

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

3 Beth Burgess¹, Győző Molnár¹, Don Vinson¹, and Emma Richardson¹

4 ¹University of Worcester (School of Sport and Exercise Science), Worcester, UK

5 ORCID iD and Twitter handles:

6 Beth Burgess: 0000-0002-2711-9998 / @_bethburgess

7 Győző Molnár: 0000-0003-1732-5672 / @GyozoMolnar

8 Don Vinson: 0000-0003-3116-4828 / @donaldvinson

9 Emma Richardson: 0000-0001-7409-778X / @emrichie11

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

25

26 Coaching literature is historically underpinned by the experiences of white, male,
27 heterosexual, non-disabled coaches (Zehnter et al., 2021), which does not reflect the
28 complex, intersectional identities of the UK sports coaching workforce. Recent literature
29 highlights the ongoing battles coaches experience regarding racism (Roche & Passmore,
30 2022), sexism (Norman & Simpson, 2022), homophobia, (Roberts et al., 2023), ableism
31 (Townsend et al., 2022) and intersectional oppressions (Clarkson et al., 2022). Yet
32 academic explorations of non-heterosexual coaches (i.e., coaches that identify as gay,
33 lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.) is limited globally, and within the UK (Norman,
34 2011; 2013). Moreover, literature on gender and sexual minorities in coaching is

1 dominated by traditional research methods (Krane and Barber, 2005; Kauer, 2009), e.g.,
2 interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups (Kara, 2015). While such methods remain
3 valuable, non-heterosexual communities may require methods that reduce power
4 inequalities between researchers and participants by engaging in non-verbal forms of
5 communication, completed how, when, and where individuals desire (Denzin et al.,
6 2023). Indeed, Jones et al. (2012) suggested that by expanding beyond existing
7 methodologies towards alternative creative means, scholars can examine the nuances
8 and complexities of coaching that may not be captured using traditional methods. This
9 article reflects upon the rationale, and realities of utilising PR and creative methods
10 within coaching research, particularly with minority groups.

11 *Participatory Research*

12 Participatory research (PR) differs to traditional research, being 'with', 'for' and 'by'
13 participants, rather than conducting it 'on them' (Chavalier & Buckles, 2013), with
14 intention to promote inclusion and recognise the diverse voices of individuals and
15 communities (Aldridge, 2014). PR has numerous meanings, common terms include co-
16 operative inquiry (Reason & Heron, 1995), co-production (Smith et al. 2022),
17 participatory (Aldridge, 2015), participatory action research (PAR; Greenwood et al.
18 1993), co-creation (Jull, Giles, & Graham, 2017), emancipatory (Barton, 2005),
19 transformative (Deshler & Selener, 1991), collaborative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997),
20 participatory appreciative action and reflection (PAAR; Ghaye et al. 2008), and
21 community-based participatory research (CBPR; Schinke et al. 2013). This list is not
22 exhaustive yet highlights the complexities of language-use regarding PR. PR designs
23 differ between objectives and methods (Conrad & Campbell, 2008), yet all prioritise the
24 lived experiences of participants, and the reflective role of researchers, moving away
25 from the traditional researcher role (i.e., driving and defining the research objectives,
26 questions, and design) towards participant empowerment (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995;
27 Spencer & Molnár, 2022). Within traditional approaches, while participants are
28 recognised for their contributions, pre-existing power imbalances are reinforced,
29 questioning whose knowledge is valued and disseminated (Spencer & Molnár, 2022).

30 Due to the collaborative approach, the role of the participants within PR is more
31 significant and may be more challenging dependent upon participant populations.
32 However, we, as researchers, are encouraged to seek empowering and equitable ways to
33 undertake research. For instance, in a coaching context, PR prioritises coaches' lived
34 experience and knowledge, and actively involves them in the research process by
35 encouraging them to have agency over how they share their experiences (Aldridge,
36 2015). Creative methods (CM) lend themselves well to PR (Wiles, Clark, & Prosser,
37 2011), enabling participants to become co-creators of meaning, blurring the traditional
38 divide between researcher and participants (Grisoni, 2008). Accordingly, the methods
39 outlined are data production procedures, where knowledge is 'produced with'
40 participants rather than 'collected from' them (Mannay, 2015).

1 *Creative Methods*

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

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

29 Within qualitative research, there appears to be an increase in discourse surrounding
30 creative methods, alongside a rise in/shift towards less conventional research methods
31 (Aldridge, 2015). While creative methods are still marginally employed in coaching
32 research, previous literature has incorporated visual methods, e.g., photographs (Jones et
33 al., 2012; Lee & Corsby, 2021) and drawings (Cope et al., 2015), and narrative methods,
34 e.g., letters (Szedlak et al., 2020). Jones et al. (2012) utilised visual methods for
35 researcher-created data rather than participant-created in a critical ethnography of
36 coaching practice. Meanwhile, Cope et al. (2015) and Lee & Corsby (2021) used visual
37 methods to capture athletes' perspectives and experiences of sport coaching. Therefore,
38 to our knowledge, Szedlak et al. (2020) is the only study that authentically used creative
39 methods to explore the experiences of coaches. Moreover, these studies provided
40 limited insight into the practicalities of deploying creative methods. Thus, by reflecting

1 on our engagement with PR and creative methods, we provide insight into employing
2 such methods with non-heterosexual coaches.

3 *The study*

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

23 The challenges of implementing PR and creative methods were quick to manifest, as
24 some of the requirements for doctoral studies were not well aligned with PR (Spaaij et al.
25 2018), which promotes discussions and decision-making with participants throughout
26 the research (Klocker, 2012). Consequently, the main contours of the research proposal
27 were initially created by the lead researcher after regular discussions with the
28 supervisory team. Additionally, PR that includes creative methods often uses workshops
29 or group collaborations which require participants' identities to be revealed. However,
30 given the sensitive nature of this research, safeguarding the confidentiality and
31 anonymity of participants was prioritised, which prevented group work and
32 collaboration. Although it is important to note that in practice, no project is expected to
33 completely follow PR ideals (Park et al. 1993).

34 Alternative approaches were considered, with a key consideration being the
35 maintenance of the coaches' agency. Consequently, the proposed data production
36 methods included 1) individual creative methods (visual or narrative), 2) semi-structured
37 interviews, and 3) online open letters. Rationales for these methodological options are as
38 followed. Offering a range of options for self-expression is essential for PR, and the
39 participants were invited to engage with methods of their choice to produce data that
40 centred on their experiences. Firstly, like Fitzgerald et al. (2021), we anticipated that

1 creative methods may be more appealing than traditional ones. Methods could be arts-
2 based, such as a drawing, collage, or photographs; or narrative such as a poem, story, or
3 journal entry (Broussine, 2008; Mannay, 2015). Within this, the participants had the
4 opportunity to use a medium of their choice to respond to “what are your experiences as
5 a non-heterosexual coach?” before elaborating upon their creation and experiences
6 within an interview. Alternatively, as the participants’ preferences were at the forefront
7 of data production, coaches were able to opt for a more traditional method, being a
8 semi-structured interview (face-to-face or online). Finally, considering anonymity and
9 confidentiality, the coaches could create an anonymous open letter. This option was
10 included as some of the coaches might not be open about their sexuality in their
11 profession, and previous literature is dominated by ‘out’ individuals and their
12 experiences, resulting in the absence of these voices. Therefore, coaches were offered
13 to create an anonymous open letter online, addressed to their manager or colleagues,
14 centred on their experience of the coaching profession. The intention was to enhance
15 access to more diverse, intersectional populations, including ‘hidden’ populations,
16 especially those who wished to remain anonymous (Hammond, 2018). Since this option
17 provided an opportunity for coaches to contribute without having direct contact with
18 the researcher and having read about the implementation of this method within other
19 sensitive nature research (Aldridge, 2015), I was optimistic regarding the potential of this
20 method. Despite the success of reflective letter writing in previous coaching research
21 (Szedlak et al. 2020), surprisingly, there was no uptake for this method. In fact, there
22 emerged a range of challenges around engagement with creative methods by coaches
23 not explicitly discussed in other studies, which will be reflected upon below.

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

36 Introductory calls were organised to provide participants with further information
37 regarding the research process and enabled them to ask questions. The data production
38 options were explained, with the intent of aligning the data collection method to the
39 coaches’ preferences, while ensuring the research question was answered (Swartz &
40 Nyamnjoh, 2018). Despite their appreciation for the multiple options, the coaches

1 frequently mentioned time restrictions, particularly in relation to their role as a coach,
2 which limited their willingness to engage in 'time consuming' creative methods. The
3 demands of coaching are frequently emphasised within research (Kenttä et al., 2020;
4 Corsby et al. 2022), so this comes as no surprise. However, despite being aware of this
5 challenge prior to commencement, the impact of time upon coaches' willingness to
6 engage with creative methods was underestimated. Alongside time, the coaches
7 mentioned other reasons, such as (a perceived lack of) creativity, with firm statements
8 declaring their uncreativity. Despite these methods being utilised as a tool for
9 expression, rather than an expected masterpiece, the comfort of the coaches was a
10 priority, and therefore, I did not push for these methods, rather expanded upon the
11 options. For those who lack confidence in their creative abilities, creative methods can
12 sometimes cause embarrassment (Kearney & Hyle, 2004), providing further rationale for
13 promoting participants' self-selection. Largely the coaches demonstrated an inclination
14 for interviews, due to the familiarity of these methods, and their preference for
15 verbalising experiences. Moreover, as verbal communication is an integral component of
16 coaching, the coaches' familiarity with and preference for this method may be expected.

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

26 ***Then and now...***

27 Then, my face didn't fit.
28 They were confused who I should be coaching. And what I could do. What I should do.
29 Whether my short hair, no makeup, 'blokeish' way was Ok for their little princesses.
30 Parents questioned whether I was a valid role model.
31 Parents questioned whether I was present in the changing room after training.
32 Whether I watched them in the showers.
33 Whether I watched them in the showers.

34 Now, I "pass".
35 No-one asks. Everyone accepts.

36 But now they look for role models for their enby¹ youth.
37 They look for queer people to inspire their kids.

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

1 To coach them in inclusive, accepting ways.
2 To make them feel happy in their own skins.
3 People that can walk the walk, that have “been there”, that know.
4 That they can add our own happy labels to, and pigeonhole in convenient boxes.
5 Now my face should fit.
6 Fuck that.

7 Claudette (she/they)

8 No one knew that their coach was pan,
9 They saw him as just a white man,
10 So hiding away,
11 His life was a little grey,
12 Apart from his pink silk caftan.

13 Loki (they/he)

14 In particular, upon reading Claudette’s poem, I was amazed; the poem resonated deeply,
15 capturing her experiences emotively, and in a different way than might have been
16 achievable in a traditional interview setting (Armitage and Ramsay, 2020). Both these
17 coaches engaged positively with creative methods, with Loki emphasising that limericks
18 enabled them to use humour which “speaks volumes”. Thus, emphasising the value of
19 creative methods, particularly regarding sensitive topics, or experiences of marginalised
20 groups. While creative methods can be used as stand-alone methods of data production,
21 in this research the participants’ creations were received prior to the interview and were
22 used as a methodological tool, by unpacking them within the interviews to aid
23 interpretation. This encouraged collaborative meaning-making between the researcher
24 and the coaches (Bagnoli, 2009; Theron et al., 2011). For instance, Claudette expanded
25 upon her poetry by emphasising the predatory stereotype that is perpetuated within
26 sport for non-heterosexual individuals (line 6). Moreover, Claudette explained that
27 despite being pansexual, due to having a boyfriend, she was perceived as being
28 heterosexual, and therefore ‘passes’ (line 8). The interview also enabled Loki to explain
29 their understanding of whiteness as a gendered term (line 2), which may not have been
30 interpreted this way without elaboration. The limerick illuminated that they were not
31 ‘out’ as a coach, yet they provided clarification that their sexuality was not actively
32 hidden. Additionally, the coaches’ creations prompted topics which may not have
33 emerged otherwise. For example, another of Loki’s limericks provided insight into a
34 previous partner attending their coaching environment, despite Loki emphasising
35 throughout that they were not out within coaching. The limerick revealed the
36 complexities of visibility and presumed heteronormativity, as Loki was with a
37 transwoman, which then sparked a fruitful discussion.

38 Only two of the 14 coaches chose to engage with creative methods; however, I was not
39 frustrated or disappointed by the lack of uptake. I have long accepted that qualitative
40 research is a messy endeavour (Cook, 2009) and overtly counselled myself to have no

1 expectation of how many coaches might opt for creative methods. Conversely, I was
2 grateful for the participants' willingness to take part in the research particularly due to
3 the sensitive topic and making time within the demanding profession of coaching
4 (Corsby et al. 2022). Additionally, I appreciated the coaches' trust and openness
5 regarding their experiences, which went beyond what I had anticipated. This is
6 demonstrated within a reflective note I had written during data production:

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

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

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

33 *Conclusion*

34 Like other qualitative research approaches, PR is often acknowledged as messy (Cook,
35 2009), as demonstrated within these reflections. However, undertaking PR with non-
36 heterosexual coaches ensures that the community is central to the research, which leads
37 to richer knowledge. Indeed, the 'messiness' of PR may simply reflect the messiness of
38 human lives, and of sport coaching. The transparency of the messy processes within this
39 paper provides authenticity and reveals practical realities. Fitzgerald et al. (2021)

1 advocated for the consideration of inclusion, participation, and empowerment in PR and
2 the challenges they bring. As mentioned, potential challenges include time restrictions
3 (particularly when working with coaches), the perceived lack of creativity, or previous
4 experience of traditional methods. It must also be considered that participants may not
5 want the level of responsibility and involvement in the research process as envisioned in
6 PR. However, specifically working with excluded and/or marginalised communities
7 provides insight into their needs and preferences, which is helpful to shape future
8 policies or interventions focusing on diverse, intersectional groups (Smith et al. 2022).
9 Other advantages include coaches having an autonomous voice that can be conveyed
10 beyond traditional verbal means. As the voices of participants are dominant
11 (unedited/uninterpreted), these testimonies can be used as stand-alone methods of data
12 production or as aids in interviews, bridging the relational distance between the
13 participants and researcher. Therefore, we emphasise that flexibility, adaptability, and
14 alterations are essential to suit the needs of coaches and the research context.

15

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