, Richards, and Bowes-Catton (2012) advocate that visual and arts-based methods are effective when researching marginal and stigmatised identities that have previously been excluded from traditional methods. For example, visual methods have the potential to capture the richness and diversity of lived experience of marginalised (e.g., non-heterosexual) individuals, and narrative methods can achieve audience resonance through evocative writing (Armitage & Ramsay, 2020; Tracy, 2010). Therefore, creative methods could be beneficial for coaching-focused research that thus far has captured limited insights and experiences of diverse, intersectional voices (Jowett, 2017). For participants to have agency in the research process, it is an accepted practice in PR to provide a variety of data production options. Whereby, participants select methods which best suit their circumstances, supporting a more considered, and considerate approach to the research (Ward & Shortt, 2020). The creation of knowledge which incorporates visual, textual, narrative, and other data may also be shared impactfully with audiences beyond academia, such as coaching communities (Jones, Santos, & Gilbourne, 2012). For example, multiple data presentation formats can be utilised within resources for sport organisations and the general public, including participant-created visuals or narratives, rather than exclusively relying on quotes from transcripts (Leavy, 2017).

Within qualitative research, there appears to be an increase in discourse surrounding creative methods, alongside a rise in/shift towards

less conventional research methods (Aldridge, 2015). While creative methods are still marginally employed in coaching research, previous literature has incorporated visual methods, e.g., photographs (Jones, Santos, & Gilbourne, 2012; Lee & Corsby, 2021) and drawings (Cope, Harvey, & Kirk, 2015), and narrative methods, e.g., letters (Szedlak, Smith, & Callary, 2020). Jones, Santos, and Gilbourne (2012) utilised visual methods for researcher-created data rather than participant-created in a critical ethnography of coaching practice. Meanwhile, Cope, Harvey, and Kirk (2015) and Lee and Corsby (2021) used visual methods to capture athletes' perspectives and experiences of sport coaching. Therefore, to our knowledge, Szedlak, Smith, and Callary (2020) is the only study that authentically used creative methods to explore the experiences of coaches. Moreover, these studies provided limited insight into the practicalities of deploying creative methods. Thus, by reflecting on our engagement with PR and creative methods, we provide insight into employing such methods with non-heterosexual coaches.

The study

Given the gap in the literature, this methodological insight stems from a doctoral study aimed to identify the work-related experiences of non-heterosexual coaches, with intention to co-produce recommendations. A transformative paradigm-informed philosophy guides the research. Central to this paradigm is power, which must be addressed throughout the research process, emphasising that the community should be involved in methodological decisions (Mertens, 2007). As the lead researcher identifies as non-heterosexual, yet not a coach, PR was adopted, positioning the coaches as the experts (Spencer & Molnár, 2022). Participants ($n = 14$) were adult, non-heterosexual sports coaches, who had between 2 and 30 years of coaching experience (ranging from grassroots to elite level). While the umbrella term, 'non-heterosexual', may be perceived as perpetuating participants' homogeneity (Caudwell, 2014), non-heterosexual is often used in research (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2012) and includes those outside of heteronormativity, but not necessarily within defined categories of sexuality (Browne, 2005). This enabled individuals across the LGBTQI+ spectrum of sexualities and genders to participate. It was of particular importance to include a broad range of coaches in response to the paucity of research, and to reach beyond the singular category of sexuality and gender approach dominant in previous studies (e.g., lesbian women coaches). Both volunteers and paid coaches were invited to participate if they coached within one of the UK-recognised National Governing Bodies and sports (Sport England, 2023).

The challenges of implementing PR and creative methods were quick to manifest, as some of the requirements for doctoral studies were not well aligned with PR (Spaaij, Schlenker, Jeanes, & Oxford, 2018), which promotes discussions and decision-making with participants throughout the research (Klocker, 2012). Consequently, the main contours of the research proposal were initially created by the lead researcher after regular discussions with the supervisory team. Additionally, PR that includes creative methods often uses workshops or group collaborations which require participants' identities to be revealed. However, given the sensitive nature of this research, safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were prioritised, which prevented group work and collaboration. Although it is important to note that in practice, no project is expected to completely follow PR ideals (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993).

Alternative approaches were considered, with a key consideration being the maintenance of the coaches' agency. Consequently, the proposed data production methods included; 1) individual creative methods (visual or narrative), 2) semi-structured interviews, and 3) online open letters. Rationales for these methodological options are as follows. Offering a range of options for self-expression is essential for PR, and the participants were invited to engage with methods of their choice to produce data that centred on their experiences. Firstly, like Fitzgerald, Stride, and Enright (2021), we anticipated that creative methods may be more appealing than traditional ones. Methods could be arts-based, such as a drawing, collage, or photographs; or narrative such as a poem, story, or journal entry (Broussine, 2008; Mannay, 2015). Within this research, the participants had the opportunity to use a medium of their choice to respond to, "what are your experiences as a non-heterosexual coach?" before elaborating upon their creation and experiences within an interview. Alternatively, as the participants' preferences were at the forefront of data production, coaches were able to opt for a more traditional method, that being a semi-structured interview (face-to-face or online). Finally, considering anonymity and confidentiality, the coaches could create an anonymous open letter. This option was included as some of the coaches might not be open about their sexuality in their profession, and previous literature is dominated by "out" individuals and their experiences, resulting in the absence of these voices. Therefore, coaches were given the option to create an anonymous open letter online, addressed to their manager or colleagues, centred on their experience of the coaching profession. The intention was to enhance access to more diverse, intersectional populations, including "hidden" populations, especially those who wished to remain anonymous (Hammond, 2018). Since this option provided an opportunity for coaches to contribute without having direct contact with the researcher, and having read about the implementation of this method within other sensitive nature research (Aldridge, 2015), the first

author was optimistic regarding the potential of this method. Despite the success of reflective letter writing in previous coaching research (Szedlak, Smith, & Callary, 2020), surprisingly, there was no uptake for this method. In fact, there emerged a range of challenges around engagement with creative methods by coaches not explicitly discussed in other studies, which will be reflected upon below.

Despite not being the focus of this paper, it should be acknowledged that sensitive nature research often results in small sample sizes (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2022). Additionally, it must be emphasised that there is no known statistic for the number of LGBTQI+ coaches within the UK, despite having this data for other identity categories, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, and age (UK Coaching, 2022). Therefore, we were unable to anticipate how many coaches fit the criterion and estimate the number of potential participants. Nevertheless, following ethical approval, 21 coaches responded to the calls for participants via social media. However, across different points of the process some of the coaches disengaged, thus, 14 engaged in data production. None formally withdrew, however, they did not respond to follow up emails, and consequently, we accepted that they no longer wished to participate. Due to their disengagement, we were unable to ascertain reasons why this occurred.

Introductory calls were organised to provide participants with further information regarding the research process and enabled them to ask questions. The data production options were explained with the intent of aligning the data collection method to the coaches' preferences, while ensuring the research question was answered (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018). Despite their appreciation for the multiple options, the coaches frequently mentioned time restrictions, particularly in relation to their role as a coach, which limited their willingness to engage in "time consuming" creative methods. The demands of coaching are frequently emphasised within research (Corsby, Jones, & Lane, 2022; Kenttä, Bentzen, Dieffenbach, & Olusoga, 2020), so this came as no surprise. However, despite being aware of this challenge prior to commencement, the impact of time upon coaches' willingness to engage with creative methods was underestimated. Alongside time, the coaches mentioned other reasons such as (a perceived lack of) creativity, with firm statements declaring their uncreativity. Despite these methods being utilised as a tool for expression rather than an expected masterpiece, the comfort of the coaches was a priority, and therefore, the first author did not push for these methods, rather expanded upon the options. For those who lack confidence in their creative abilities, creative methods can sometimes cause embarrassment (Kearney & Hyle, 2004), providing further rationale for promoting participants' self-selection. Largely the coaches demonstrated an inclination for interviews, due to the familiarity of these methods, and their preference for verbalising

experiences. Moreover, as verbal communication is an integral component of coaching, the coaches' familiarity with and preference for this method may be expected.

As a result, 12 coaches opted for interviews, and 2 engaged with creative methods, both utilising narrative methods (one created a poem, and the other created three limericks). Interestingly, limericks were not discussed within the introductory call, it was the coach themselves that initiated this method. Contributing to the natural generalisability and resonance of a research project (Smith & McGannon, 2018), narrative methods often evoke emotions whereby readers can relate to or empathise with the experiences shared (Armitage & Ramsay, 2020). We demonstrate this by including two of the creations below, alike the work of Keyes and Gearity (2011). The poem and limerick remain unedited and are presented as they were written.

Coaches' creations

Then and now...

Then, my face didn't fit.

They were confused who I should be coaching. And what I could do. What I should do.

Whether my short hair, no makeup, "blokeish" way was Ok for their little princesses.

Parents questioned whether I was a valid role model.

Parents questioned whether I was present in the changing room after training.

Whether I watched them in the showers.

Whether I watched them in the showers.

Now, I "pass".

No-one asks. Everyone accepts.

But now they look for role models for their enby¹ youth.

They look for queer people to inspire their kids.

To coach them in inclusive, accepting ways.

To make them feel happy in their own skins.

People that can walk the walk, that have "been there", that know.

That they can add our own happy labels to, and pigeonhole in convenient boxes.

Now my face should fit.

Fuck that.

Claudette (she/they)

No one knew that their coach was pan,

They saw him as just a white man,

So hiding away,

His life was a little grey,

Apart from his pink silk caftan.

Loki (they/he)

In particular, upon reading Claudette's poem, we were amazed; the poem resonated deeply, capturing her experiences emotively, and in a different way than might have been achievable in a traditional interview setting (Armitage & Ramsay, 2020). Both these coaches engaged positively with

creative methods, with Loki emphasising that limericks enabled them to use humour which “speaks volumes”. Thus, emphasising the value of creative methods, particularly regarding sensitive topics, or experiences of marginalised groups. While creative methods can be used as stand-alone methods of data production, in this research the participants’ creations were received prior to the interview and were used as a methodological tool, by unpacking them within the interviews to aid interpretation. This encouraged collaborative meaning-making between the researcher and the coaches (Bagnoli, 2009; Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011). For instance, Claudette expanded upon her poetry by emphasising the predatory stereotype that is perpetuated within sport for non-heterosexual individuals (line 6). Moreover, Claudette explained that despite being pansexual, due to having a boyfriend, she was perceived as being heterosexual and therefore “passes” (line 8). The interview also enabled Loki to explain their understanding of whiteness as a gendered term (line 2), which may not have been interpreted this way without elaboration. The limerick illuminated that they were not “out” as a coach, yet they provided clarification that their sexuality was not actively hidden. Additionally, the coaches’ creations prompted topics which may not have emerged otherwise. For example, another of Loki’s limericks provided insight into a previous partner attending their coaching environment, despite Loki emphasising throughout that they were not out within coaching. The limerick revealed the complexities of visibility and presumed heteronormativity, as Loki was with a transwoman, which then sparked a fruitful discussion.

Only 2 of the 14 coaches chose to engage with creative methods; however, I was not frustrated or disappointed by the lack of uptake. I have long accepted that qualitative research is a messy endeavour (Cook, 2009) and overtly counselled myself to have no expectation of how many coaches might opt for creative methods. Conversely, I was grateful for the participants’ willingness to take part in the research particularly due to the sensitive topic and making time within the demanding profession of coaching (Corsby, Jones, & Lane, 2022). Additionally, I appreciated the coaches’ trust and openness regarding their experiences, which went beyond what I had anticipated. This is demonstrated within a reflective note I had written during data production:

The participant that I interviewed today opened up about a lot of personal experiences that have occurred in their life – it felt as though this was something they had been wanting to express for a long time, and I think that the interviews enable participants to do this. Each time I conduct interviews I am surprised at how much the participants divulge to me, I am hoping this is a reflection of the rapport that is built, and that the participants feel as though they can confide in me. [02/09/22]

In terms of giving agency to participants, PR is a pertinent approach to consider even though the majority opted for interviews in this study. The coaches' stories were fascinating, regardless of how they were portrayed (i.e., orally, or utilising creative methods). We would posit that with another group of coaches their selected methods for knowledge sharing might be different, due to individual preferences, and perceptions surrounding creative methods (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Furthermore, if we limited the methodological options, e.g., creative methods only, it may have prevented some coaches from participating and having their voices heard, due to their preference for traditional oral methods. Therefore, emphasising the importance of participants' agency within research.

After undertaking the initial analysis, participants were provided with the opportunity to reflect further about their experiences and whether the initial analysis represented their testimonies. Participants' involvement with analysis and related reflection may enhance the transferability and resonance of the data (Schinke, McGannon, Watson, Busanich, & Galily, 2013). The continuation of participation from the coaches in the latter steps of the research are yet to be confirmed. However, they have been enthusiastic throughout, and expressed their willingness to be contacted for further input. Therefore, despite the challenge of time when working with coaches, participatory approaches do have the potential to ensure that participants and their stories are at the forefront, rather than the purpose of data production.

Conclusion

Like other qualitative research approaches, PR is often acknowledged as messy (Cook, 2009), as demonstrated within these reflections. However, undertaking PR with non-heterosexual coaches ensures that the community is central to the research, which leads to richer knowledge. Indeed, the "messiness" of PR may simply reflect the messiness of human lives, and of sports coaching. The transparency of the messy processes within this paper provides authenticity, and reveals practical realities. Fitzgerald, Stride, and Enright (2021) advocated for the consideration of inclusion, participation, and empowerment in PR and the challenges they bring. As mentioned, potential challenges include time restrictions (particularly when working with coaches), the perceived lack of creativity, or previous experience of traditional methods. It must also be considered that participants may not want the level of responsibility and involvement in the research process as envisioned in PR. However, specifically working with excluded and/or marginalised communities provides insight into their needs and preferences, which is helpful to shape future policies or interventions focusing on diverse, intersectional groups (Smith,

Williams, Bone, & The Moving Social Work Co-production Collective, 2022). Other advantages include coaches having an autonomous voice that can be conveyed beyond traditional verbal means. As the voices of participants are dominant (unedited/uninterpreted), these testimonies can be used as stand-alone methods of data production or as aids in interviews, bridging the relational distance between the participants and researcher. Therefore, we emphasise that flexibility, adaptability, and alterations are essential to suit the needs of coaches and the research context.

Note

1. Enby (or otherwise NB) is a term that refers to non-binary.

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