A Novice Strength and Conditioning Coach’s Experiences of the Complex and Contested Nature of Working in Professional Sport

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Masters by Research, Sport, Health and Exercise Science

by

Robert David Dawson (BSc Hons)

October 2016
Abstract

This thesis investigates a novice strength and conditioning coach’s experiences of the complex and contested nature of working in professional sport. It begins by exploring the existing literature based in the paradigms of (post-)positivism, poststructuralism and interpretivism. It then discusses the dearth of literature written from an interpretivist perspective and argues the need for this to be rectified.

The main body of the thesis uses semi-structured interviews to study the experiences of a neophyte strength and conditioner throughout his time as volunteer, as an intern and as full-time employee of a top-flight, professional sports team. The results present a contested story infused with the effects of power structures and relationships. The interpretation of which engages with the work of Kelchtermans and colleagues (1993; 2002a; 2002b; 2005; 2009), and Goffman (1959). The thesis concludes that in order to advance the strength and conditioning profession there needs to be more research done from a similar sociological perspective.
## Contents

Abstract ....................................................................................................................................................... 2

Contents ....................................................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 1. Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 6
  1.1 Personal reflection ............................................................................................................................... 6
  1.2 Academic rationale ............................................................................................................................ 12
  1.3 Aims, research questions and significance of the study ................................................................. 15

Chapter 2. Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 16
  2.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 16
  2.2 Traditional underpinnings of strength and conditioning knowledge ................................................. 16
    2.2.1 Positivism: The dominant paradigm of strength and conditioning literature .......................... 16
    2.2.2 Training load ............................................................................................................................... 19
    2.2.3 Biomechanics ............................................................................................................................. 21
    2.2.4 Physiological responses to training ............................................................................................ 23
    2.2.5 Periodisation .............................................................................................................................. 26
    2.2.6 Post-positivism ........................................................................................................................... 27
    2.2.7 Critique of positivism and post-positivism .................................................................................. 29
  2.3 Alternate paradigms in strength and conditioning ............................................................................. 31
    2.3.1 Poststructuralism ....................................................................................................................... 31
    2.3.2 Interpretivism ............................................................................................................................. 33
  2.4 Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 37

Chapter 3. Methodology ........................................................................................................................... 38
  3.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 38
  3.2 Locating the study within a research paradigm .................................................................................... 38
  3.3 Narrative research ............................................................................................................................. 41
  3.4 The participant – purposive sampling ............................................................................................... 42
  3.5 Qualitative Interviews – A Rationale ................................................................................................. 44
  3.6 Collecting the narrative interview data .............................................................................................. 48
  3.7 Data analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 50
  3.8 Judging the study ............................................................................................................................... 54

Chapter 4. Results ....................................................................................................................................... 56
  4.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 56
4.2 Finding strength and conditioning: ‘I always had an interest in how the body works’ ..............................................................57

4.3 Volunteering at the Elsinoire Eagles: ‘Get your image across early’ .................59

4.4 Internship at Illyria Warriors: The Road to Employment ..............................64
  4.4.1 Getting “onside” with key staff ........................................64
  4.4.2 Player power ..................................................................69
  4.4.3 The role he was waiting for ..............................................71

4.5 Employment ........................................................................74
  4.5.1 Aims, role and expectation ..............................................74
  4.5.2 Staff relationships: “The door’s always open” ......................76
  4.5.3 Losing the confidence in your mentor .................................80
  4.5.4 Trust ............................................................................87

Chapter 5. Discussion ..................................................................96
  5.1 Introduction .......................................................................96
  5.2 Developing professional self-understanding ...............................96
  5.3 Impression management ....................................................102
    5.3.1 Presenting the ‘correct’ image .........................................102
    5.3.2 “Teams” .......................................................................105
  5.4 Micro-political literacy, negative self-understanding and vulnerability ...107

Chapter 6. Conclusion ................................................................112
  6.1 Introduction .......................................................................112
  6.2 Summary of major findings ................................................112
  6.3 Contribution and Future Research .......................................114

Reference List ......................................................................118
Acknowledgements

To the following people who have provided support, guidance and love in my life over the completion of this thesis: Phil Marshall, Lee Nelson, Oliver Browne, Matthew Rimmington, Tom Maughan, Crawford Matthews, Ken McVey, Tommy Laughton, Paul Hatton, Matthew Fawcett, the players I have played with, the athletes I have coached and the wonderful people who are no longer near but have blessed my life to no end.

Most importantly, to Mum, Dad and Vik.
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Personal reflection

The struggles that my parents faced during my childhood rang loudly. Their marrying young and fiscal disadvantage was compounded by Margaret Thatcher’s introduction of the poll tax. Growing up in this northern, working class family in the early 1990s was bereft of the luxuries to which some, more affluent school friends were accustomed. Reflecting on our childhoods, my older sister remarks that the outlets we used for escapism were different; she sank into the works of Colin Dann whereas I channelled myself into the wonder of sport. The lack of material and monetary security and emotional turbulence at home was juxtaposed by sport, which was the constant that never failed to deliver. Sport and competition was and remains the equivalent of The Animals of Farthing Wood for my sister. It was a tool that allowed me to be whomever I wanted, hero or villain. But more importantly it served as a means to express the full extent of all my emotions and frustrations in an acceptable manner; it was the social and moral anchor this angry boy needed, and the Muscular Christians of the Thomas Arnold era would have been proud. It was the physical aspect of sport that the teenage author marvelled at, from Roy Keane’s leadership, to Mariusz Pudzianowski’s brute strength and Kobe Bryant’s determination, and I devoted myself to watching and playing any sport available to me. More recently, however, I have begun to understand the nature of sport as much more than an act of competition between people, but as a societal pillar. My love for sport, alongside my interest in its role in society, are the reasons why I chose to study at university; I wanted to live every day doing something I loved and, more importantly, I wanted to help other people do the same.

During my second year as an undergraduate I found the outlet for this passion as I was introduced to the profession of strength and conditioning during the Introduction to...
Training Theory module; a core subject for all Sports Coaching and Performance students. To work in an area that could enable me to work in elite sport helping world class athletes improve their performance had its attractions. I sought advice from the tutor, a well-established strength coach in his own right, and several weeks and phone calls later I landed the opportunity to volunteer at a local, top-flight professional rugby league club. After an initial meeting with Charlie, the Head of Strength and Conditioning, and Liam, the Head Coach of the youth teams, it was decided that I would assist with the delivery of training with the reserve team for the remainder of the season.¹ I attended training every day and was assigned small tasks such as delivering warm-ups and cool-downs, offering advice on on-field play and assisting the learning of weight lifting technique in the gym. I deliberately asked as many questions of Charlie and Liam as possible regarding their coaching practices and rationales – I did not want to turn up and get lost in the background; I wanted to put myself in the best possible position to learn from those around me. Everything was running smoothly, positive relationships with the staff were developing fast, the players were a joy to coach, and I felt that with every session I attended my stake in the team was being strengthened.

However, it was not long before I encountered an alternate, darker side of strength and conditioning coaching. Charlie continuously tested and questioned my knowledge on a daily basis and asked me to plan and deliver a low level, fifteen-minute speed and agility session for the team to introduce them to some basic principles. Eager to show my knowledge I re-read a number of textbooks and ensured my drills and rationale were as up-to-date as possible. The day came and, as usual, I arrived early to set up. I made sure the equipment was colour coordinated and I double checked the placement of everything. I felt

¹ Throughout this thesis all names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
confident; I had coached these drills a number of times before and knew that I could impress the coaches with my knowledge and application.

November: 2009 – “We’ve all got to start somewhere”

Charlie and I stood on the field waiting for Liam and the players to arrive. I had described my session plan and aims of the drills, which he approved of and seemed to be impressed by: “sounds good to me mate, just make sure you demonstrate everything and you’ll be fine”, he responded. After discussing various strength and conditioning principles, Charlie thanked me for the past few weeks and for showing commitment to the team: “I can tell you really want to be here, which is great, not many students stick around for too long”. It felt like a pivotal moment. I was proving myself as a reliable member of ancillary staff and was happy that Charlie and I seemed to have bonded since my arrival. The players arrived as a group and I immediately took charge and, with Charlie and Liam looking on, led them through a warm-up in preparation for the session. After a quick water break and with the players lined up in front of me, I began: “Right lads! I’m going to go through some specific drills to help us with our sprint technique. What’s important today is not how fast we move but how well we move. Quality of movement is key!” I repeated these words over again as the drill began, not only for their benefit but to remind the coaches what I was aiming for. The players started brightly: “keep your head up!”, “don’t be afraid to slow down!”, and “concentrate on your technique” I shouted, asserting my authority. Spurred on by the conversation with Charlie I felt in my element; slowly securing my position within the club, coaching a professional team, seeing the players enjoy my drills and work hard for me was a great feeling. I circled the players, watching the drill, my voice loud with authority.

“Hold it there for a minute boys! Stop what you’re doing!”
I looked around and saw Charlie charging into the drill holding four or five balls in his hands. What was wrong? What has he seen? “We’re not in the Olympics are we? Let’s get some balls involved and speed this up!” I was dumbfounded. My face turned red, my chest tightened. Not in the Olympics? He said my drills were fine! How could they not be? I had done my research! For the next five minutes, he completely took over. I stood on the side of the drill, trying to offer occasional positive word to the players; “nice” and “good” was all I could muster. Any authority I previously had was lost. I felt like a spare part, sanding awkwardly looking on, trying to avoid eye contact. All I could do was watch as he ran around, over enthusiastically shouting the exact instructions I had just been giving. It seemed to go on forever. I saw Liam begin clapping some players on in encouragement from the corner of my eye. As he finished, Charlie called the players together: “Alright boys good start, not a bad drill by Rob but we play the game with a ball, we can forgive him though can’t we boys? He’s a scientist and never played rugby before but we’ve all got to start somewhere haven’t we?” My heart sank. I felt my eyes widen and my jaw clench. A scientist? What’s that supposed to mean?! The players had a chuckle amongst themselves and I tried to laugh along with them to save any face I had left; I did not want to show them I was crestfallen. I remained quiet for the rest of the session. I stood still on the side-line, hands in my pockets staring into space as Liam coached the players through a mini-game whilst Charlie acted as referee. The players ran over and I held up the water bottle carrier, refusing to run across to them as usual. “Thanks scientist”, one of the players said menacingly. I turned my back and acted as though I had not heard anything, but I was hurt.

The next few days I spent reflecting on what had happened. If he did not like what I was doing, surely he could have told me after I had described what I had planned? I could
not understand why he would act in that way. I knew my drills were correct from everything
I had studied; he approved them beforehand so why had he publicly embarrassed me? Did
he set me up to fail on purpose? I became paranoid about his motives and worried about
retaining credibility in front of the players. However, it was the derogatory intent in
demoting me to mere “scientist” that really bothered me. What did that mean? I knew
Charlie did not have a degree and yet had been a conditioner in the top-flight of rugby
league for over ten years, but why did he demean me in this way? Did he do this to re-assert
himself as superior to me in front of the players? Was he threatened by my knowledge and
enthusiasm? I began to question my methods. Had my university education left me out of
touch with the real world of sports coaching? The whole situation shook my confidence and
made me realise that strength and conditioning coaching would not be as straightforward as I
had imagined from my textbooks.

I resolved not to approach Charlie about what had happened. I did not want to come
across as ‘soft’. I knew he would see that as a sign of weakness, an indication that I could
not cope with the rough, jocular, masculine nature of the club and the wider sport. I worried
about the consequences of potentially challenging him on his actions. The fear of being
released was too great a threat; I needed the experience if I was going to have any realistic
chance of securing a job after completing my degree. Instead, in the proceeding weeks, I
became as unnoticeable as possible during training; I shied away from offering to take drills
and warm-ups, becoming much less vocal, no longer eager to display my knowledge. I did
not want to be in the spotlight again, not until the dust had settled, or at least the novelty of
the players referring to me as “the scientist” had worn off. I continued to laugh along with
the jokes between Charlie and Liam, shook their hands at the end of every session and never
forgot to thank them for their time, but things were different. I had learned that coaching was
highly contested, and working alongside other professionals was not going to be the straightforward, sharing of knowledge and of common goals that I imagined. The landscape was unpredictable so I began to censor myself and cover my own back and promised myself that I would not be caught out so easily again.

This experience was the first of many that had a great impact on my coaching practice throughout my seven-year career. For example, I suffered from hearing my methods be unfairly criticised by co-workers during my first meeting with a new head coach. The accumulation of these experiences have led me to a deeper understanding of the nature of strength and conditioning coaching; a nature that is not only about the uncomplicated transfer of knowledge and the teaching of exercise technique, but one permeated by political action and personal agendas. Whilst acquiring an appropriate grounding in the scientific principles which underpin strength and condition coaching is important, I have found the ability to positively manage social interaction and the relationships between myself, the athletes I coach and the colleagues I work alongside, is imperative for success as a strength and conditioning coach. The accumulation of my experiences, alongside the lack of sociologically grounded research in strength and conditioning have formed the basis for this thesis. By studying the field through a sociological lens, it is hoped that this work will better prepare aspiring strength and conditioning coaches for their transition into the profession.
1.2 Academic rationale

In both team and individual sports, the strength and conditioning profession has seen continuous and rapid refinement since its humble beginnings during the 1960s (Arthur & Bailey, 1998). From its infancy, the person(s) who served in the capacity of the strength and conditioning coach has advanced from being a member of the coaching staff who assumed the role as part of their overall duties, to individuals with specialised, expert knowledge (Layden, 1998). As the desire to achieve greater sporting performance saw the need for such professionals to be employed at the club level, this eventually led to the formation of the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) in 1978 and the more recently established United Kingdom Strength and Conditioning Association (UKSCA) in 2004, with their aims of leading the profession of strength and conditioning (Radcliffe, 2013; Tod, Bond & Lavallee, 2012). The formation of professional accreditation with both organisations has provided aspiring strength and conditioning coaches with direction, focussing learning towards the professional competencies required in order to succeed as a practitioner. For example, the NSCA requires aspiring strength and conditioning coaches to be formally examined in the broad areas of anatomy, exercise physiology, biomechanics, programme design, nutrition, exercise technique, organisation and administration and testing and evaluation (Triplett et al., 2009). Additionally, the UKSCA demands similar displays of competency as accreditation requires formal examination covering similar topics alongside various practical coaching demonstrations (UKSCA, 2016). Whilst there can be no doubting the importance that these areas have for ensuring professional competence, what is noticeable by its absence from professional accreditation curricula is any reference to the social dimensions of practice and the vital role interactions with key stakeholders such as athletes and colleagues play in professional practice.
Alongside attaining professional accreditation with such governing bodies, academic journals such as *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* (JSCR) and *The Strength and Conditioning Journal* (SCJ) offer thousands of articles which continuously offer cutting-edge research and up-to-date practice methods. The majority of this literature is based on empirically evidencing cause and effect relationships of numerous training variables. Competent strength and conditioning practice is largely defined by the efficacy of a training programme to improve athlete’s strength, power, speed, hypertrophy, and metabolic conditioning based on quantifiable testing (Beachle & Earle, 2008). There is no doubt that acquiring broad scientific knowledge of the physical parameters of sports performance is of critical importance for any strength and conditioning coach. However, it has recently been suggested that the retaining of such information does not adequately prepare strength and conditioning coaches for the social complexities of practice in professional sport (Mills & Gcarity, 2016). Somewhat similar to the NCSA and UKSCA, there is minimal regard amongst such strength and conditioning journals of the sociology of practice and how interactions between coaches, athletes and other stakeholders impact the coaching process.

Whilst there has been a steady proliferation of sociological research in sports coaching over recent years, there is a distinct lack of qualitative research on the sociological aspects of strength and conditioning practice (Mills & Gcarity, 2016). Whilst the profession inevitably demands a great amount of careful, linear planning (for example in the progression of an individuals or team’s abilities and cognitive processes), the delivery of essential criteria from coach to athlete is riddled with problematic and ambiguous discourse and based in social interaction (Cissik, Hendrick & Barnes, 2008). Although a number of authors have catalogued the everyday duties and responsibilities of strength and conditioners
(for example Deuhring, Feldmann & Ebben, 2009; Ebben & Blackard, 2001; Ebben, Caroll & Simenz, 2004; Gallo & De Marco, 2008; Massey, Vincent & Maneval, 2004), to date there is limited data which provides first-hand accounts of the subjective experiences of strength and conditioning coaches in the performance of their role. However, there are one or two notable exceptions, for example Garity and Mills (2013) applied theorist Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) to the first author’s experiences as a collegiate strength and conditioning coach. Additionally, Thompson, Potrac and Jones (2015) examined the micro-political experiences of a newly appointed fitness coach at an association football Premier League club in reference to Goffman’s (1959, 1963) writings on impression management and stigma, Kelchtermans’ (1993, 2009) micro-political perspective and Garfinkel’s (1956) notion of status degradation. Whilst these have provided some valuable, initial insights into the nature of strength and conditioning practice, a paucity of research into the socio-political challenges of this role remains.

In a similar vein to that of Potrac and Jones (2009a), the purpose of this thesis is to place strength and conditioning as a negotiated, contested activity which is grounded in micro-political power dimensions. Indeed, there is a current call for strength coaches to recognise that their work involves multiple power relationships with athletes, colleagues and administrators, with the profession increasingly described as a complex and not fully-rational social act (Garity, Hudson & Murray, 2014; Handcock & Cassidy, 2014). To address this lack of recognition, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the various sociological aspects of practice (Mills & Garity, 2016). The nature of strength and conditioning is much more complex than the understanding of how performance is related to physical preparation, and by providing an awareness of the broad social and political aspects
of coaching, new theoretical and practical understandings of the profession can be developed (Mills & Gearity, 2016).

1.3 Aims, research questions and significance of the study

The aim of this study is to explore a neophyte strength and conditioning coach’s subjective understanding of the socio-political nature of his workplace interactions. In particular, specific attention has been given to the participant’s understandings of their working relationships with key contextual stakeholders (head of strength and conditioning, the club manager, the club physiotherapist, other support staff and players) in the practice setting. Towards this end, qualitative interviews were used to explore the following research questions:

1. How did the participant subjectively experience his interactions and relationships with key contextual stakeholders?
2. What issues did the participant believe he faced in his working relationships with these individuals?
   a. How did he attempt to resolve these issues?
   b. Why did he choose to act in certain ways and not others?
3. What contextual and situational factors did the participant perceive impacted on his practice?
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a broad review of existing strength and conditioning literature and, more specifically, to critically analyse the various paradigmatic and methodological approaches taken by researchers from the field. Initially a discussion of strength and conditioning literature underpinned by the positivist paradigm will be presented. Some examples of work based in this paradigm will then be provided, addressing the most commonly considered aspects of strength and conditioning theory. After presenting a critique of this paradigm, alternative paradigms which have been used by researchers in this field will be detailed following the same protocol and will include the paradigms of post-positivism, post-structuralism and interpretivism.

2.2 Traditional underpinnings of strength and conditioning knowledge

2.2.1 Positivism: The dominant paradigm of strength and conditioning literature

Throughout the research process, the paradigmatic position chosen by researchers acts as a representation of their particular philosophical and theoretical beliefs about the contemplation and completion of their study (Mallet & Tinning, 2014). A paradigm is therefore seen as a set of basic beliefs that one uses to define the nature of the world, the way in which particular problems exist and to provide a set of agreements on how such problems can be investigated (Fraser & Robinson, 2004; Sparkes & Smith, 2002). According to Tracy (2013), a researcher’s paradigm can differ on the basis of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge) and methodology (strategies for
collecting and analysing data), and reflect certain values, beliefs and dispositions toward the social world (Mallet & Tinning, 2014).

When attempting to engage with a review of strength and conditioning literature, and indeed sports coaching research in general, one quickly learns that its community holds theory in high regard (Nelson, Potrac & Groom, 2014). Much of the research into strength and conditioning practice is derived from the physical sciences and has therefore been largely grounded in the positivist and post-positivist paradigms (Gearth & Mills, 2012). Positivism holds a realist ontological view; that the world is external and there is a single objective reality to any research phenomenon or situation regardless of the researcher’s perspective or belief (Donovan-Hill & Dibb, 2008; Mallet & Tinning, 2014). Epistemologically, positivists are objectivist and argue that cause and effect explanations can be discovered for all phenomena and assert that scientific statements are only meaningful if they can be proved true or false (Smith & Smoll, 2014). From a methodological standpoint, positivist research focuses on micro-level, lab-like experimentation which attempts to control as many variables as possible and are generally committed to quantitative research favouring numerical scores that can be subjected to statistical analysis (Kaboub, 2008; Smith & Smoll, 2014). Lastly, positivist data collectors believe that the nature of science is objective and self-correcting, yet human researchers themselves have weaknesses, liabilities and biases which should be corrected or minimised (Smith & Smoll, 2014). From this standpoint, it is regarded as unnecessary to discuss any personal attributes, thoughts or opinions and is often viewed as a mark of low credibility (Tracy, 2013). In this light, the overwhelming majority of strength and conditioning researchers have attempted to determine cause and effect relationships in relation to training stimuli. Such investigations have typically attempted to gather quantitative numerical data
and to subject this to statistical analysis in order to better understand the physical relationships which exist between variables. Their primary aim here has been to enhance understanding of the training and adaptation process, to allow for more effective training programming and improved competitive results.

The vast majority of strength and conditioning literature is athlete centred; that is, the focus is on improving the physical capacities of athlete(s) in order to improve performance by using a logical, systematic and unproblematic process. The basis of this principle was formed by endocrinologist Dr Hans Selye who published work regarding the various stages of affects that stress has on single cell organisms and has since been described as ‘the essential foundation of exercise physiology [as] the entirety of the discipline exists as extensions on Selye’s theory of biological adaptation’ (Kilgore, 2010, p.6). The ability of strength and conditioning coaches to manage stressors placed upon their athletes as a result of progressive overload, and the subsequent ability to adapt to these stressors and optimise their performance, has largely been based on a number of subject areas closely related to the natural science disciplines. These subject areas have sought to describe and catalogue the demands of a wide range of sports through the understanding of internal and external training load, to better understand the movement patterns and techniques used in sport through the study of biomechanics, to understand the physiological responses to a range of training methods, and lastly, to optimise the planning process to allow for adaptation through a process of periodisation. The following sections will now attempt to broadly cover each of these areas and provide relevant examples to explain their importance for strength and conditioning professionals and to demonstrate their overwhelmingly positivist outlook.
2.2.2 Training load

In order to adequately prescribe specific training parameters to an athlete, a strength and conditioning coach must first develop an in-depth understanding of the physical demands of the sport with which they are involved. Before attempting to devise a training programme, quantification of training and competition load must be prioritised in an attempt to develop sports specific training programmes, and can be investigated through various internal and external means of analysis (Gabbett, 2016). For example, Weaving et al. (2014) quantified the sessional training load of seventeen professional rugby league players over the course of two twelve-week preseason periods utilising heart rate, GPS, accelerometer and rate of perceived exertion (RPE). The authors investigated the effect of training mode on the relationship between internal loads: individualised training impulse, session RPE and external loads: body load, high speed distance and total impacts, during various training modes including “small-sided games”, “conditioning”, “skills”, “speed”, “strongman” and “wrestle”. The results suggested that the use of only a single internal or external training load measure could potentially lead to an underestimation of training dose and concluded that a combination of internal and external training load measures is required for optimal measurement of certain training modes.

The RPE system used in the aforementioned study is highly recognised as a reliable internal marker of intensity during exercise. For example, previous research has shown relationships between RPE and physiological markers of blood lactate response (Irving et al., 2006), VO2 (Eston et al., 2006) and heart rate (Lambert, 2008). Despite being developed as an alternative to measuring heart rate and to eliminate the need for athletes to wear heart rate monitors, heart rate monitoring is still commonly used as a means of assessing training and competition load (Halson, 2014). Indeed, it has been well documented that heart rate
demonstrates an almost linear relationship with VO2 over a range of steady-state submaximal exercise intensities and as such, many methods to quantify the internal training load are based on heart rate monitoring such as training impulse (TRIMP), heart rate recovery and heart rate variability (Halson, 2014; Impellizzeri et al., 2004; Pyne & Martin, 2011).

In terms of external training load, a number of technologies are available to strength and conditioning coaches. For example, time-motion analysis (TMA) consists of analysing performance to quantify the movement patterns and physiological demands of the sport and provides information on characteristics such as an athlete’s speed, duration of performed movements, distance covered, and work: rest ratios (Lopez et al., 2014). In addition, recent technology advancements have seen the use of global positioning system (GPS) devices to quantify movement demands during training and competition, as utilised by Weaving et al. (2014). With the advantage of being able to receive information in real time during performance, GPS is used to objectively quantify levels of external workloads and can be used in addition to internal workloads to characterize competition match play and establish training intensities. From a training perspective, a detailed understanding of individual performance demands for different playing positions within team sports can be studied, which enables the provision of individually tailored training programmes (Cummins et al., 2013). Finally, GPS can measure a number of variables at one time including distance travelled, speed of movements, frequency and intensity of impacts among others and offers a comprehensive, accurate and automated examination of player movements with authors having studied its use in Australian rules football (Coutts et al., 2010; Ritchie et al., 2016; Young, Herpner & Robbins, 2012), rugby league (Cummins, 2016; Gabbett & Gahan, 2016; Windt et al., 2016), rugby union (Cahill et al., 2013; Coughan et al., 2011; Sawby, Jones &
Comfort, 2016), cricket (Petersen et al., 2009; Petersen et al., 2010, Petersen et al., 2011), soccer (Gomez-Piriz, Jimenez-Reyes & Ruiz-Ruiz, 2011; Harley et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2013) and hockey (Gabbett, 2010; Jennings et al., 2012; Macleod et al., 2009).

2.2.3 Biomechanics

In understanding the internal and external training and competition demands, strength and conditioning coaches use this information to prescribe sport-specific exercises and training programmes to enhance their athlete’s performance. Exercises and drills must therefore be relevant to the demands of the sport and performed with sufficient intensity to elicit a positive training response without causing overtraining or a high risk of injury. To this end, a sound knowledge of biomechanics is important to understand the fine details of sport performance and is met through the measurements of the kinematics (motion characteristics) and kinetics (force characteristics) of movement behaviour (Carling, Reilly & Williams, 2009; Hughes & Bartlett, 2008). For example, Slawinski et al. (2010) investigated the kinematic and kinetic differences of elite and well-trained sprinters during the starting block phase and two subsequent steps. The authors assessed the athletes’ horizontal position of the centre of mass, horizontal and vertical velocities and the horizontal position of rear and front hands at set times. The main results showed that at each time point, the elite sprinters’ horizontal and vertical velocities were significantly greater alongside their rate of force development when compared to the well-trained athletes. Additionally, the study also found that at each point of measurement, elite sprinters produced a significantly greater rear and front hand displacement than their well-trained counterparts. In conclusion, the authors suggested that muscular strength and arm coordination appeared to characterize the efficiency of the sprint start and provided recommendations to strength and conditioning
coaches to include resistance training and coordination when developing training programmes (Slawinski et al., 2010).

Kinematics describe the location and movement of the limbs while an athlete is performing a skill and can be measured through both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Hamill, Knutzen & Derrick, 2015). Qualitative analysis involves the strength and conditioning coach having relevant kinesiology knowledge of an activity being performed. For example, as an athlete’s performance is observed, an evaluation of this can then be compared to a technical model which is used to prescribe an intervention to improve future execution (Knudson & Morrison, 2002; Lees, 2008). The advantage of using visual analysis to enhance performance is that it can be used by any strength and conditioning professional on the basis that they understand the technical model of the movement being performed (Carling, Reilly & Williams, 2009); for example, a coach’s subjective evaluation and observation could be used to assist an athlete performing a squat movement to increase their amount of hip flexion for correct execution (Knudson, 2007). From a quantitative perspective, the strength and conditioning coach can assess various kinematic measurements such as displacement, velocity and acceleration of linear or angular movement (Carling, Reilly & Williams, 2009). For example, video-based tracking systems can offer two or three dimensional analysis to be used to record movement and digitise key markers on a frame by frame basis to analyse rapid, ballistic actions (Nunome et al., 2006).

Whilst the study of kinematics attempts to describe motion, kinetics is the branch of biomechanics that deal with the causes of motion and is concerned with the forces that act upon the body for motion to occur (Hamill, Knutzen & Derrick, 2015). Movement kinetics are quantifiably measured most commonly through floor mounted force platforms and are
able to measure ground reaction forces for the analysis of numerous gait cycles involved in sport and assess an athlete’s power output, work, acceleration, jump angle and jump distance (Carling, Reilly & Williams, 2009; Griffiths, 2006; Hughes & Bartlett, 2008). In the examination of performance, strength and conditioning coaches can use this type of kinetic analysis alongside kinematic observation to understand an athlete’s movement patterns and force outputs simultaneously (Hughes & Bartlett, 2008). As such, there is a vast array of research which has been produced assessing numerous activities and sporting actions which include; sprinting (Gonin et al., 2008; Schot & Knutzen, 1992; Slawinski et al., 2010), jumping and landing characteristics (Delahunt, Monaghan & Caulfield, 2006; van der Does et al., 2016; Chappell & Limpistavi, 2008), change of direction tasks (McLean, Walker & van der Bogert, 2005; Sigward & Powers, 2006; Spiteri et al., 2013), association football (Augustus, Mundy & Smith, 2016; Sakamoto et al., 2016; Smith & Gilless, 2016), cricket (Felton & King, 2016; King, Worthington & Ranson, 2016; Middleton et al., 2016), and weightlifting (Petrizzo et al., 2016; Schoenfeld, 2010; Winchester et al., 2005), among others.

2.2.4 Physiological responses to training

In addition to developing an understanding of the physical and biomechanical demands of their sport, a strength and conditioning coach must also endeavour to recognise the physiological responses to various training modes prior to the prescription of a specific training programme. Broadly speaking, this includes understanding the acute and chronic responses to repeated strength training and metabolic conditioning on an athlete’s nervous, muscular, endocrine, metabolic and cardiorespiratory systems (Beachle & Earle, 2008; Kenney, Wilmore & Costill, 2015). In this regard, Macpherson et al. (2011) compared sprint
interval training to endurance training to assess body composition, 2000m run time-trial performance, VO2 max and cardiac output. Participants trained three times per week for six weeks; sprint interval training consisted of thirty seconds maximal treadmill sprints with four minutes of active recovery between bouts, whereas endurance training consisted of thirty to sixty minutes of continuous running at 65% of VO2 max. The results of this study found that both training methods significantly improved body composition, 2000m time trial performance and VO2 max. However, in contrast, cardiac output improved only amongst those performing endurance training; the authors therefore concluded that adaptations with endurance training are primarily of central origin and relate to the heart and lungs, whereas those with sprint interval training are more peripheral for example affecting adaptations at the muscular level and in associated enzymatic reactions and contractile activity.

In terms of metabolic conditioning, research has found that energy for skeletal muscle contraction is supplied by anaerobic and aerobic metabolic pathways with different adaptations occurring depending on the type of training performed (Ratamess, 2008; Swank, 2008). As a result of anaerobic training, phosphocreatine is more adequately stored for an increase in immediate generation of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), therefore improving the ability of this energy system to work at a higher intensity (Derrickson & Tortora, 2011). In response to aerobic training, a number of adaptations occur that leads to an increase in maximal aerobic capacity and lactate threshold (Kenney, Wilmore & Costill, 2015). For example, the capacity of skeletal muscle to store glycogen is increased as well as the ability to use fat as an energy source (Swank, 2008). Additionally, chronic adaptations of aerobic exercise also include an increase in maximal cardiac output, increased stroke volume and reduced heart rate at rest and at submaximal activities (Beachle & Earle, 2008).
With regard to resistance training, neuromuscular adaptations are an essential mechanism for gains in muscular strength and are often associated with early phases of strength training (Coburn et al., 2013). These adaptations include an enhancement in inter-muscular co-ordination and recruitment patterns between agonist, antagonist and synergist muscles during strength training movements and have been found to occur without a hypertrophic increase in muscle fibres (Young, 2006). Additionally, whilst increased muscle mass is a primary goal of athletes involved in sports which require strength and power, muscular hypertrophy has been found to be virtually non-existent during the initial stages of resistance training due to the correlation between muscle cross-sectional area and muscular strength (Schoenfeld, 2010). In pursuit of increased muscular adaptation, exercise and training selection must relate to what adaptation is required for improving performance by manipulating exercise type, frequency, intensity, rest interval and repetition speed (Marini & Veicsteinas, 2010; Ratamess et al., 2007; Schoenfeld, 2010). Additionally, the percentage of muscle fibre type can be adapted based on the specificity of the training stimulus; grossly speaking maximal strength training favours the adaptation of muscles from a slow to fast twitch bias and endurance training favouring an adaptation from fast to slow twitch predominance (Marini & Veicsteinas, 2010). Finally, in consideration of the hormonal responses to resistance training, moderate to high levels of volume and intensity which stresses large amounts of muscle mass with short rest intervals have been found to produce the greatest acute hormonal elevations which also, in part, have been found to mediate athletes increase in strength, power, hypertrophy and local muscular endurance (Fragala et al., 2011; Kraemer & Ratamess, 2005).
2.2.5 Periodisation

The research regarding training load, the biomechanics of human movement and the physiology of sporting performance are all elements of training which the strength and conditioning coach must utilise in order to develop a specific training plan for their athletes. In order to cover all of these aspects succinctly enough to produce positive adaptation for competition, it is imperative that a strength and conditioning coach uses a periodisation model to plan their training. Periodisation is the method which allows the division of an athlete’s training plan into smaller phases in order to enable peak performance at a particular time, as well as to target specific bio-motor abilities in a sequential order (Bompa & Haff, 2009). Well planned training programmes help coaches and trainers to achieve multiple objectives such as cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular endurance, hypertrophy, strength or power subject to the needs of the contextual demands of the sport (Ramalingam & Yee, 2013). Due to the many variables which can be altered within a training programme, there are numerous models of periodisation, however as Rhea et al. (2003) argue, research is still needed to identify an optimal periodised programme to suit each competitive environment. Whilst several periodisation models have been proposed across different sports and competitions (Gamble, 2006) and for varying ages or performance experience (Plisk & Stone, 2003; Tschiene, 2000; Verkhoshanky, 1998), the principal characteristics of their approaches are the variations in training content or the changes in intensity and volume throughout their programmes.

Moreover, Bartolemei et al. (2016) compared the block method against the weekly undulating method of periodisation on endocrine and strength changes in male athletes. Eighteen experienced resistance-trained males were randomly assigned to follow a particular method which consisted of four training sessions per week for a fifteen-week period.
Assessments included anthropometrics, maximal strength of upper and lower body, and testosterone and cortisol levels in salivary samples. Additionally, whilst the format of intensity and volume differed between the groups, both programmes directed an equal total training volume across the fifteen weeks. The results found that a greater increase in bench press strength was observed in the block periodisation method while no between group differences were noted for lower body isometric strength, lean body mass, basal testosterone levels and resting cortisol concentrations.

### 2.2.6 Post-positivism

The growth of strength and conditioning as a profession is largely evidenced by the volume of practically orientated, bio-scientific research topics described in the previous sections. However, it has been argued that effective strength and conditioning coaches are likely to draw on a much broader range of knowledge and skills than typically discussed in the majority of the scientific literature (Tod, Bond & Lavallee, 2012). To date, there have been numerous investigations that have analysed strength and conditioning coaches’ demographic characteristics alongside their typical responsibilities, tasks, work environments and practices (e.g. Deuhring & Ebben, 2010; Deuhring, Feldmann & Ebben, 2009; Ebben, Hintz & Simenz, 2005; Gee et al., 2011; Massey et al., 2009; Simenz, Dugan & Ebben, 2005) with such work categorised under the of post-positivist paradigm. In terms of ontology and epistemology, post-positivists share the same belief systems as those who subscribe to positivism who hold an aim of discovering a single material reality (Tracy, 2013). However, post-positivists recognise that all observation is fallible and that all theory is revisable (Tracy, 2013). In accordance, post-positivist methodologies utilise multiple measures, multiple observation techniques and triangulation (the use multiple types of data, diverse collection methods, various theoretical frames and multiple researchers) to gain a
clearer understanding of patterned phenomena (Tracy, 2013). The aforementioned strength and conditioning literature has typically focused on the profile of practitioners along with their current situations, behaviours, choice of practical methods and beliefs by using observation instruments and questionnaires to concurrently quantify and create databases of measurable characteristics.

The methodologies used to observe strength and conditioning coaches’ behaviours have derived from early sports coaching authors. For example, research presented by Smith, Smoll and Hunt (1977) and Lacy and Darst (1984) developed the Coaching Behaviour Assessment System (CBAS) and the Arizona State University Coaching Observation Instrument (ASUOI) respectively in an attempt to observe and categorise the specific behaviours of sports coaches. Still, before Massey et al. (2002), no other research had specifically observed the behaviour of strength and conditioning coaches in the same manner. Here, the researchers’ aim was to analyse the behaviours of six elite strength and conditioning coaches utilising the ASUOI to serve as a foundation for further research into how professional strength coaches actively perform their job (Massey et al., 2002). The collected data consisted of a percentage analysis of the observed coaching behaviours and found that the most observed behaviours were silent monitoring (21.99%), management (14.62%) and hustle (11.2%). The authors concluded that these results were a natural consequence of what they deemed the broad nature of the strength and conditioning environment and additionally suggested the participants’ recognised their own influence of their behaviour on their athlete’s performances.

More recently, Tod et al. (2012) attempted to explore the professional development of experienced strength and conditioning coaches over the course of their careers through
the use of a triangulated methodology and semi-structured interviews. In total, fifteen strength and conditioning coaches with an average of eleven years’ experience were recruited to take part. The authors documented the practical changes they had adopted over the course of their careers. Interestingly, it was discovered that the main change in approach to their practice was the need to consider the various stakeholders with whom they were working and the importance of developing positive relationships with their athletes. Additionally, the subjects described how their reliance on external justification for professional decision making had shifted towards a greater confidence in their personal, experience-based knowledge. As their careers progressed, it was both their work and non-professional experiences, interacting with senior strength and conditioning coaches and the professional literature, which were the primary influences on their professional development. Lastly, decreased levels of anxiety were also noted in their competence as their experiences advanced, which mirrored a reduced narcissism over the amount of control they had over their athletes and their competitive results (Tod et al., 2012).

2.2.7 Critique of positivism and post-positivism

The subscription to the (post-) positivist paradigm by strength and conditioning researchers has unequivocally contributed to the theoretical evolution of the understanding of sporting performance. However, whilst (post-) positivist enquiry underpins the vast majority of strength and conditioning research, it could be suggested that this type of research lends itself to describing the coaching process as linear, sequential and unproblematic in nature (Potrac et al., 2000). It has been argued that by continually viewing the coaching process in this manner, practice is consequently taught without a contextual frame of reference and leads to an inability of coaches to adapt to an ever changing human environment (Potrac et al., 2000). In direct criticism of (post-) positivism, numerous
scholars conducting their studies in alternative paradigms (i.e. post-structuralism and interpretivism) have argued that social activity is much more complex than the (post-) positivist view suggests (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). As such, critiques have been aimed at both the ontological and epistemological aspects of this type of research. For example, rather than the view that there is one single identifiable reality, or one that we may not be able to fully understand, critics have argued that individuals experience their own reality, or that realities are multiple (Markula & Silk, 2011). Additionally, it is arguably impossible to separate ourselves from what we already know and that, as social researchers, we operate within, not outside of broader historical, social and theoretical contexts which, subsequently, may impact on the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

The coaching process is inextricably linked to human interaction; that is coaches are not merely technicians who are only involved with the transfer of knowledge, but are operators in a social and cultural context alongside a range of significant others, such as other coaches, athletes and managers (Jones, 2000). Indeed, the reality of strength and conditioning is that its practice does not exist inside the vacuum of a laboratory setting; that is to say that Selye’s foundations of physical exercise legitimises an unconscious regarding of athletes as extensions of single cell organisms and not as complex social beings. By only viewing strength and conditioning from a positivistic perspective, the assumption is that coaching success can be explicitly measured and that social tensions and dilemmas can be ignored and are not characterised in practice (Jones & Wallace, 2005). As such, the call for more sociologically grounded research in strength and conditioning is necessary in order for practitioners to better understand the nuanced behaviours and actions which are present within the working environment (Potrac et al., 2000). It is in no way the intention of this thesis to discredit strength and conditioning research undertaken from a positivist standpoint.
As stated, the progress made in understanding human performance has been dramatic in recent years. However, in order to truly bridge the gap between theory and practice, a greater consideration of the socio-cultural aspects of coaching practice must be considered. Whilst there is limited strength and conditioning research grounded in paradigms outside of positivism and post-positivism, the following sections will illustrate the limited body of work which has viewed the profession through poststructuralist and interpretivist lenses.

2.3 Alternate paradigms in strength and conditioning

2.3.1 Poststructuralism

Whilst the vast majority of strength and conditioning research can be considered as (post-) positivist, and there is a remarkable lack of strength and conditioning enquiry utilising other such paradigms. That said, the work of Gearity and Mills (2012) is notable in having stepped away from the traditional research paradigms by employing a poststructuralist stance. In contrast to positivism, poststructuralist researchers believe that reality and truth are not out there waiting to be discovered through scientific enquiry, but that research is influenced by the social environment and therefore always contextual and subjective (Avner, Jones & Denison, 2014). Ontologically and epistemologically, researchers who subscribe to a poststructuralist perspective hold the belief that there are multiple, subjective realities and that knowledge is consequently subjective and contextual (Markula & Silk, 2011). From this perspective, the belief is held that reality and knowledge are produced through discourses which are formed through power relations and frame an individual’s understanding of the social world (Avner, Jones & Denison, 2014). The work of Gearity and Mills (2012) attempted to address some of the difficulties which lie in strength and conditioning practice due to coach-athlete relationships. The authors used the work of poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault and his work *Discipline and Punish*.
(1977), as their framework. The research attempted to problematize how the first author produced athletic yet docile bodies in his eight-year tenure as an NCAA Division I strength and conditioning coach. It was argued that, while many social science authors have recognised that the nature of sports coaching is highly contextual, traditional strength and conditioning research fails to meet this criterion by painting an overly simplistic picture of the profession, devoid of historical and socio-cultural context (Gearity & Mills, 2012). The authors reflected that the coach used punishment to present a visible display of power and in effect, obtain compliance through fear. Additionally, it was stated that such actions are rarely discussed by strength and conditioning scholars, despite drawing from Foucault’s work that truth-power relations are at the heart of all mechanisms of punishment; that is, the coach is the exerciser of truth be it through such demands for proper athletic attire or punctuality to training sessions (Foucault, 1977; Gearity & Mills, 2012). Their conclusion was that using a Foucauldian perspective allowed the coach to reflect on his practice critically and become more aware of his shortcomings, acknowledging the various problematic power relations in his environment, the undertaking of which should be encouraged in any aspiring strength and conditioners (Denison & Anver, 2011; Gearity & Mills, 2012).

Whilst this approach has undoubtedly added value to the strength and conditioning literature, there are several critiques of the poststructuralist approach to research. For example, poststructuralism has regularly been accused of determinism, which makes reference to the notion that ‘individuals are so constrained by power relations that they have no ability to make any meaning of their own’ (Markula & Silk, 2011, p.52). Additionally, Dawkins (1998) has argued that poststructuralism has a ‘parasitic’ bias and, as explained by Rosenau (1991), promotes a negative agenda based on the idea of the impossibility of
establishing any truth. As poststructuralism views power as inherently embedded in discourse, the paradigm has also been criticised for having no theory of agency. In this respect, poststructuralism rejects the idea that individuals can make their own choices and instead theorises that ‘self’ is a form constructed through discourse (Markula & Silk, 2011). This idea appears to contradict more interpretive suggestions that our personal reality is self-created and, whilst this form of research highlights the presence of power and discipline within social life, post-structuralism is evidently problematic.

2.3.2 Interpretivism

Similar to poststructuralist research, there is also a dearth of strength and conditioning literature based in the paradigm of interpretivism. In contrast to positivism, the subjective experiences of an individual lie at the heart of interpretivism and the paradigm therefore rejects the belief that the social world can be examined through the same assumptions and methodologies that are used to examine the physical world (Potrac, Jones & Nelson, 2014). Ontologically, interpretivists believe that there is no reality independent of perception and that it is constructed through subjectivities, interests, emotions and values (Sparkes, 1992). Epistemologically, this paradigm understands knowledge of reality as constructed through social interaction with others and one’s practice within the surrounding environment. In doing so, researchers strive towards an empathic and holistic understanding of the surrounding world, and attempt to discover a first person perspective on personal experiences with others, as well as with broader social, cultural and historical contexts (Markula & Silk, 2011; Tracy, 2011). Additionally, interpretivists hold the belief that the researchers’ values are inherent in all phases of the research process and that who we are and how we understand the world is a central part of how we understand ourselves, others and the encompassing social context (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).
Research based in the interpretivist paradigm is not concerned with categorising individual’s knowledge and behaviours, but rather to explore the various sociological aspects of practice which govern these (Potrac et al., 2014). The need to understand the various experiences, relationships and interactions of coaching professionals has been acknowledged in recent years and it has been argued that to fully determine the social nature of coaching, researchers should attempt to move closer to the site of social practice and uncover the culture of a particular group from the group members themselves (Cushion, 2014; Jones & Armour, 2000; Potrac & Jones, 2009). Whilst there has been a recent surge in literature exploring the socio-cultural and micro-political aspects of sports coaching from a broad perspective, to date there has been very little consideration specifically regarding strength and conditioning practice from the same standpoint.

As evidenced in previous chapters, the consistent theories of strength and conditioning practice are heavily grounded in the positivist paradigm. Aside from a few noteworthy calls for strength and conditioning coaches to be made aware of the importance of the coaching process (e.g. Jeffreys, 2010; 2014) and the need to be more reflective in their practice (Handcock & Cassidy, 2014), the research undertaken by Thompson, Potrac and Jones (2015) remains the sole strength and conditioning investigation based in the interpretivist paradigm. The authors attempted to address the sociocultural and emotional aspects of the practice of an individual’s appointment in a Premier League Association Football team by using an ethnographical methodology with the overall aim of illuminating the strategies used by the subject to develop positive working relationships with other contextual stakeholders.
The authors conducted five narrative biographical interviews with the writings of Goffman, Garfinkel and Kelchtermans providing the analytical frameworks employed to analyse their data (Thompson et al., 2015). The study’s results explored the passage of time between the subject’s initial excitement of his appointment to his eventual resignation, and analysed a number of key incidents which occurred during his tenure. The work of Goffman (1959) was used to theorize the subject’s initial actions in attempting to integrate himself into the ‘tight-knit’ group of coaching staff. In his choice to present a professional manner at all times, the subject engaged in showing a conscious ‘front’ to his colleagues in order to gain their respect (Jones, 2006; Thompson et al., 2015). Despite this, and various other attempts at building positive working relations (including self-deprecating humour and projecting a friendly image), the image he presented failed to live up to the behavioural expectations of the role. This was evident in an encounter with two senior members of staff who questioned his coaching experience in a discussion about the players’ training programmes. The meeting led to feelings of anxiety and insecurity and, coupled with a later encounter in which he found out he was not initially first choice for the role, was explained through Goffman’s (1959) understanding that first impressions are significant in setting human interaction on the right track. In an effort to overcome stigmatisation by his colleagues, he attempted to write himself into the micro-political landscape of the club and consciously influence his surrounding context (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). This was done through purposeful acts such as joining in with post-training staff games in an attempt to develop positive relationships with the head coach and other senior staff. These actions were an attempt to deal with his feelings of professional vulnerability, and whilst this seemed to work in the short term, it did not serve the ultimate purpose of gaining professional recognition from his peers (Thompson et al., 2015). Through the presentation of this story, the authors recognised the limitations of a single-case study; however, their aim...
was not to present generalisations of the strength and conditioning profession but rather to stimulate wider research of neophyte strength and conditioners’ practice. As such, in considering the micro-political nature of the profession, a deeper understanding of how strength coaches can better deal with their environment can be uncovered (Thompson et al., 2015).

Whilst Thompson et al. (2015) has provided a much needed interpretivist frame with which to view strength and conditioning, interpretivism is not without its critiques/critics. For example, whist it appears to lend itself well to the social explorations of coaching, Markula and Silk (2011) have argued that it focuses too narrowly on subjective experiences and, despite acknowledging social structures, that the paradigm suggests that the individuals are free to live the life of their choosing. Additionally, due to it’s subjective nature, interpretivism abandons scientific procedures of verification and therefore offers results which cannot be generalised to other situations (Williams, 2000). Lastly, in spite of a key aspect of interpretivism lying in the belief that individuals define their own meanings within respective cultural, social and political settings, Blaikie (2007) has also stated that interpretivist researchers often fail to recognise the structures in society and the consequential causes of social actors’ actions, as such it can be difficult to see why and how a researcher might reach their conclusions (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The work of Thompson et al. (2015) has without doubt given credence to the need to specifically engage with a critical sociology of strength and conditioning and to further address the micro-political realities of the profession. Yet, whilst the interpretivist paradigm has been utilised to investigate sports coaching from a broad sense (e.g. Cushion & Jones, 2006; 2012; Huggan et al., 2015; Jones, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Potrac et al., 2002; Potrac
& Jones, 2009b; Purdy & Jones, 2011; Purdy, Jones & Cassidy, 2009), and despite the work of Thompson et al. (2015), there still remains a paucity of interpretivist research specifically relating to the field of strength and conditioning and the micro-political nature of professional practice. The position of Potrac and Jones (2009a) is that coaching contexts are not unproblematic, progressive processes, but negotiated and contested ‘arenas for struggle’ (p.233) and as Potrac and Jones (2009a; 2009b) argue, a continued failure to recognise the micro-political nature of coaching contexts only results in a distorted utopian view of the many coaching disciplines.

2.4 Summary

The aim of this chapter was to offer a comprehensive review of existing strength and conditioning literature. Here, I have presented some of the key findings from the literature underpinned by the positivist and post-positivist paradigms and highlighted the limited research conducted within the alternative paradigms of post-structuralism and interpretivism. Whilst considering the strengths and limitations of this work, I hope to have demonstrated the need for a greater understanding of the working lives of strength and conditioning coaches. This not only includes the micro-political challenges faced by these practitioners on a daily basis, but also their experiences of the employment demands of such work.
Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Within this section I will discuss the methodology I used in an attempt to address the research questions and the reasoning behind choosing this specific approach. The chapter begins with a presentation of my philosophical and methodological viewpoint on the nature of the research process. This will be followed by a description of the process by which the participant was recruited for this study. I will then provide a rationale for utilising individual interviews and detailing how these were conducted. Finally, a description of the iterative nature of the way in which this data was collected and analysed will be outlined.

3.2 Locating the study within a research paradigm

As established in the previous chapter, the choice of paradigm in which researchers base their studies plays a vital role in how their subject area is broadly received, understood and defined by the wider research community. Despite the vast majority of strength and conditioning research being underpinned by the positivist paradigm, and whilst there has been a consideration for a poststructuralist perspective (e.g. Gearity & Mills, 2012), this thesis is based in interpretivism for a number of reasons. To begin with, the fundamental difference between the positivist and interpretivist models is that an interpretivist study takes into account the social forces that are externally applied to the subject and how the subject reacts to these, physically and mentally (Bryman, 2012; Gratton & Jones, 2004). Additionally, reflecting on my personal experiences as a practicing strength and conditioning coach as demonstrated in Chapter 1.0, I found that I often had to manage a context characterised by its negotiated and contested environment. Thus, I considered the interpretivist approach to be more insightful as a result and give me wider scope throughout the study. A criticism of positivism then, is in its limitations to take into account the
intangible concepts such as free will, feelings or emotions and, from personal experience, misrepresents the full nature of strength and conditioning.

Like positivism and poststructuralism, interpretivism is a particular belief system for analysing and conducting research and has received increasing popularity in the study of sports coaching in recent years (Potrac, Jones & Nelson, 2014). Interpretivism does not examine the social world through the same assumptions and methodologies used by natural scientists when viewing the physical world, but offers a different perspective which is founded on the premise that people define their own meanings of the world around them with regard to their own social, political and cultural settings (Jones & Wallace, 2005). The benefit of using such an approach in this study is that it offers an explanation of events and actions from the subject’s personal perspective (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Moreover, in response to the relative absence of interpretivist strength and conditioning research, this thesis seeks to provide a much needed antithesis to the populist bio-scientific dominance of the profession and sets out to uncover the practical, every day realities of the profession from a practitioner’s viewpoint.

In terms of ontology, interpretivists take an internalist, idealist/ relativist stance in the belief that there is no reality independent of perception (Sparkes, 1992). As such, interpretivism rejects the positivistic notion of an independent existing reality but subscribes itself to understanding there to be multiple, mind-dependent realities with the social world being constructed within individual’s subjectivities, interests, emotions and personal values (Potrac et al., 2014; Sparkes, 1992). This however does not suggest that the social world is created by the mind, instead advocating that it is made up of how people interpret and respond to actions and behaviours, and in doing so, interpretivists focus on the interests and
purposes of people or their intentional or meaningful behaviour (Potrac et al., 2014).

Interpretivism therefore has a subjectivist epistemology in the belief that all knowledge is subjective and socially constructed (Sparkes, 1992). The paradigm holds the notion that there is no objective truth to be known and the only way to explore the realities that exist in people’s minds is through subjective interaction (Potrac et al., 2014). Therefore, the nature of this paradigm offers a clear link between the researcher and the research subject in that knowledge is constructed between the two; the researcher’s questions and the participant’s responses influence the analysis and interpretations that can be made from the data (Carson et al., 2001). Furthermore, interpretivism allows the focus of the research to be on understanding what is happening in a given time and context, rather than on explaining relationships through objective facts and statistical analysis, and is concerned with understanding human behaviour from the researcher’s and the participant’s reference frame (Carson et al., 2001).

The task of the researcher is to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place on their experiences with both parties being interdependent and mutually interactive (Potrac et al., 2014). From a methodological standpoint then, interpretivism adopts an ideographic methodology which focuses on understanding unique, subjective phenomena. (Mallet & Tinning, 2014). Interpretivism encourages qualitative methods of research with emphasis on thick description and interpretation and utilises a variety of methods such as ethnography, interviewing and narrative inquiry. (Mallet & Tinning, 2014). The motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences should be understood as time and context bound, with the researcher’s overall aim being to uncover these constructed truths whilst minimising personal bias (Neuman, 2000). By engaging with this paradigm, it
is the aim of this thesis to add to the significantly lacking interpretive reading of strength and conditioning and subsequently offer a broader understanding of the profession.

3.3 Narrative research

As described, the philosophical assumptions of interpretivism conclude that there is no reality “out there” which is independent of human experience, and that realities are indeed multiple, created and mind-dependent (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). These assumptions have concurrently led to the development and use of narrative inquiry in the study of the social sciences, which not only is a tradition of qualitative inquiry committed to interpretivism, but the direct studying of people’s stories through time (Smith, 2010). Narrative research’s focus is therefore concerned with storied events which are ordered in time with their characters and environment described and explained (Gajek, 2014). The strength lies in the memorable, often provocative way in which the reader is then drawn into these events and elicits narrative knowledge to be shared and legitimises multiple ways of knowing (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). While Smith (2010) argues that there is no clear definition of what narrative inquiry is, the general consensus is that humans lead storied lives, our narratives provide a structure for identity and that narrative research is the resulting interpretation of these (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

The narrative inquiry therefore enables researchers to analyse complex, subjective experiences and find meaning in them (Woike, 2008). The ultimate aim of this inquiry was to interpret the storied experience of the research participant in relation to his practical experiences, focusing on the events being described, how and why they were conveyed, and what was felt and experienced (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The benefits of this approach are argued to be the capacity to reveal the temporal, emotional and
contextual quality of relationships and lives, reveal the subjective world of the participant, focus on the embodiment of experience, and acknowledge the participant’s uniqueness (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Equally, within the context of this study, such inquiry has the power to raise different and potentially troubling questions about the true nature of strength and conditioning practice (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). However, it must be noted that this approach is not without its limitations; as Gubrium and Holstein (2009) claim, individuals are indeed free to select which stories they share when articulating their experiences which therefore frames the researcher’s interpretation (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As Denzin (2014) argues, individual lives contain multiple narratives and only those which are confessed can be analysed and interpreted. Yet, as Josselson (2013) understands, it must be assumed that the shared stories hold emotional and psychological meaning for the participant and, as a result, sense making and interpretation were placed at the centre of the narrative inquiry enabling an exploration of the participant’s subjective reality.

3.4 The participant – purposive sampling

For this study, a typical purposive sampling was used (Tracy, 2013). The participant was not considered to be in anyway atypical or extreme and had been selected based on the specific purposes associated with answering the study’s research questions. As a practising strength and conditioning coach, I knew of numerous other practising strength coaches who could have been approached to take part in this study. In this respect, the potential participants were selected through network sampling in that they were deliberately chosen for the unique information which they could provide based on their personal experiences and current stage of development (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).
Prior to securing the research participant, ethical approval for the research to take place was granted by the departmental ethics committee. The criteria that we desired to explore was that of a neophyte strength and conditioning coach who was still in higher education and in the transition period between internship and aiming to become a full time professional. Potential participants were then ranked in order of preference based on the potential depth and richness of data formed from a pre-existing understanding of personal story and background. As such, the order of preference was determined based on my personal understanding of each of their careers and who I believed would offer the most in-depth account to shed light on the study’s research questions. Once decided upon, the first choice participant was contacted and presented with a brief overview of the study, followed by information on project aims, methodology and perceived outcomes to which he agreed and accepted to participate.

At the time of data collection, Adam (pseudonym) was 25 years old and in the process of completing a PhD after achieving a first class honours degree in Sport and Exercise Science. Throughout his adolescent and teenage years, Adam played a variety of sports and received regional representative honours in rugby. Throughout his secondary and college schooling, Adam was drawn to the physical and life sciences for areas of study and had initial aspirations of studying medicine at university level. However, the demands of balancing a playing career with studying for his A-Levels would prove too difficult and resulted in Adam achieving lower than expected grades, which forced him to choose a different career path, which, after initially considering studying physiotherapy, led him to sports science. During his time at university, Adam found interests in the modules of biomechanics, anatomy, exercise physiology and nutrition and in successfully achieving high grades in each, was recognised as having the potential to benefit from upcoming
volunteering opportunities available through his institution. Upon our first meeting Adam had completed a year-long internship and had earned a full-time contract at the Illyria Warriors, a top-flight, professional rugby club, where he was employed as an assistant strength and conditioning coach and GPS analyst. As the overall research aim was to attempt to understand the processes of socialisation as a neophyte strength and conditioner working within a professional setting, Adam’s demographics of still being in higher education whilst also working as an intern within a top flight professional sports team made him an ideal participant.

3.5 Qualitative Interviews – A Rationale

The use of interviews, in various forms, has already been exploited by numerous sports coaching authors in studying various lines of enquiry (e.g. Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac & Jones, 2009b; Purdy, Jones & Cassidy, 2009). Interviews offer researchers an insight into the what’s, how’s and whys of an individual’s personal interpretation of practice and present a first-hand reflection on an individual’s work, their role and their interactions with stakeholders. whilst granting an insight into significant experiences which can shape and effect such topics. Additionally, they allow the reader to gain an understanding of the emotions, opinions and feelings of the individual and how they make sense of their experiences (Purdy, 2014).

Qualitative interviewing allows participants to speak in their own voices and language and lets them emphasise and clarify the issues which are important to them (Byrne, 2012). This occurs due to the flexibility of questioning which interviewing can bring. Gillham (2005), suggests that all interviews have some form of structure, yet the degree of structure requires different qualities as a researcher and thus can have great impact on the
answers given by the interviewee and ultimately the conclusions reached by the research. There are three main types of interview which researchers can utilise depending on their experience and confidence in questioning. Firstly, the unstructured interview could readily be described as the true nature of qualitative research in that it places responsibility on the interviewee in determining the structure and direction of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). At the start of an unstructured interview, participants are not always aware of the course that the interview may take; researchers firstly establish the broad subject(s) that are to be covered yet it is the subject who decides where the narrative should begin, the order in which the topics will be introduced and the amount of detail that will be divulged (Corbin & Morse, 2003). As such, the amount of information told or untold is somewhat telling of the subject’s mind frame and thought process regarding their story and the events that are being described. The virtue in unstructured interviews is the allowance of the interviewee to give their accounts in their own way whilst minimising researcher influence in their discovery and understanding of the subject’s world (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Whilst this form of interview has numerous benefits in data collection, many researchers have expressed concern about the potential disadvantages from utilising such methods. In running an unstructured interview, researchers need a high degree of experience in qualitative investigation as this approach depends on the conversational skills of the researcher and their ability to construct an open, honest, trustworthy relationship (Purdy, 2014). From a practical perspective, unstructured interviews can last a long time and are dependent on the interviewee and the amount of information they are willing to disclose and, consequently the process of data organisation and analysis can also be greatly increased (Tracy, 2013). Lastly, the unstructured interview may produce high levels of irrelevant data
as participants could venture off topic which could present challenges during data analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

In contrast, structured interviews offer a different technique for data collection. This form of interview consists of composing predetermined questions which are asked in the same sequence for each participant (Purdy, 2014). Essentially, structured interviews can be described as verbally administered questionnaires and are the primary tool in social survey research (Gillham, 2005). During such interviews, clear choices and priorities must be established in questioning with each question being asked out of necessity. Only closed questions are asked, which in turn infer closed responses, and are of three main types: subject descriptors which reveal information about the interviewee, behavioural questions which are concerned with what people do, and attitudes and opinions which usually requires a list of abilities to be ranked (Tracy, 2013).

The advantages of structured interviews lie in the collection and analysis of participant data. Closed questions can be asked in a relatively short amount of time whilst answers are easy to replicate and quantify, increasing reliability of testing whilst speeding up the process of categorical analysis (Tracy, 2013). However, in terms of power relations it is the researcher who determines what information will be gathered which could be based on individual bias in an attempt to control the data which will be collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Additionally, structured interviews do not offer room for further investigation beyond the set question list which may leave relevant issues unexplored and in some cases may constrain the responses given by the interviewee (Tracy, 2013). Control of structured interviews is mostly held by the researcher, however the participant may only choose to
respond to specific questions or to refuse to respond altogether with no further investigation being administered (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The third method of interviewing is the semi-structured approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Arguably, this form is the most beneficial way of conducting a research interview due to the balance between flexibility and structure it offers (Gillham, 2005). In this form of interviewing, the researchers develop a list of questions which cover a number of broad topics or subjects which are to be discussed (Tracy, 2013). To ensure equivalent coverage of topics, the interviewees can be prompted with supplemental questions if the researcher deems that not enough information has been given spontaneously (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Initially, the researcher may control the direction of the interview due to the pre-determined structure of questioning however as the participant becomes more comfortable with the process, the strength of this method is revealed as the preservation of the narrative element is held in spite of the structure (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Questions are open ended with the same questions being asked of all participants, however the phrasing and order of interview questions are adaptable, allowing the researcher to react to any unsuspecting issues that may emerge (Purdy, 2014).

Any research, regardless of the direction of data collection is about discovery and not what the researcher believes to be the case (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Whilst it is therefore important not to deviate too far from the initial research aims, the participant must be free to divulge and express any information they see as important in as much or little detail as desired (Tracy, 2013). Additionally, the researcher must develop a naïve eye when collecting data in that individual bias for wanting information to be found must be rejected and the course of the interview largely dictated by the interviewee (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
As such, the chosen technique for this study was to use semi-structured interviews to address this particular research topic. Semi-structured interviews facilitate a strong emphasis of discovery which this study seeks to provide whilst the structure of this method allows for an analysis of commonalities (Gillham, 2005). In terms of workload-hours, the cost is relatively high due to the preparation which will be required in order to conduct a non-biased list of questions allowing for the interviewee to commence an open narration of their experiences. However, as the study is relatively open in terms of what may be discovered alongside the potential richness in data, semi-structured interviews offer a flexible, conversational approach which will allow the researcher the room to explore any areas which may emerge through discussion and not restrict conversations to a fixed agenda (Purdy, 2014).

3.6 Collecting the narrative interview data

The data was collected from a number of one-to-one semi-structured interviews in an attempt to fully explore the research topics. In total, five interviews were completed with approximately 15 hours of audible interview data collected. The context in which the interviews took place was taken into careful consideration and were of the participant’s choosing. In order to create a sense of naturalness and comfort when disclosing information, they occurred via Skype, allowing Adam to be at home and complete the interviews at a time convenient to him. The interviews were recorded via the use of a dictaphone allowing the researcher to concentrate on the dynamics of the conversation, especially during times in which new, unsuspected information was being divulged (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

During the first interview, some of the ethical principles grounding the study were discussed with the participant being made aware that only the researchers would have access to the provided data (Gillham, 2005). It was made apparent to the participant that they held the right to cease any interview at any time and to review all or some of the transcripts
immediately on request. Additionally, it was made clear that the participant would be given a pseudonym alongside any other person(s) or places referred to in order to further ensure anonymity (Purdy, 2014).

As an interviewer, my aim was to build a natural rapport with the participant and ask questions that allowed responses to be given in the participant’s own words, enabling them to honestly express their own personal perspective (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Patton (1990) describes rapport and neutrality as two interlinked elements of the interview process; rapport should be established in such a way that it does not undermine neutrality with what the interviewee discloses. Indeed, it was my intention to not simply be a silent actor but a participant in an interviewing relationship by being a willing and empathetic listener (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). By taking an active part in the interview, I was able to show emotional understanding of the events being described whilst attempting to avoid showing favour or disfavour in my responses. Where appropriate, I briefly mentioned my own coaching experiences in an attempt to further establish rapport and build an open relationship (Seidman, 2006).

As the interviews were semi-structured, the interview guides were used as a template for conversation and were informed firstly by the research aims and through data analysis of previous interviews. Importantly, the order in which the questions were asked remained flexible in order to maintain a conversational approach. By remaining flexible, the transitions between questions were smooth and logical with topics easily flowing from one to another. The guides provided a framework around which questions could be developed spontaneously, so that I was free to explore and probe the subject further on matters which needed further clarification or which were thought to offer greater depth (Sparkes & Smith,
As recommended by Tracy (2013), in beginning the interviews I used experience questions such as ‘which subjects did you study at college?’, ‘which sports did you play as a teenager?’ and ‘how did you know you wanted to be a strength and conditioning coach?’, which encouraged the participant to tell his story in his own words and to create a sense of comfort in revealing his experiences. Secondly, I used what Tracy (2013) refers to as generative questions; non-directive, non-threatening queries to generate frameworks for talks such as ‘what events led you to acquiring your first practical placement?’, ‘what was your overall aim?’ and ‘why do you think your colleague acted in this way?’. Clarification probes were used such as ‘can you explain that point further?’ and ‘what do you mean by that?’ in instances where misunderstanding occurred or where points made by the interviewee were unclear (Gratton & Jones, 2004). As suggested by Seidman (2006), it was important that such questions were used naturally and gently as to avoid the participant from feeling uncomfortable or inarticulate. Additionally, this style of interviewing also allowed for the use of elaboration, or detail oriented probes (Gratton & Jones, 2004). For example, basic ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ questions were used to elicit greater depth, richness and quality of data. Additionally, it must be noted that various non-verbal elaboration cues were also used; such as head nodding or making eye contact to ensure that the interview remained informal and relaxed (Tracy, 2013).

### 3.7 Data analysis

Traditionally, qualitative data analysis is treated as a stand-alone section within the research process, with data analysis coming after data collection (Creswell, 2007). Whilst treating analysis in such a fashion would be undoubtedly helpful in structuring the process, it has been suggested that treating data analysis as a separate event causes a false division
between this and the rest of the research process (Taylor, 2014). In line with Sparkes’ (2002) understanding of the process of analysis, throughout this project’s entirety I was continuously reaching conclusions and ordering thoughts on the subject matter. The ever-flowing movement between the data and theory, the changing of my beliefs and assumptions based on the evolving understanding and questioning of the data led this project to be iterative in nature as opposed to purely inductive (Taylor, 2014). Iteration is regarded as a reflexive process in which the researcher continuously revisits the emerging data and progressively alters their opinions and understandings of their findings (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Iterative analysis can therefore be seen as the utilisation of both emic readings of the data, meaning investigating the data from the participant’s point of view, and etic understandings of theory, models and explanations, meaning an emphasis on what I, as the researcher, deems important (Taylor, 2014). Indeed, ‘an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data’ (Tracey, 2013, p.184). As such, subsequent interviews evolved in response to the analysis of the data already discovered; the data collection and its analysis were related to each other in a cyclical manner, rather than following one after another in a stepwise sequence (Fossey et al., 2002).

Throughout this process of analysis, two distinct phases of coding were used on a number of occasions in order to make sense of the ever evolving data (Tracey, 2013). The first phase was distinctly an emic analysis of the participant which was used to construct a biographical account of the participant in attempt to make sense of their story. During this first phase of analysis, the goal was to identify the who, what, where and when as opposed to the why or how of the participant’s narrative in order to develop a rich portrayal of accounts without yet attempting an explanation. Throughout the completion of this phase, the focus was on coding that would help me address my research questions and refers to the labelling and
systematising of the data into themes and categories (Tracy, 2013). As such, the importance of this phase was twofold; firstly, in the identification of critical people, incidents and phases of time (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009a) and secondly, in identifying data that provided insights into how the participant experienced interactions with key stakeholders, what issues were encountered, and how these people and events made them feel.

The second phase of coding attempted to find meaning in action through etic analysis of the data. Whereas first phase coding was generated by the data, the researcher used these ‘first level’ codes coupled with interpretive creativity and theoretical knowledge to generate ‘second level’ codes (Tracey, 2013). Here, primary codes were critically examined and organised into interpretive concepts; that is rather than mirroring the data, secondary coding began to explain it through relevant theory, literature and models (Tracey, 2013). Both coding activities had the potential to reveal gaps within the narrative, in which case any such topics were revisited in subsequent interviews in order to gain clarification and reach theoretical saturation, or the point in which no new information was being revealed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The writing up of the participant’s narrative can also be considered a part of the analytical process as the interviews were transcribed alongside the continuous collection of data. Whilst this process aided in observing any gaps in the account, it also served as a reflective tool in making sense of the story. As such, while I consider the narrative to be an accurate account of the participant’s experiences, it must be made clear that they were ultimately constructed and analysed by myself and will therefore unavoidably include an element of prejudice as ‘all potential new knowledge is apprehended in relation to an interpretive scheme of our existing knowledge’ (Gillham, 2005, p.9).
In an attempt to analyse the participant’s narrative in terms of understanding why and how actions, thoughts and feelings occurred, a number of theoretical frameworks were used. Initially, Kelchtermans’ research on professional development, micro-political literacy, processes of socialisation and vulnerability were used as a reference point in attempt to make sense of the data. The research on micro-politics in the schooling environment (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a; 2002b) provided a perspective to view the various issues explained by the participants in terms of how the subjects understood and navigated themselves in their working environment. Subsequently, how the subjects in Kelchtermans’ research developed their micro-political literacy (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a; 2002b) and learnt to “read” situations through a micro-political lens, understand them and learn to effectively deal with them was framed in the context of the present data. Additionally, Kelchtermans’ (2005; 2009a; 2009b) notion of the personal interpretive framework was also used as a frame to further understand the subject’s narrative.

The second analytic framework that was used to understand the participant’s narrative was Goffman’s (1959) ‘Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’, in which theories of self-presentation and impression management have been coined. In an attempt to view the interactions within an individual’s narrative, Goffman examined what people hold as acceptable behaviour and viewed the nature of interaction as being shaped by both the environment and audience (Jones, 2004). Resultantly, observing and analysing the process of an individual establishing and maintaining a desirable identity to define themselves in a social environment was of major importance in this study. In particular, Goffman (1969a; 1969b) believed that it was in the individual’s interest to control the perceptions of others by presenting the correct ‘front’, and hence control the responsive treatment toward themselves.
(Jones, 2004). This dramaturgical approach birthed the term *impression management* and, when used in a sports coaching context, involves taking great care that the ‘correct’ impression is given at all times to maintain their place within the social structure (Goffman, 1959; Jones, 2004). The use of Goffman’s work in the present study offered a sensitive and acute lens through which to observe the participant’s social interactions with individual stakeholders and the social structure as a whole (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, utilising this perspective illustrated the capacity of the participant to influence and direct the activities of others in an attempt to maintain their place within the social hierarchy (Jones, 2004).

### 3.8 Judging the study

Any inquiry, irrespective of its paradigmatic grounding and methodological approach, employs different evaluation criteria as means of judging the research findings (Anney, 2014). Within sports research, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) framework is most commonly used, which substituted the quantitative criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability with the term “trustworthiness”. This included credibility, transferability and dependability. In order to meet these criteria, and attain a level of trustworthiness, a number of techniques were offered which included prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation and peer debriefing among others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yet, whilst this position remains the gold-standard for judging the quality of qualitative research, Sparkes (2002) and Sparkes and Smith (2014) have argued that this perspective is philosophically contradictory as it promotes an ontological realism and an epistemological foundationalism (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Consequently, in a call to judge qualitative inquiry with more relativist criteria, these authors (as cited above) have developed their own evaluative stance and encouraged a “letting go” perspective. Here, the authors regard criteria as characterising traits and emergent in nature which can be modified to suit the specific context of a given study.
(Smith & Deemer, 2000; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As such, it is argued that the traits used to judge qualitative research are not fixed or to be applied to all qualitative inquiries (Smith, Sparkes & Caddick, 2014).

In keeping with such work, I invite readers to consider the judgement of this research in relation to specific interpretive criteria drawn from the “letting go” position as discussed in works such as Sparkes, (2002) and Sparkes and Smith, (2014). Indeed, if I were seeking evaluation based on validity, reliability and generalisability, I would have decided upon a more suitable paradigm and methodology with which to frame the research questions. Specifically, I ask the reader to judge this thesis on the following criteria (Smith et al., 2014):

1. Is this subject a worthy topic of investigation regarding relevance, interest or significance?
2. Does this study make a substantive contribution to the field of strength and conditioning?
3. Does this investigation invite you, the reader, to develop a personal, interpretive response to the participant’s story?
4. Does the research provide an embodied sense of lived experience?
5. Does it utilise sufficient data and appropriate theoretical frameworks with which to analyse the account?
6. Does the study impact you, as the reader, to inspire further research questions about social life?
7. Does the study inspire you, the reader, to further research questions about the social aspects of lived experience?
Chapter 4. Results

4.1 Introduction

This section will present the narrative biography of Adam (a pseudonym) and will highlight the key experiences that he encountered as a neophyte strength and conditioning coach. The following account begins with a contextual understanding of Adam’s sporting and academic background and showcases his experiences of being a volunteer at the Elsinoire Eagles, and as an intern and a member of staff at Illyria Warriors; two professional rugby league clubs. Throughout this time, Adam’s interactions with various stakeholders, his vision, desire and limitations for various roles, and career progression were all found to be defining aspects of his tenure.

At the point of the first interview, Adam had been a practising strength coach for four years and was in the process of completing his PhD. Throughout our interviews I found him to be open about his experiences and I suspect they acted as a form of catharsis; a way to release his various emotions about what had passed. It was clear that he wanted to excel in his field and had a tireless work ethic in his attempts to improve as both an academic and practitioner. In general, his account shows a gradual decline in positivity and enthusiasm in his practice from his early experiences as a volunteer through to the eventual end of his employment. Within his descriptions of various incidents, he hinted towards how he managed his actions and emotions in terms of self-preservation for both his present role and potential future career in the field.
4.2 Finding strength and conditioning: ‘I always had an interest in how the body works’

Throughout his childhood Adam played various different sports, including rugby league for a top flight professional team’s junior section. Unfortunately, a familiar story afforded to numerous budding young sports-people was also consigned to him, as during his mid-teens, Adam began incurring numerous injuries. These repeated incidents eventually led to him undergoing reconstructive surgery and effectively ended any hope of him becoming a professional athlete. However, it was his involvement, and in particular his interactions, with various types of sports coaches that birthed his interest in the sport sciences. Alongside this, the assistance he received in his rehabilitation shaped Adam’s initial interest in becoming a physiotherapist:

*I always had an interest in how the body moves just from playing sport. I was good at science in my GCSEs and I always thought that if I didn’t make it as a professional then I’d have to have another career path in mind. I saw first-hand what they did physio-wise and in terms of strength and conditioning I didn’t really see the pathway at that age, I didn’t really see it as a dedicated career path, but physio-ing was the one I was interested in at the point of doing my GCSEs.*

Whilst beginning to turn his attention toward a career which did not involve playing, Adam continued to compete throughout his first year of studying A-Levels despite having surgery. I perceived that he looked on this time with a level of regret as he described himself “being in no-man’s land”; spreading his time thinly across both playing and studying, neither of which were being fulfilled to his own self-nominated expectations. As such, this
mismanagement of time resulted in Adam failing an AS-Level and therefore ending his hopes of studying physiotherapy at university. With both a career as a professional sportsman and as a physiotherapist no longer viable, Adam decided to direct his studies to sport science:

*I thought, well, I like science and I like sport so, I like the application of the two. And by this point I already knew a bit more because of the media coverage it was getting so I thought ‘yeah, it seems like a decent course which I would like to do’ so then I decided to apply. This is what I had in my head at the time: instead of being an average person in a top, top course, I thought I could have been a bigger fish in a smaller pond in sports science.*

Throughout his undergraduate degree, Adam’s sole focus was on his academic career and described that, while he still occasionally enjoyed playing, he refused to become distracted from his academic study. It was during this time which Adam admittedly “found his feet” as a student, as the structure of studying at university allowed him to engage his critical thinking abilities in a way which was not available to him at college. On course for achieving a first class degree, he began to reflect on his time spent as a player and envisioned how he could use his academic skills and scientific understanding to help others:

*I always thought that looking back, players of my age weren’t getting enough support, [support] that they could have got in order to develop them as players and giving them the best opportunity at making it professional. So I thought, well, that could be an area which I could focus on and make better. Through the evolution of sports science over the past few years and the*
emphasis sports clubs are now putting on it in terms of strength and conditioning, that is when I started thinking ‘oh, that’s an area and career I think would be satisfying with the experience I’ve had myself, where I’ve not had the best provision as a player.

Adam was spurred by the excitement of learning how to apply academic research into elite sport and the prospect of turning into a career. He realised that in order to discover whether he would enjoy this role as a long term career prospect, he would need to acquire some experience.

4.3 Volunteering at the Elsinoire Eagles: ‘Get your image across early’

After a number of meetings with one of his undergraduate lecturers, a practising strength and conditioning coach for a number of years, Adam was given the opportunity to shadow him at the Elsinoire Eagles as an external deliverer of a number of speed and agility training sessions. Excited by the prospect of learning from a highly sought after strength and conditioning coach in a professional environment, Adam understood this role as an opportunity to showcase himself as a competent practitioner in front of his lecturer in the hope that he would aid Adam’s his long term career development:

[I wanted to] basically show my worth really, to show that I had the potential, and to show that I had the grounded theoretical knowledge in that area, and to basically get buy-in from him as my mentor. Ultimately if you get buy-in from them then it’s like you’re worthy of being mentored fully; if you show that you’re willing and capable then they’re going to be more enthused to put more time into you and help you develop as a practitioner.
Having learned in secondary school to ask questions of his teachers and mentors, Adam employed this tactic in attempt to gain “buy-in” from his tutor in the hope that this would eventually lead to his tutor assisting him in his career development:

*Because I knew [he] was only leading with the speed sessions, I wanted to pick his brains about what he knew. Also to see how the speed sessions fitted in with the overall structure of training; it was a good chance for me to focus on the speed stuff with him so I could ask specific questions on speed and kind of get more direct experience.*

In addition, Adam also felt that it was important to get “buy-in” from the players to further enhance his reputation in front of his tutor. He mentioned how he believed that “people always take note and kind of evaluate you straight off” and how “they’re very quick, the players, to make a judgement”. As such, he was aware of the consequences of failing to quickly transfer a positive image to the players:

*I think getting your image across straight away is important for getting the support of the players. If you don’t get the buy-in from the players straight away and show that you’re knowledgeable and can enforce what you’re trying to plan, then it won’t be as optimal. It’s important to get the players to work hard; if they don’t really take on board what you’re saying, if you don’t get that image across, they won’t learn anything and it creates the perception that you’re not as good as you may be.*
When questioned as to when he developed this understanding of the importance of “getting your image across straight away”, he recalled:

*I’d learnt that through playing myself. I always remember that we had an assistant coach at an amateur team who I think was quite new to coaching. We were only fourteen or fifteen, he came down and delivered a few sessions that were rubbish so that had a knock on effect on how the whole squad saw him, even at a later age. He set that image of not being very good right at the start, and even though he probably got better, it’s very hard to win that back. I think sort of learning that as a kid through playing made me take that approach of showing knowledge straight away.*

In order to protect himself from any negativity regarding his practice, Adam made himself readily available to talk to the players on a personal level which aided him to showcase his knowledge through the answering of practice-related questions. In doing so he heavily relied on his academic study of sports science and used evidence based practice as a protective blanket when faced with player inquisitions. Additionally, Adam also commented that whilst he was quick to offer answers, he was wary of how giving misinformation could also lead to negatively impacting on his long term professional image:

*I used general chit-chat at the start, getting onside personally with people makes you feel more comfortable to then start putting your S&C knowledge forward. I’d definitely be open to answering any questions and made sure I was thorough with my answers, trying to link what I was doing with evidence based practice; it’s very hard to discredit evidence if you have it there*
quantifiably. Initially, I think you’ve got to be confident in what you know, but also what you don’t know. If you give a piece of advice or information to an athlete and it might not necessarily be correct, they can take that further into their career and might have a detrimental effect on them. If they get asked ‘oh, who told you that?’ and they say you, that can discredit you as a practitioner and build up a bad name for yourself.

Adam noted how “a couple of times, as I moved up the performance pathway when I was a player, and moved up in terms of standard I was playing at, I found out that I’d been taught things that were rubbish and that I’d been doing techniques and things wrong because of a coach who didn’t really know his stuff at the time”. He was aware of how the information he might have given to an athlete could lead to a lack of job satisfaction and ultimately cost him his job:

You’re never going to get everything right but it’s always that frequency of getting most of your stuff right. Ultimately, if you don’t get the buy-in from the players, if they perceive you negatively, over time that’s going to be detrimental to your job. Job satisfaction is going to go down because you’re not getting the result that you want to strive to and they’re not going to get the result either. Ultimately you could lose your job. It’s a results based industry and if you don’t get buy-in, players can run amuck and make you out as though you don’t know what you’re doing even though you might have a load of experience or qualifications or whatever.
Despite these early efforts, Adam’s placement would not last as long as he wanted as he told of how “we ended up only doing two sessions” despite being scheduled to be at the club for a six-week block. Describing how “there was obviously other stuff going on that I wasn’t aware of and wouldn’t hazard a guess to what was happening”, this was Adam’s first experience of some of the difficulties that working with other professionals can entail:

*We went in on a night to do a speed session which included technique work and into some max effort sprints, but prior to that they had just done a full hour lower body weights session. So we’re there with a full session plan, find this out from other members of staff so then he [Adam’s tutor] had to work on his feet and adapt the session very quickly.*

This forced Adam to question the club’s strength and conditioning coach’s feelings towards them being there as an external provider. He described that

*at the time I thought it might have been just an oversight, but looking back I think he didn’t care about what we were trying to do. He probably did it to show that he was in charge and he could do what he wanted because of that.*

Despite admittedly not having ‘too much interaction’ with the coach, Adam described that this event in particular was his first real encounter with some of the potential difficulties in working as a strength and conditioner. Alongside learning the importance of ‘being reactive’ and ‘having the ability to quickly adapt your practice’, it was clear that Adam had also began to read the landscape from a micro-political perspective:
the coach probably had his own agenda and reasons for doing it, but what they were I wouldn’t hazard a guess, mainly because we were in and out so quick and I was just focusing on what I could learn practically.

Despite being disappointed about that lack of contact time at the club, Adam looked back on his placement with relative positivity. Encouraged that he had been recognised as a student who could positively represent the University in a professional setting, Adam believed that he had developed a ‘much better rapport’ with his tutor and hoped that this would ‘stand me in good stead for any future opportunities which might come about whilst I was still studying’.

4.4 Internship at Illyria Warriors: The Road to Employment

4.4.1 Getting “onside” with key staff

A number of weeks after commencing his third year of undergraduate study, Adam was presented with the opportunity to intern at the Illyria Warriors. From his recollection, the club had been in contact with Adam’s tutor asking for any potential candidates who would be able to assist the head of strength and conditioning with his delivery. As such, Adam was recommended for the role and believed this to be a direct response to impressing his tutor during his placement and due to his high standard of academic achievement.

After his experiences at the Elsinoire Eagles, Adam was keen to show that he could add immediate value to the club by his presence. He wanted to showcase that he had the knowledge to be able to support his line managers by conveying himself as a knowledgeable, evidence based practitioner who had a willing to question and learn from his superiors:
Short term [this] creates a development opportunity for yourself. Getting the buy-in and showing worth, they’re more likely to push you to develop because they’ll see potential in you. Long term you have got to show that you’re ultimately worthy of employment and that you’ve got a position in the club that is needed.

In addition of long term career development, upon entering the club, Adam’s aim was to secure future employment. He quickly sought to gain approval from Ben; the head of strength and conditioning, who would act as Adam’s line manager throughout his placement. Adam learned that Ben had been an established strength and conditioning coach in rugby league for a number of years and, on their first meeting, Adam admitted to feeling “quite nervous because it was the first interaction with someone who had the job” that he wanted. Adam hoped that he could show himself as being “someone who he could rely on”, “enthusiastic” and “approachable” so that “he would be much more open and see value in having me”. In his own words Adam “wanted him to invest time in me by talking to me and discussing things with me”:

He questioned me a lot. It helped me to understand and determine what he thought was important even if I didn’t know the answer. I would go off and look it up because I knew that he thought it was worth questioning me about. That helped with him liking me and getting on with me, especially in the beginning. He was aware that I may know things that he may not so we had quite a few conversations where questions would pop up, I had the resources there at university to help, things like research and books, I think I added value by doing that.
Ben was Adam’s direct link at the club and he believed that by showcasing himself in this manner, this would result in a positive image being filtered through to the other members of staff. Adam hoped that this would aid in presenting himself as capable of employment in front of the backroom staff and to this end, Adam strived to maintain a consistent image towards other particular staff members. In experiencing first-hand, the dynamics of how backroom staff roles are interlinked, he perceived all the staff to be very “close knit” in their relationships, especially between Ben and Scott, the club’s physiotherapist. Adam was undoubtedly very aware that, due to the relatively small number of staff members, it was important to his image that he got everybody “on side” as quickly as possible, especially Scott, as he was aware of how “physios work closely with the S&C staff” from his time spent as a player:

*I think maintaining a consistent image towards all members of staff is important. Getting him [Scott] onside would help because, basically I see every member of staff as a team. Staff members all have their own individual roles but they all come together as a collective, so it’s important to get onside with all members of staff and not to divide yourself by not making yourself approachable [to everyone]. It’s a lot easier to get certain members of staff onside than others because of the time aspect, if you spend more time with people through your job then you’re going to get onside better than if you deal with people intermittently.*

Adam began to strategically seek out Scott as a secondary staff member to impress, observing his practice and questioning him when possible. He described how he was
“battling with the age thing as at the time I was only 21” and that he felt as though he had to “prove that I’m good enough to be there”. Through questioning Scott, Adam hoped to learn his methods and quickly found that they were interested in exploring similar approaches to improving the team’s performance. In particular, he mentioned how Scott was “keen to explore how training load affected injury rates, and that’s something that I had looked at and was interested in whilst I was at uni”. By conversing with Scott regarding their shared interests, Adam hoped this would “consolidate [his] position” and lead to establishing himself in Scott’s estimation as a knowledgeable practitioner and worthy of future employment. He stated how he was aware that there was “strength in numbers” and he thought that it was important that the backroom staff “work as a team and are on the same page”:

*I understood the importance of teamwork in the backroom staff just as much as teamwork on the pitch, and that had obviously come through my playing days. You get things done much better if you’re cohesive and if you work as a team. I thought, in order to do that you have to communicate to people and speak to them, so I thought that would be the approach that would yield the best results for me.*

The majority of the time spent volunteering at the club was observing Ben and Scott, who he admitted he formed a positive relationship with through both questioning and his preparation for being questioned. Whilst he hoped this would aid in his efforts towards full-time employment, Adam was aware that ultimately the decision would be left to the head coach, Lee. However, Adam pointed out that, due to various logistical reasons, the time spent
interacting with him was less than he desired. In attempt to make himself noticed, Adam made an effort to place himself in positions which allowed for conversation to happen:

*Mainly at the beginning it was just the time aspect because, obviously with the structure of the S&C, if I was not doing anything directly then it would be a pitch session which Lee would have taken where I would be at the side. Whereas if it was an S&C session, it would be on the field or in the gym so I would be involved in that and Lee would be away. At lunch time, I did make an effort to talk to them and interact with them but I wasn’t a decision maker and I wasn’t really needed to interact with them, but when I had the chance I made sure I did.*

Despite his attempts, Adam admitted that he could have done more to interact with Lee and reminisced that he should have supressed his shyness in group settings to showcase himself better:

*I think I’d be a lot more selfish in how you go about your development. I think I would make more of an effort with the head coach because ultimately he’s the decision maker with getting a job. I’d kind of think about strategies to get him onside a bit more. I’d be more vocal, but then it came down to time again, the days turned into weeks and then it kind of makes it harder. It was just the contact time issue which made me closer to Ben and Scott, which I think comes naturally. Looking back, I should have done more. Me as a person, I wouldn’t say I’m shy but if I’m one on one then I’ll get across what I want to get across, but not always in a group situation. If I knew then what I know*
now, getting to know the coaches on a personal level can have a very big impact on what happens in terms of employment.

### 4.4.2 Player power

From his early experiences as a practising sportsman, Adam was aware of the power which can be exerted by the players in terms of establishment as a competent practitioner. He philosophised that teams ultimately revolve around the players, whilst the job of the coaching staff was to accommodate their individual and collective development. Adam understood that the image the players had of him could lead to an increase in chances of promotion from volunteer to staff member very quickly:

> I think as soon as an opportunity arises, I’m quite sure that the coaching staff take on the opinion of the players in deciding who gets what. As any other member of staff, the players build a network of contacts just like the coaches do, so in terms of employment, when players get asked for an opinion, they have a network of staff they’ve already worked with, so getting them on board and keeping in touch with them can stand you in good stead. So if you can make yourself look positive to the club and the players, then you’re going to increase your chances of giving a good impression to everyone if you can give a good impression to the players, your practice might not even be that good compared to others, but if they like you, trust you, and see that you help them and have a good rapport, then ultimately, that counts massively.

However, due to his role as being mainly observational, he found himself feeling “like a bit of a spare part”, especially in light of what he perceived as the high profile status
of the players. Adam was aware that he would be immediately judged by the players and his value would be questioned by them so wanted to “get off on the right foot” in presenting himself as a knowledgeable coach who could add additional support to their success. Unfortunately, engaging with the players would be much more difficult than expected as Ben had failed to give him any kind of introduction:

There was never any introduction to the players. I kind of just slipped in at the side so… one session I wasn’t there the next minute ‘oh who’s this guy?’

[It would have helped] if they had all gathered them round at the start and said ‘this is Adam, he wants to be an S&C coach and he’ll be assisting and shadowing me during the preseason’ just to explain to the players who I am and what I’m there for; they didn’t even know my name.

This lack of introduction, compounded with Adam’s reticent personality, forced him to worry that the perception he wanted to present had not been achieved. He described how he felt “daunted” at the thought of establishing relationships with the players in light of their status as experienced, full-time, professional athletes. Adam desperately wanted for the players to see his presence as important as, in his own words “it can get to the point where people question why you’re there”. Seeing this incident as having the potential to affect his tenure and therefore his long term career development and hopes for employment, Adam attempted to engage with the players one on one to establish the impression he had wished to provide. In order to achieve this, he sought out conversing with players at any opportunity he could find and attempt to use “any sort of association [he] could think” to try “to maximise the time [he] had with them at any given opportunity”. In addition, he explained that he would always “chip in with knowledge if they asked” and attempted to talk to the
players in “a way that they would understand” in order to showcase himself as both knowledgeable and approachable. Interestingly, he used the same tactic with the players as he used with Ben in researching answers away from the training ground to the questions he could not answer immediately:

*Especially, if it’s something that’s important to them, prep it, send it back, rather than try and give an answer off the top of the head which might be wrong. It’s like a doctor and a patient; if you ask a doctor about some symptoms or some sort of disease or medical illness and they give you an answer then that answer sticks in your head for a long time because it’s from somebody knowledgeable. So if somebody asks me something about strength and conditioning about why is a certain exercise bad or good and you’re not entirely confident in your answer there is potential for that answer to then stick in the memory of that person, which can have a carry on effect. So making sure what you’re saying is actually true, or based on sound knowledge is important.*

**4.4.3 The role he was waiting for**

Despite his efforts with Ben and Scott, Adam noted that he continually felt self-conscious about the nature of his role in front of the players. He described having doubts as to the image the players had of him and worrying whether they would question “what [he was] actually bringing to the table”, regardless of his interactions with them. Whilst he believed he was developing his skills for his long term career aspirations and that he was adding value to Ben and Scott’s practice through his assistance, the lack of definitive role
coupled with not being officially introduced to the players led Adam to feel “insecure that the players wouldn’t see me as a reference point and that it limited their reasons of approaching me”. A number of months into his placement, the club invested in GPS technology for the players and, knowing that Ben had little experience in this field, Adam saw this as an opportunity to finally gain a concrete role he desperately desired. After a number of conversations with Ben, Adam pushed himself forward to taking responsibility for the new technology and hoped that in acquiring this role that he would be actively promoting himself for future employment:

I thought ‘it’s needed anyway’, especially in professional sport in terms of how a strength and conditioner evaluates their own practice and their own drill development. I think [GPS technology is] a key tool in that so I knew it would be beneficial for me to develop my skills in that area. I saw it as an opportunity to get myself in there and simultaneously develop my strength and conditioning practice. So it was a way of getting in there to add value in the short term, but in the long term to be thinking of employment in that capacity.

Knowing that he possessed a high level of computer literacy, Adam recognised that he would be able to offer his unique skills to the benefit of the team by getting the maximum capabilities from the technology available. This way, the team would have an opportunity to recognise not only his value, but accept him as a useful member of the coaching staff:

Because I was on the back foot at the start in terms of people’s perceptions, it’s like having worth, self-worth in the dynamic of the team. Instead of being
just someone on the side line as an assistant, it would help me integrate and become maybe indispensable to the team because I had that particular role.

Whereas if I was just solely assisting or observing, I’m like the side part to Ben instead of being my own thing. It was kind of a niche for me in the club, because ultimately instead of being the guy that was just observing; in terms of people’s perceptions, I had a role, the players knew I had a role.

In attaining a definitive role at the club, Adam found that this indeed did aid in the perception which the players had for him as he was soon afforded the nickname “GPS Adam”, an endearing term which he embraced and became proud of. He had attained recognition from Ben, Scott and the players, and he reminisced that his time spent during this year was “overall a success”. Despite his internship coming to an eventual end due to the completion of his undergraduate degree and consequent departure from the city, Adam was confident that his performance had led to placing him in the best possible position for consideration for future employment. This feeling would be confirmed by a conversation with Ben on his final day at the training ground:

He was sort of hopeful that something could come off the year after. He was fairly positive that if anything did come up then I’d be the first in line to be put forward for it. He said that he would make the case to have me in so I was fairly confident that I would get an opportunity.

Not only had Adam achieved his goals of learning professional practice and securing his position for potential employment, he described of having learnt how “developing those relationships can really help in terms of staking your claim at a club”. Additionally, Adam
considered that “showing willingness to the job and turning up multiple times a week without getting paid” proved to his co-workers that he had “a dedication to the team, which makes them think that you really want to be there”. Overall, Adam described that his internship provided him with a platform which “grew my confidence”, “increased my knowledge” and “bettered my capability to build relationships with people”; aspects which he believed “helped me massively going forward, whether it was with that club or somewhere else”.

4.5 Employment

4.5.1 Aims, role and expectation

During the summer months after the completion of both his internship and his undergraduate degree, Adam described that “he heard whispers from my tutor that there might have been a potential opportunity coming up at Illyria alongside their partnership with the university”. After a number of weeks, Adam received a phone call from his tutor telling him that the club had requested a full-time assistant strength and conditioning coach to manage the GPS technology and that his name had been put forward. In light of his successful internship, Adam was “really happy because it was a chance to be based in a professional club full-time and get paid for doing it”. In conjunction with employment, Adam would also undertake a PhD. It was explained to him that not only would his presence benefit the club, in that they required an extra staff member to fulfil a role, but he would also be able to collect the necessary data to be used for his research.

In believing that his actions during his internship had paid off, during the month preceding the start of his employment at the Illyria Warriors, Adam developed a strong understanding of what he wanted to achieve from his tenure. Seeing his position as the next
step in his career progression, Adam’s aim was to retain employment until the completion of his PhD, further develop his practical skills, and to build on the working relationships with his co-workers he had previously established.

At the beginning of his tenure, Adam described feeling “really happy” at being given the opportunity to work at a professional club and his quick progression in becoming an employee. This positive feeling manifested itself in his inclusion at a preliminary staff meeting prior to the start of pre-season training in which each member of the performance staff, as well as the club’s chief executive, was present. It was during this meeting when Adam learned that he would be working alongside Ben, who had been retained as the club’s strength and conditioning coach, as well as two new members of staff; Mark, the new Head Coach and Luke, a newly appointed Head of Performance, who would be both Adam and Ben’s line manager.

Whilst Adam thought that he had “already shown value in the internship in terms of the GPS side of things”, he was now presented with the challenge of once again establishing his position in light of Mark and Luke’s appointments. In response to these new staff members and their positions, Adam expected them to be the major decision makers in the staffing structure and in deciding how his role would be driven forward. Ultimately, he looked to them to aid in his integration with the players and to take leading roles in promoting staff cohesion:

*I expected them to be sort of forward thinking in integrating me into that team as quick as possible, making me feel comfortable around players and other members of staff. It’s just a fundamental thing if you’re managing*
people, to get the best out of their staff. I think it’s a key thing in management, all the way up the hierarchy, to integrate all members of staff. It’s driven into players from an early age about the importance of teamwork to successful performance and I think that should mirror the backroom staff.

Furthermore, Adam also expected constant communication between all members of staff, again reflecting on the importance of this in any team. Ultimately, he believed that he would be guided by the senior staff, who would offer him a clear structure of his role and his everyday duties:

I was originally thinking that the support would come from above and make very clear guidelines as to what they wanted, what they wanted to focus on and what they wanted to develop from a physical side. Yeah, I expected guidance from people who are ultimately paid more, had more experience, they’re the people who should be training other people below them as quick as possible because that ultimately makes their job easier so that they can focus on the things that they need to focus on being a higher member of staff. So, yeah, I thought it’s always in the best interest of the person above to get the person below onside because ultimately without people on the bottom of the ladder working tirelessly to deliver what people higher up need, then the club can’t be successful.

4.5.2 Staff relationships: “The door’s always open”

In meeting Mark, the new head coach, Adam described how he wanted to “get his foot in the door with him as soon as possible” so he could establish himself as a good
practitioner and worthwhile member of staff. From his point of view, he argues how “you have to showcase what you can do directly to the main guy” as “from a career perspective, you have to get him on board enough so that he relies on you”. From Adam’s understanding, Mark had a number of years’ experience as both an assistant and head coach at various different clubs and had entered the club with a strong reputation, which Adam was keen to show that he was not intimidated by:

*Being someone who has grown up playing team sports, my mind-set has always been that we do what we need to do for the team and that everyone has their role in that. I was keen to showcase that. I assumed that everyone else had the same mind-set; that we were all little cogs in wheels and we were all going to do what we can to make the team wins. That’s the ultimate goal, if we’re all contributing then we should want the team to do as best they can no matter what.*

However, Adam described that the dynamic of the initial staff meeting “didn’t lend itself towards getting an opportunity to display that straight away” but took solace from Mark commenting that his “door was always open” from the beginning and that “if you need anything that you can come to me”. Adam was keen to take this on board and despite not having established himself personally, it made him feel able to develop a positive relationship in the near future. Adam aimed to show Mark that he could provide “worthwhile”, “useable” data that would “help him make his decisions” in terms of training and player selection by tailoring his collected GPS data specifically to Mark’s needs. By providing data in this way to establish himself with his head coach, Adam ultimately thought that this could have potential benefit in terms of long term career progression:
Knowing the importance of networking in terms of this job specifically, a lot of jobs come up from the inside without it being advertised. People are changing positions constantly and at the time it was important because if he lost his job or if he moved anywhere else, you’ve always got that port of call in terms of he knows what you can do. If he’s happy with what you do, if that position came up somewhere else then he’s more likely to want someone who he knows can do that job. So it’s sort of beneficial to keep him open to you in terms of wanting to work somewhere else.

In addition to Mark, Adam also recognised that Luke, the newly appointed head of performance, was a key figure in developing his specific skill set as a practising strength and conditioning coach. After the general staff meeting, Adam was involved with a separate meeting with Luke and Ben in which Adam was given the specifics of his job role. Adam described that the meeting was generally led by Luke and that he was “eager to take on board what he wanted me to do considering his experience, and show that I was capable of doing what was asked of me”. On his first impressions of Luke, Adam mentioned how “he seemed confident in getting the players and people onside”. However, it was Luke’s scientific knowledge which “came off the tongue” which most impressed Adam. Consequently, Adam saw this as a prime opportunity to learn specific strength and conditioning techniques from Luke who had been a practising coach in numerous top-flight professional clubs for a number of years. In an attempt to achieve Luke’s “buy-in”, he prepared himself for any potential questioning by re-reading numerous strength and conditioning articles:
I was sort of preparing myself in terms of knowledge; was he going to pull me up on things I might not have the confidence on? I was quite apprehensive about making sure that everything I said was spot on.

He mentioned how “I wanted to show that I could do what he wanted, but also that I had the ability to offer a lot more” in the hope that this would convey the image of “someone who wanted to be there and develop the role long term”. By being valued in his role and showing himself as a competent, knowledgeable practitioner, Adam believed this would help him integrate into the club with the staff and the players alike and hoped this would encourage Luke to push his development even further:

You want to be given that platform where you think ‘yeah, I am appreciated and what I’m doing is actually valued by the rest of the staff’ and that sort of follows on and builds confidence with yourself as you think ‘they see it as really important, they see it as integral to their decision making’ and by me seeing that what I’m doing is integral to their [the rest of the staff’s] practice, that will ultimately push me forward as well as you know things have to be done right.

In understanding that his role was one of “supplementing the decision making by providing data”, it was Adam’s opinion that he would feel respected in his role, which then would “help in terms of job satisfaction” in that he needed “to feel like they need you there in that position, because if not, it’s like ‘what’s the point of me being here?’” The early interactions with staff gave Adam the impression that he would be able to succeed in his aim of progressing as a strength and conditioner through building positive relationships with his
new co-workers and feeling valued. Yet, despite feeling enthused by these early interactions, especially Mark’s comment of “the door is always open”, it would not be long before Adam would be faced with events he had not yet been prepared for.

4.5.3 Losing the confidence in your mentor

Upon entering the start of the season, Adam told of how he believed that his practical skills would rapidly progress due to becoming an employee as in addition to being involved with the decision making process of the team, he would also be able to learn the details of Luke’s practice. In focusing on improving as a practitioner, Adam showed self-awareness in understanding the limitations of his own knowledge by describing how he continually questioned Luke regarding his strength training/gym-based practices, recognising this as Luke’s major strength. However, as time progressed and Adam’s contact time with Luke increased, he began to see what he considered to be gaps in his newly-found mentor’s knowledge in particular areas. Adam described how, in a number of conversations regarding the players’ pre-season GPS data, he believed Luke to have a lack of “basic, fundamental, physiological knowledge” which consequently forced Adam to silently question his competence. For example, Adam reminisced how Luke “seemed to provide arbitrary numbers to define fatigue levels without really, what I thought, having any evidence to underpin them” and how “from a conditioning aspect, the recovery time between sets and reps wasn’t always aligning up with what he said he was trying to develop in terms of energy systems and things”. Rather than viewing Luke’s knowledge gaps as a potential pitfall to his development, Adam thought that this would be the prefect chance for him to show the club his own competencies as a knowledgeable practitioner in his own right, and somebody who could be a vital cog in the makeup of the backroom staff:
Initially I thought that would be a chance for me to push, and improve things and show my worth. I’m strong on the physiology side so I thought I could fill that gap. I actually saw it as a positive opportunity really, it’s pretty inconceivable that someone is going to be an expert in every single area, that’s why I think the best, sort of, partnerships and backroom staff relationships, from what I’ve seen, are the people who are open to the mind set of that and focus on the collaboration of information.

In this regard, Adam began to research other areas which he thought might also have been significant for the team’s development, in particular the link between training load and injury rates. Doing this, he thought would:

would be a good start and look good in front of everybody, the head coach, the CEO, because when players are off the pitch they’re costing the club money, so I thought they’d love it. My initial perception of team sports and what I thought a backroom staff should have been like – it’s like trying to push players to always find that extra edge to get better. I ultimately thought that same attitude would reflect on the staff members as well. So I thought that if another member of staff had come up with an idea or come up with evidence based recommendations, I thought Luke or other members of staff would sort of jump at the information.

In particular, Adam thought Luke would be “really appreciative” for bringing in an aspect of practice which Adam believed would be beneficial for the team’s success. Adam described how:
Even though [Luke] brought the monitoring of training into the club on a massive scale compared to what was there before, he never mentioned the training load and injury rate connection, so I thought it would be something new to him. There’s enough evidence to support that it’s an important area to look at and I think, at the time, if I brought the injury-load thing in, then it’s going to benefit the team so why would he not want that? Again, it goes back to that thing of what our aim should be, in that we should all want the team to win, at the end of the day. If we want the team to win, then we want injury rates to go down and get our best players on the pitch, no matter what.

Additionally, Adam described how he also attempted to re-develop a template spreadsheet that had been provided to him by Luke. As part of his duties, Adam used this spreadsheet to analyse daily training data gathered via the GPS technology and in believing that Luke’s knowledge on this area might not have matched his own, Adam questioned the spreadsheet’s algorithms to provide worthwhile data. He described: “I thought I could make it better, and at the end of the day, I saw it that I was in control of that data, I was the one managing it every day, I sort of knew what Luke wanted to report so I thought I could make a better spreadsheet”. Adam recalled how the spreadsheet “was designed for an individual athlete and trying to use it for thirty-odd players was nearly impossible” and, more importantly to Adam that “looking through the formulas, it just gave you a random number with not much rationale behind it so it didn’t really mean anything even though we were basing our training from it”. From this, he attempted to
put in some evidence based additions which could tell us week-to-week changes in training load rather than just day to day stuff, which at the time was just coming out as a massive indicator of injury risk from all the research.

Whilst Adam believed that researching additional data would bolster his position as an ancillary staff member, the events that succeeded these efforts would derail his entire standing within the team. He recalled a specific moment whilst sat at his desk and “casually approached by Luke, kind of out of the blue in a real non-descript way”:

Luke said to me that Mark was getting confused with the reports. Yeah, he said that [Mark] was getting confused with my interpretation and that he [would] speak to Mark directly, so I should send the reports to Luke and then he would speak to Mark. I felt pretty shocked by how he just randomly came up to me in that way, it took me by surprise because I thought I was providing the data in a way that was being understood and in a way that they wanted, but then I was kind of doubting myself.

In light of this event, Adam described that he felt as though he had lost an important responsibility. He told of how Mark failed to integrate himself with the staff on any in depth level and that sending his reports was the only real interaction he had with his head coach. Feeling as though he had lost an important link in the club; one that he wanted to impress, Adam felt his effectiveness in the team had reduced:
I had an inner drive to want to contribute to the conversations on how the data could drive training and after that had happened, I thought that maybe that could affect me long term in terms of, well, if they just wanted someone to provide them with the data then anybody could do that and why would they need me in particular?

However, after a short while, Adam was surprised to find that what had actually occurred was entirely different to what he first thought:

A few weeks later, Mark actually came to me and asked why I wasn’t sending him the reports directly, and I said “because Luke had told me to send them to him directly and that he would speak to you”, so then Mark told me that he wanted me to send them to him directly that made me think that, well, he wasn’t confused by them and he actually wanted to get my insight on things and it made me think ‘why was Luke doing that?’.

Adam made sense of what Luke had done by reflecting on his own actions and concluded that whilst he thought he was “being completely transparent and trying to make recommendations to ultimately change practice”, these might have negatively impacted on Luke’s practice in front of Mark and the rest of the staff:

The data, at times, negatively impacted on Luke’s practice. For example, the pre-season data that we collected, the data negatively impacted on Luke’s perception of his practice. One week specifically at the start of pre-season, I worked out that we had around a two hundred percent increase in the total
distance that the players had ran from the week before which then had a massive knock on effect for our rate of soft tissue injuries which went through the roof over the following weeks.

This subsequently led Adam to believe that Luke had actions were embedded in the preservation of his own reputation. He described how he thought Luke “had sold himself as an expert in everything to everyone, so he couldn’t have anyone seen to be better than him in anything” and had consequently tried to “restrict the opportunities which I could display that I was progressing and gaining more importance as a member of the backroom staff” in light of his critiques of Luke’s practice. He stated that he had learned a valuable lesson in that “it massively opened my eyes to how people have their own agendas on things; he was looking out for himself and I didn’t expect that at all. Basically, teamwork didn’t exist in the backroom staff at all in that place”. As a result of this, Adam began to silently question every aspect of Luke’s practice and doubted the information he was providing:

As soon as you lose that confidence in your mentor, or somebody above you with more experience than you, once you lose that aspect, you start doubting what he’s saying [about] the things he’s saying he does know about, so you end up going back and having to look at that yourself. So the actual mentoring aspect of Luke had disappeared because I was having to go back and look myself and confirm what he was actually telling me.

For Adam this was an act of protecting his own long-term career development. Adam stated that he “didn’t want, long-term, to adopt methods or practice, or knowledge on areas, and regurgitate whatever I had learned off Luke, to then ultimately find out that it wasn’t
correct”. Yet despite this, Adam did not directly question Luke regarding his practices or his actions as “he sorts of put like a shell over him, a protective type of dismissive thing whenever you tried to talk to him on that level”. Adam saw this as a reflection of their respective hierarchical positions which allowed Luke to be “stern and abrupt” with his language and “deviate the topic of conversation away quite quickly”, as “Luke probably knew that because of his position in the club, he probably knew that I wouldn’t have been as equally stern and abrupt to pull the conversation back on point”. Additionally, Adam believed that Luke would have seen any in-depth questioning as an attack on Luke’s knowledge and that this would have negative impacted Adam’s career further down the line in his tenure. Adam therefore continued to conduct himself in ways which were expected of him, despite thinking that his time could have been spent more productively. He mentioned how “they wanted all training sessions monitored live” which involved Adam “sat outside freezing cold for ninety minutes in front of the laptop” despite his understanding that “the wouldn’t use the live data for anything anyway, it was all for show and not actually benefitting anyone at all”. In these actions, he described how “it slogged me down and ultimately I was like ‘what’s the point of me even being here?’”. He continued such tasks because he “didn’t want people saying that I wasn’t doing my job. I had to show some proper value somewhere and actively display that, so I had to carry on even though I didn’t want to”. Realising that his mentorship and role was steadily deteriorating and that the recommendations he was trying to put forward were not being utilised, Adam described that he began to feel “worthless”, and that “he couldn’t wait to get home most days”. Adam admitted that “I thought about quitting a few times” but in looking for other opportunities he realised that “I needed to stay to get the opportunities that I wanted further down the line” and despite feeling “trapped in that aspect of things, I just had to see it as a stepping stone to where I wanted to be”. Adam summarised the events thus:
It was a very much a slow burning process over time. But as I started to see that the recommendations that I was giving wasn’t being implemented, I started to feel like what is the point? What I’m doing is worthless and what was the point of going to that level if it was never going to be implemented at that level? Which, looking back, I could have quite easily taken to what Luke was saying, and what he wanted out of the data. It would have taken me half the time, but that’s not what I wanted, as time went on just following that same process, it starts to stifle you professionally, it starts to make you think well ‘I’m better than this’ in terms of what I was delivering. Even though Luke was my line manager, that was my area. In any sort of employment, you give someone a minimal level of requirements that they need to meet the demands of the job but ultimately if they want to give more and push more in that specific role, then the manager should be open to that and accommodating to that because ultimately, if you drive that side of things forward then that can drive the whole staff forward. Everyone expects the players to drive forward their preparation and attitude towards training so equally, we should be the same as staff members; there shouldn’t be that sort of restriction to drive things forward and that’s the perception I got as time went on.

4.5.4 Trust

Adam’s feeling of restriction and lack of worth in his position was compounded over the year he spent at the Illyria Warriors and manifested itself in numerous ways. For
example, Adam reminisced how, after a relatively collaborative start between himself, Luke and Ben, Adam “ended up pretty much being tea boy” and detailed how:

*At the start, we had a balance of who made brews, who made cups of tea.*

*Sometimes Luke would look over to me from the other side of the gym and make a gesture [as if he was drinking from a cup], which at first, I found pretty funny. But then it started to become every single time. I don’t think he ever made me a brew once and that it was like he was confirming his dominance over me.*

He stated how he thought this was “Luke’s way of showing that he was busy all the time, running around after the players” and “another way of showing that image that he was always doing something important”. Luke described how “I hated it in the end, but I felt like I had to do it to keep him on board and show him that I was willing to help him and Ben in that way, even though it made me feel a bit abused”.

In feeling forced into making Luke and Ben cups of tea, Adam described how his job satisfaction “dwindled over time” as a result. This added further negativity to not being able to have the impact on the development of the players’ training he wanted in his role. He told of how he had asked for session plans from Mark so he could categorise training drills to give the coaches a basic insight into their practice, yet his request again came to nought:

*It seemed like an incapability to even provide me with a basic session plan which made me think ‘do they not trust me with the session plans? Do they not want me to know things?’ I couldn’t understand, they had produced the*
plans anyway, so why didn’t they just CC me in the email and give me the plans that I needed to ultimately provide them with more relevant, contextualised information? So yeah, job satisfaction dwindled over time.

This, Adam believed was employed by Mark because “maybe he just couldn’t see how the tactic and the physical meet up” but was also a manifestation of what he saw as a wider, cultural issue:

That’s how those people stay in those positions, because they’re not transparent in what they do. They don’t want anyone to know things who don’t have to; every coach believes that what they’re doing gives them a huge tactical edge over the other teams but in reality it probably doesn’t add up to much.

As a result, Adam began feeling that he was “just there for being there’s sake” and that the impact he was having was minimal. When asked why he had not approached Luke regarding his concerns, he mentioned how he observed the relatively small community which the sport operated in and thought that approaching Luke may negatively impact his opportunities for future roles:

You feel sort of trapped in that aspect. You don’t want to upset the apple cart because you could leave that job but it could affect you down the line as well, so you have to make that balance between fulfilling what you want out of the role but at the same time not treading too much to impact you going forward. So, I was keen to keep him onside. I didn’t know that if there was a chance
that if I went in there negatively and undermined his position at the club, he would then undermine my capabilities of getting a position at a different club further down the line.

Adam’s feeling of being trapped was amplified by what he described as a lack of communication throughout the club which, in his opinion left Luke as the major link with Mark. He told of his annoyance that there was no “open platform to air these griefs” and that “no ideas were getting bounced about” due to a lack of any formal staff meetings set by Mark. It was Adam’s opinion that the club revolved around Luke and his ability to get buy-in from other stakeholders in the environment, and he perceived that “Luke was sort of driving things forward but in his own way; it was his way or the highway.” Adam saw Luke’s actions as attempts to “secure his position and consolidate people’s perceptions of him as the knowledgeable guy, the bee’s knees, the top guy”. On reflection, he explained Luke’s actions as “consolidating himself in term of future employment” as “if he got value from the players, for example, then if they move on to different clubs they can take that perception with them, which can help if he was ever looking for work elsewhere”. Adam described how he thought Luke had created a “perception of knowledge” due to the club having limited alternatives of expertise to critique his practice and that he had a “skill of getting people onside on a personal level”, which ultimately strengthened his position and made it difficult for Adam to approach anybody with his concerns, due to fear of Luke finding out which could have consequences for his position at the club:

I always sort of tended to keep those things to myself because I didn’t really know who to trust at the club. If I said things, then I didn’t know how it would impact my future at the club.
Feeling that he could not confide in anybody due to “Luke having the upper hand in terms of preference with other people”, Adam also expressed his regret in how his relationship with Ben had diminished due to Luke’s indirect intervention. He described a change in the “openness and ease to communicate” with Ben as “it was always them two together all the time” and “the actual available opportunity over the course of the season was limited” to talk to him. This was, in Adam’s opinion, due to hearing that Luke had secured Ben’s contract extension for another two years:

*I saw them get closer or, should I say Ben being more grateful of Luke when they managed to both secure extensions to their contracts and, from what I gathered, Luke very much pushed Ben’s extension. Luke kind of said that anyway, but not in so many words. I mean, if someone pushed your claim for a two-year extension, which is what [Ben] got, you can’t help but be grateful for that security.*

Making sense of this, Adam deduced that this was another act of self-preservation by Luke as he believed “Ben didn’t really have that ability to critique what Luke was doing, so he’s a strong ally for Luke in that way”. He described how this had taught him that “there’s always strength in numbers and the more people you have onside, the more likely you’ll get what you want”. Whilst he saw that “Ben was just happy to go along with [Luke]”, he had an understanding that the only other person who he could perhaps confide in was Scott, who had been retained as the club’s physiotherapist. Adam perceived that “he had the same sort of relationship with Luke that I had” and that “they were at logger heads quite a bit”. Here,
Adam described how “to be honest, I probably agreed with Luke that his physio practice wasn’t that good”, yet despite this

he displayed that he knew the importance of the data that I was trying to collect – whether he actually did or not and that he just told me that because he didn’t get on with Luke as well, I don’t know, but that social strength, having someone to talk to who seemed to be on the same wavelength in terms of the training load and injury stuff, at the time was a big strength.

However, still wary of how talking to Scott on any level, professional or personal, would look in front of Luke, Adam “tended to speak to Scott after everybody had left”, as doing this made him think that “it’s safe” to have a conversation whilst Luke was not present at the training ground.

A couple of times, I was speaking to Scott during the day and Luke would walk in. I would be having a chat with him making a cup of tea and Luke would pop up. Whether it was my own professional paranoia but he seemed to pop up at the times I was speaking to him. It was only a little aspect, it never got to the point where Luke would ask me what I was doing speaking to Scott, but I got the feeling that he wasn’t happy that I was speaking to him. I just felt paranoid, like every time I’d be talking to him, he’d turn up and try to earwig what we were talking about.

Ultimately, a combination of not being able to complete his job in the manner which he desired, a lack of communication between staff and Luke’s hold on the environment, led
to “no job satisfaction at all” for Adam during his time at the club. He stated that he “felt like the impact of what I was doing was really minimal” and that he was “just providing information for providing’s sake” rather than actually achieving his goal of becoming a key part of the decision-making process. After believing in the importance of keeping Luke “onside” for long term job opportunities, Adam told that he:

Tried to keep him onside by not being pushy, or forward with my recommendations which hampered my job satisfaction in itself. You shouldn’t have to be in that position that, if you see things in the data that can benefit the club, then you don’t feel like you can air them because they’ll be seen in a negative way.

Adam believed that he could not get his “message across” due to Luke not being “open to his own flaws” which boiled down to him “getting to write a thirty second email about what I thought the data was saying and then it getting locked away in a filing cabinet and not maximising the decision making”.

Adam’s expectations of his role, his attempts to secure his position in the club, the lack of communication throughout the staff members and Luke’s position in the hierarchy caused a “lack of worth” in Adam’s self-perception. In summary of his time, Adam reflects:

It was just grinding down the days. Which, that’s alright in the previous jobs that I had when I was sixteen or seventeen at McDonalds where you just want to grind the day out and it’s about clocking in and clocking off; getting in there, and getting done. When it gets to that position in a professional place
when it’s a job that you actually want to do, that can be really disheartening
and make you think ‘why did I go through all the agro of training up and
trying to be a strength and conditioner when you could get the same job
feeling from what I was doing when I was in McDonalds?’

The deterioration of Adam’s relationship with Luke and the subsequent struggles he faced with his role was compounded by the large amount of time he was required to spend at the club and subsequent lack of progress in his PhD. In his own words “half of the reason I was there in the first place was to collect enough data to help with my studies, as well as assist at the club and become a better practitioner”. Nearing the end of the season, Adam had a number of meetings with his postgraduate supervisors about the lack of progress he had shown in his written work. On the recommendation of his tutors, Adam left the club at the end of the season as he had acquired enough data to form the basis of one of his thesis chapters. Adam felt that he
couldn’t do any more at the club. They weren’t listening to my recommendations, mine and Luke’s relationship was breaking down and the whole thing had died a death in terms of me learning anything or becoming a better S&C coach.

He described how “it got to the point where I just didn’t care anymore about the club, I wanted to leave and focus on my PhD”. In light of his negative experiences, Adam went on to report that
the biggest thing I’ve learn from all this is how to deal with multiple people in a team environment that has a lot of pressures and volatility attached with it. You have to actively force yourself to engage in getting people onside and be seen as a good egg.

Additionally, he offered the advice of “being mindful of the individual agendas that people have, given their own environments and roles that they’re likely to be in”. In summation, Adam told of how he is still continuing his career in strength and conditioning but no longer has the same desire to work as part of a backroom staff in a professional sports team, due to his experiences at the Illyria Warriors not being “one of a kind”:

I thought that that experience would have been one of a kind. After focusing on my PhD and completing it over the next couple of years, it was only after that when I eventually got a similar role in a different club that I thought ‘no, it’s not a one of a kind environment’. I’ve made the decision that, I still like getting involved with clubs, but probably now only as an external provider. I’m still hoping that I’ll find a club that’ll buy into me and buy into what I can offer fully. But I have lower expectations now than when I was at Illyria in terms of what impact I can actually have on practice, which is not the most ideal mind-set when going into working with professional clubs but, they don’t help themselves. I just know that I’d never go into a club and be directly employed by them knowing what the environments are now.
Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This discussion will provide a theoretical interpretation of Adam’s narrative biography. The analysis will focus on the micro-politics of his experiences including theoretical explanations for his actions. The work of Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Kelchtermans and colleagues’ (1993; 2002a; 2002b; 2005; 2009a; 2009b) theories on micro-politics will be utilised to make sense of both of these facets.

5.2 Developing professional self-understanding

Adam’s story reveals a reality of strength and conditioning that is much more complex than the simple application of in-depth subject knowledge in a professional setting. Instead, the revelation is one of an experience embroidered with social and political action beyond his immediate specialist function. During analysis it became clear that underpinning his narrative was the desire to impress those with whom he interacted with in an effort to try and secure employment as a strength and conditioning coach. In each of his separate working environments (volunteering, internship and employment), Adam attached great value on being recognised as a more than competent practitioner in order to be recognised by his co-workers as worthy of acceptance, mentorship, career development and future employment. It was clear that Adam placed great importance on his “self” within his coaching roles, not only in terms of how he viewed himself but also in how he thought he was perceived by those around him.

Here, Adam’s story can be explained through the use of Kelchtermans’ (1993; 2005; 2009a) theory addressing “professional self-understanding”. Whilst Kelchtermans’ work was principally undertaken in the context of classroom teaching, numerous parallels can be
drawn to interpret Adam’s story. This is not the first study to draw such parallels; Kelchtermans’ findings have been used elsewhere in analysis of the strength and conditioning profession (e.g. Thompson et al., 2014) as well as broader sports coaching contexts (e.g. Jones, Thompson & Bailey, 2013; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; 2009b). According to Kelchtermans (1993; 2005; 2009a), an individual’s self-understanding refers to individual perception of self and personal belief of how others perceive their performances within their role. It is the self-understanding that refers to both the comprehension an individual has of themselves at a certain moment in time, and recognises this as a result of an ongoing process of making sense of one’s interaction with their environment and how these directly impact the “self” (Kelchtermans, 2005). As such, to disassociate the theory with a static notion of being, Kelchtermans (2005; 2009a; 2009b) noted how he purposefully avoided the term “identity” to instead align the idea of the “self” as dynamic and biographical in nature.

In terms of how Adam judged his professional self-understanding, this can be traced back to his early experiences as a youth team player. For Adam, the desire to become a strength and conditioning coach developed through the lack of support afforded to him after sustaining a performance debilitating injury that ended his chances of pursuing a career as a professional sportsman. In turn, I would argue that his self-judgement was based on his perceived ability to positively influence the players with whom he was working in light of his personal injury experiences as an adolescent. In response, Adam’s actions, how he perceived himself as a practitioner and how he responded to how he thought others view him, are all birthed from the desire to provide better service than he received himself. This interpretation could be theoretically explained using Kelchtermans’ (2005, 2009a; 2009b) notion of “the personal interpretive framework”; the process in which the individual develops their “professional self-understanding”. Kelchtermans (2009a) defines this concept
as ‘a set of cognitions, of mental representations that operates as a lens through which individuals look at their job, give meaning to it, and act in it’ (p. 260). Additionally, he argues that this framework guides interpretations and actions in particular contexts, but is at the same time also modified by and resulting from meaningful interactions (Kelchtermans, 2009a). In relation to Adam’s personal interpretive framework, a number of positive and negative elements developed through his tenures which can be best understood in relation to “self-image”, “self-esteem”, “job motivation”, “task perception” and “future perspective” (Kelchtermans, 1993; 2005, 2009a, 2009b).

The beginning of Adam’s story reveals how his educational interests provided him with an early sense of a self-image, an ideological notion of what it meant to be a strength and conditioning coach. Studying at university allowed him the opportunity to engage his critical thinking abilities alongside his interest “in how the body moves”; by applying academic research in elite sport Adam believed he could provide a better service to others in response to the treatment he received as a player after becoming injured. As such, upon entering each of his working environments, he continuously attempted to show evidence-based knowledge to the various stakeholders with whom he was working; he believed this to be the cornerstone of being a strength and conditioning coach. These actions can be understood in terms of Kelchtermans (1993; 2005; 2009a) concepts of “self-image” described as the way in which one typifies themselves in their profession. Here, Kelchtermans (1993; 2005; 2009a) argues that the self-image is based on self-perception and also on what others mirror back, and is therefore strongly influenced by the way in which one is perceived by others. To this end, Adam continuously attempted to showcase his knowledge, and subsequently that he was a competent strength and conditioning coach, to the various stakeholders with whom he worked with at each stage of his story.
Additionally, Adam recognised that in order to fulfil the requirements of what it meant to be a strength and conditioning coach, he needed a definitive role with individual responsibilities. In particular, he described how he felt particularly insecure whilst completing his internship at the Illyria Warriors as he was not afforded an official role other than to provide general assistance to Ben, his line manager. Compounded by not being given a formal introduction to the players, Adam described how he felt “like a spare part” in that he had no specific duties, and worried what impression this had provided the players and his co-workers with. However, being given eventual responsibility of the GPS technology left Adam with a strong sense of belonging in the team and eventually led to his employment in the following year.

During this time and prior to his employment, Adam’s self-image was strongly influenced by the players in particular as he specifically noted how he enjoyed receiving the characterised moniker of “GPS Adam”. Consequently, gaining this role and being referred to in this manner not only provided him with a positive self-image, but heighted his self-esteem. In Kelchtermans (2005, 2009a; 2009b), it was argued that to most of the teachers studied, their students were the first and most important sources of feedback as they were the ultimate reasons for their teaching. Drawing a parallel to Adam’s story, it could be argued that he regarded the players in a similar light as, by definition, it was only the presence of the players that made him a coach and allowed him to enact this role (Kelchtermans, 2009a). The players were Adam’s pupils; he was there to help them achieve to the best of their ability and generate excellent performative results, just as a teacher trains their pupils to perform well in learning outcomes and assessments. Whilst both Adam and Kelchtermans’ teacher are the individuals that hold the knowledge and therefore in a superior position, it is
the players’/students’ receptivity to being taught, how positive they perceive the teaching process to be, as well as whether they achieve the desired outcomes, that is the basis on which Adam/the teacher build their self-worth. This puts the players and the students in a position of power within the mind of their mentors.

Adam’s desire to fulfil his idealised self-image was closely linked to his efforts in fulfilling and exceeding the duties afforded to him. Upon gaining employment from the Illyria Warriors, Adam told of his attempts to improve a ready-made spreadsheet provided to him by his new line manager, Luke, and of how he began an additional investigation into training load and team injury rates. He explained how he “got the impression that the data was going to be used in a systematic way” and that he would be a key part in the decision making of the team’s training. The fulfilment of these tasks can be explained in terms of Kelchtermans notion of “task perception” (Kelchtermans, 1993; 2005; 2009a). This concept reflects Adam’s idea of what constituted his professional programme and the tasks and duties required of him in order to do a good job. Encompassed in an individual’s task perception are the deeply held beliefs about what constitutes good practice and personally constructed moral duties and responsibilities in order to do justice to those who one is in charge of (Kelchtermans, 2009a). Adam considered his investigations and subsequent training recommendations to the rest of the staff as part of a duty to “find that extra edge” in order for the team to achieve a higher level of performance and accomplish what he viewed the team’s overall aim to be: winning more matches.

In relation to this, Adam experienced a heightened self-esteem and increased motivation in his role. In his own words, fulfilling these tasks “would look good in front of everybody” even down to the CEO of club and would afford a stake in claiming his
importance in the backroom staff. In making sense of this event, Kelchtermans (1993; 2005; 2009a) refers to the notion of “job motivation” or, the motives that makes one choose to enter a profession, to stay in that profession, or to give it up for another career. Specifically, however, it is also noted that a person’s motives for working develop over time and are not static in nature (Kelchtermans, 1993). For example, Adam’s initial motivation to enter the profession was to provide better service to players and, over time, his motives behind his actions came from the desire to impress his co-workers, line managers and other key contextual stakeholders.

If he could be successful in positively impressing those around him, Adam was aware that this could have a positive impact on his long term career. In Kelchtermans’ (1993; 2005; 2009a) notion of “future perspectives”, he refers to the dynamic character of self-understanding and how a person sees themselves in their role in the future and how they feel about this. It can be broadly seen across the timeline of Adam’s story that successfully impressing others positively impacted on his self-esteem, which in turn influenced his job motivation. Fulfilling his readymade duties as a strength and conditioner also bore consequences on his future perspectives. For example, by providing his co-workers with evidence based research, he believed that his role would be secured as an integral member of the backroom staff. This would help him consolidate his reputation as a dedicated, skilled professional, something that could potentially provide him with future employment opportunities at different clubs. Adam’s efforts to impress the various stakeholders with whom he interacted was a response to what he supposed his role was as a strength and conditioning coach. Additionally, engaging in self-analysis can be interpreted as Adam’s attempt to better-reflect on his practices in order to improve as a strength and conditioning
coach, all the while giving consideration to his future prospects, recognising what he needed to achieve to give himself the best opportunity to further his career.

5.3 Impression management

5.3.1 Presenting the ‘correct’ image

In order to impress his surrounding contextual stakeholders, Adam endeavoured to engage in a number of micro-political strategies informed by his previous experiences as a player. As well as attaining a high level of subject knowledge, it was clear that Adam placed a great importance of impressing those around him by showcasing his bio-scientific understanding of practice. For example, a recurring theme in Adam’s story were his attempts to impress the players with whom he worked with as described during his time as a volunteer at the Elsinoire Eagles. Here, he noted how he would make himself available in answering any questions regarding their performance with sound, evidence based knowledge in an effort to “get them on board” and to promote his position for further mentorship by his tutor. In this regard, Adam also engaged in active questioning of his tutor’s practical competencies in an effort to showcase himself as knowledgeable, competent and indeed worthy of mentorship. These actions, he believed, would aid in any future opportunities which may have arisen for advancing his career; as such, these actions eventually became successful as he was later put forward to intern at the Illyria Warriors.

In attempt to make sense of these actions, Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) proves as a useful tool to frame Adam’s story. Goffman’s work provides a detailed description and an analysis of process and meaning in everyday action (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2002). In this respect he developed extended metaphors, namely
that of social life as a theatre, to describe people’s actions in the presence of others and how those actions are understood (Jones, 2004). Importantly, it is a central tenant of Goffman’s (1959) work that individuals are not entirely determined by society as they are able to strategically manipulate social situations and others’ impressions of themselves (Branaman, 2000). Consequently, the concepts used to explain his dramaturgical metaphor are the notions of “performance” and “impression management”. Here, Goffman (1959) refers to “performance” as activity occurring during continuous presence before particular others which has some influence on the observers; the purpose of performance is therefore to provide the audience with a particular impression of self.

In analysing Adam’s performance and the managing of his impression, we can turn to Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front” and “dramatic realization”. Defined as ‘the part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 32) and used to define the situation for those around them, Adam’s “front” can be seen in his continuous show as a knowledgeable and competent practitioner and somebody who, in particular during his internship, was worthy of employment. Adam desperately wanted to fulfil the duties of what he saw were the necessities of professional competency and, during this time, he attempted to highlight his strength and conditioning knowledge to the players by conversing with them on a personal basis and offering evidence based advice whenever possible. Additionally, with his line manager, he described how he would use resources from his undergraduate studies in order to research the questions and topics which were brought up in conversation. Here, we can see Goffman’s (1959) notion of “dramatic realization” in action. That is, in order to present a compelling front, Adam was forced to fulfil the duties of his position and to communicate the characteristics and of the job in a consistent manner (Goffman, 1959). In placing particular importance on the front he
presented to the players, and in light of not being formally introduced to them on his arrival, it can be seen that he infused his activity with signs which dramatically highlighted and portrayed confirmatory facts that would have otherwise remained obscure to them (Goffman, 1959).

In attempting to present himself as an indispensable member of the backroom staff, Adam described how at the start of his employment, he wanted to particularly impress the head coach by providing him with key contextual data in order to improve the team’s performance. Specifically, Adam’s actions of investigating the yet to be acknowledged area of training load and injury rate were seen as what Goffman (1959) describes as acting ‘in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them the specific response he is concerned to obtain’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 17). Here, Adam’s actions can be seen as an attempt to present the correct front in view of his head coach and an adherence to Goffman’s further notion of “idealization”. Idealization constitutes one way in which a performance is moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society and how one’s actions are put in the best possible light to show compatibility with a cultural normative (Goffman, 1959). It could be argued that Adam’s pre-conceived ideas of what it meant to be a professional strength and conditioning coach, and a member of the backroom staff were the cause of his understanding of the club’s culture. In his own words, Adam stated how he believed that every member of staff should be focused on the common objective of winning competition, and to this end it was the collective duty to manage the players in a way which would allow them to minimise the potential for injury. Consequently, in order to fit into this culture, Adam presented an idealized view of himself by attempting to show his ability to meet these ends and fit into this mould.
5.3.2 “Teams”

It can be seen that, up to the point of establishing an investigation into the training load and injury risk connection, Adam’s actions and efforts to impress those around him had been successful at every point in time. He had achieved “buy-in” from his tutor whilst volunteering at the Elsinore Eagles by successfully conveying himself as knowledgeable, enthusiastic and worthy of mentorship. These actions subsequently met his desire to then be recommended for internship which afforded him a position at the Illyria Warriors. During this time, the questioning of his line manager, the transfer of knowledge to the players and establishing the responsibility of the GPS technology all led to a positive working environment, confirming his professional self-understanding and leading to eventual employment. As a result, Adam continued on this line of impression management in order to secure his position as a key decision maker on gaining employment and establishing his worth in light of the head coach. However, in doing so, Adam was naïve in how attempting to impress those at the top of the hierarchy would have major consequences for his relationship with those closer to him.

Here, I would argue that the breakdown of Adam’s relationship with his line manager, Luke was the focal point during his employment at the Illyria Warriors. It was the events surrounding this particular relationship which catalysed Adam’s understanding of the contested, micro-political nature of strength and conditioning. To offer theoretical context, a number of concepts from Goffman (1959) and Kelchtermans (1993; 2002a; 2002b; 2005; 2009a; 2009b; 2013) can be used. To begin with, I view this pivotal moment in Adam’s story as a reflection of Goffman’s (1959) notion of “teams”. In this respect, it is argued that people are not only engaged in the presentation of the self as single actors, but that the
definition of a situation is projected, fostered and sustained by the intimate cooperation of more than one participant (Goffman, 1959). In relation to Adam’s story, I came to understand that whilst recognising himself as a part of the backroom staff as a whole, Adam failed to recognise how he was also a part of a smaller, more intimate team with his new line manager Luke, and Ben, who had been retained by the club and was now on a similar hierarchical level to himself. Whilst Adam’s actions of promoting new information came from his desire to fulfil the ideological tenants of his role in bettering the performance of the team and establishing himself as a key decision maker, his attempts to impress highlighted certain incompetencies of his immediate superior.

In an effort to explain this, one can use Goffman’s (1959) notions of “dramaturgical discipline” and “dramaturgical loyalty”. In defining dramaturgical discipline, Goffman (1959) argues that crucial for the maintenance of the team’s performance is that each member must offer a show of intellectual and emotional involvement in the activity he is presenting, but must not get carried away by his own show. Dramatically speaking, a performer who is disciplined is someone who remembers his part and commit “unmeant gestures” (Goffman, 1959). I would argue that, due to Adam’s naivety in how highlighting Luke’s practical knowledge gaps perhaps affected his professional reputation, Adam had failed to show discipline in his performance within his team; in effect he became too involved in his own attempts to enhance the team’s performance that he enacted an “unmeant gesture” in showcasing Luke in a negative light. This unplanned action can also show Adam’s lack of dramaturgical loyalty towards his miniature team, and failed to form a complete social community which offered a place and source of moral support (Goffman, 1959). In this, Goffman (1959) argues that members of the team must not exploit their presence within the team in order to stage their own show. Adam’s “show” was therefore his
attempts to consolidate his tenure and advance his position by providing a better service to the players, which in turn resulted in Luke politically excluding and alienating him from the team.

5.4 Micro-political literacy, negative self-understanding and vulnerability

In attempt to secure his desired goals, it was evident that Adam engaged in a number of micro-political strategies to establish strong working relationships and place himself in a position to advance his career progression. In attempting to better the ready-made spreadsheet, provided to him by Luke and through his training load/injury rate investigation, Kelchtermans and Ballet’s (2002a) notions of “micro-political action” and “micro-political literacy” can be used to further explain this. Adam’s micro-political actions were aimed at establishing and safeguarding his desired working conditions; he performed these acts to establish himself with his co-workers, in particular to the head coach and to safeguard his employment. However, it was Adam’s micro-political literacy, or more, his lack thereof which ultimately defines his story.

Micro-political literacy is referred to by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a) as an individual’s ability to effectively “read and write” themselves into the micro-political reality of their environment. Throughout his working experiences, Adam desperately wanted to be regarded by his co-workers as well as the players as a competent, knowledgeable practitioner and in his experience as a player, he had learned the importance of showcasing his talents on immediate arrival to his environment. For example, whilst an intern, Adam believed that simply shadowing and assisting Ben would not place him in a strong position to stake a claim for future employment. However, at the point in which the club invested in GPS technology, Adam saw this as an opportunity to gain political leverage in highlighting
himself as a necessity for the team’s success. His reading of the landscape entailed appreciating how his high level of computer literacy outmatched the rest of the staff and subsequently allowed him to ‘write’ himself into the micro-politics of the environment. However, in attempting similar tactics during employment, it can be seen that Adam had indeed failed to read his new landscape which, in turn forced Luke to politically exclude him out of his position and personal responsibilities. In essence, he had not yet learned the “knowledge aspect” of his micro-political literacy as an employee; he failed to read the situation and had yet to own the lexical knowledge on processes of power and struggles of interest when working with other professionals (Kelchtermans, 2002b). Consequently, in using the second “instrumental” aspect of micro-political literacy, Adam had failed to effectively apply his strategy and tactics of promoting a positive impression and therefore disestablished his relationship with Luke. Lastly, in terms of the third aspect of one’s micro-political literacy, the “experiential” aspect, this left Adam feeling powerless and with a degree of vulnerability in his tenure.

Indeed, in reference to what Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a; 2002b) defines as “professional interests”, Adam held a belief about what entailed good practice and the conditions he perceived as necessary or desirable to properly perform his professional tasks. He understood his role to be an important one; to provide the relevant information to the rest of the staff in order to positively impact on the team’s performance and achieve their ultimate goals of winning. Much like the teachers in Kelchtermans and Ballet’s (2002a; 2002b) studies, Adam’s organizational interests (i.e. the issues concerning roles, positions or formal tasks) comprised an important professional interest for him at the start of his employment. Indeed, not only keeping his job, but advancing his standing within his job constituted a major organizational concern for Adam. Furthermore, his “material interests”
(Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a; 2002b) could be seen in his planning of and creating a better spreadsheet to analyse his GPS data and his development of training load and injury recommendations. This can be seen as Adam’s strategic effort to becoming visible as a competent, creative, hardworking professional (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a; 2002b). In relation to his professional self-understanding, as previously described, this was used to fulfil his self-image, enhance his self-esteem, to keep up his task perception, achieve a minimal job satisfaction and to assist in his future perspectives (Kelchtermans, 1993; 2005; 2009).

Despite his interest, Adam’s inability to effectively read the micro-political landscape of his employment ultimately had a negative effect on his professional self-understanding. As Kelchtermans (2002a) argues, the person is inevitably at stake in their actions. In Luke’s responses to Adam, his identity as a coach had been changed. He no longer held the self-image of being a “vital cog” in the makeup of the backroom staff, but was merely providing data without it being maximised in the ways that he desired. This forced a negative impact on his self-esteem, as in his own words he began to feel “worthless” and detached from his duties and led to an ultimate lack of job motivation. In terms of Adam’s future perspective, he explained how he chose not to approach Luke regarding his concerns as he was worried what impact this could have had on any future roles and employment opportunities. This resulting impact on Adam’s professional self-image, I would argue, caused Adam to understand the vulnerable nature of his profession and the political realities of working with a performance team.

Indeed, Adam was not able to attain his desires for his role as Luke had placed limited control over the parameters of his task perception and the duties afforded to him.
When making sense of what had occurred, Kelchtermans’ (2005; 2009) investigations of vulnerability of teachers’ work can be drawn as a parallel. As Kelchtermans (2005, 2009) understands, the basic structure of vulnerability is always one of feeling that one’s professional identity and moral integrity are being questioned. The experience of teachers’ vulnerability was resulted from the fact they did not feel in control of what they considered to be valued working conditions (Kelchtermans, 2005). In response to his relationship with Luke, a by-product of recommending a change in practice forced a discrepancy between them, and in turn birthed Adam’s vulnerability. In light of this, his valued working condition, one of providing data to effect training, was one he was not wholly in control of; his recommendations had to be verified and utilised by those above him and due to the illuminating effect on Luke’s mismanaged practice, his effectiveness was no longer possible. According to Kelchtermans theorising, this is a form of ‘formal or political vulnerability, which raises the agenda of power to influence and define one’s working conditions (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 266).

Vulnerability, for Kelchtermans (2005, 2009) is not an emotion, but a structural condition, mediated by the context and directly linked to one’s identity. Adam felt vulnerable as a direct response to how he believed his identity as a strength and conditioning coach had been challenged and changed as a result of his environment. As found by Kelchtermans (2005, 2009), the relationship between teacher and student is an ethical one, and the teacher therefore never has full control over the situation or the outcome of their actions. The same can be seen for Adam’s story; in spite of his thoughtful and purposeful actions in attempting to improve the performance of the team, the relationships between others could not be fully controlled (Kelchtermans, 2005). Further to this, Adam believed that his actions would be positively received by every other member of the backroom staff,
including the CEO of the club; his duty, he believed, was aligned with wanting to provide the best service and fulfil his roles to the best of his ability. However, as Kelchtermans (2005, 2009) also argued, one can never be sure that their actions will convey the meaning that they were intending to. Indeed, as Adam had come to learn, there is more to coaching and being a coach than technically linking the means that promise to be most effective to the ends (Kelchtermans, 2005).
Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This thesis concludes by firstly reviewing the key findings that this study provided. Specifically, it will discuss what the author considers the major empirical and theoretical contributions of this work to the wider understanding of strength and conditioning. Following this, it provides suggestions for future avenues of critical investigation into the social complexities of the profession.

6.2 Summary of major findings

This research has presented a new perspective of strength and conditioning that is removed from its traditional, bio-scientific nature. Specifically, it focused on some of the everyday demands and dilemmas that Adam, a neophyte strength and conditioning coach, experienced during his time as a volunteer at Elsinoire Eagles and as an intern and employee at Illyria Warriors, two top-flight, professional sports teams. In reflecting on Adam’s story, it has been argued that his actions were based on a want to provide a level of service that was not afforded to him as a player during a period of sustained injury. The key motivating factor behind Adam’s entrance into the strength and conditioning profession was his desire to help others. Resultantly, Adam developed the necessary knowledge to ensure that his practice was based on sound, scientific evidence, and he sought to advance this throughout each of his working environments. This study argues that Adam’s idealistic view of his professional self-understanding underpinned his thought processes and professional strategies and determined his actions and overall experiences (Kelchtermans, 1993; 2005; 2009). To this end, his self-image, how he viewed himself and how he believed others perceived him, had consequences for his self-esteem, his motivation to work, how he viewed his job roles and ultimately how he envisaged his future career.
His determination to advance his career drove him to impress those around him and seek their approval. Given this understanding, this thesis drew on Goffman’s (1959) work on impression management and in particular his notions of ‘front’ and ‘idealization’. Here, this work has argued that Adam attempted to provide a knowledgeable front, embodying the persona of a competent practitioner whose presence would be beneficial for the clubs at which he worked. This reading of Adam’s story has been understood in terms of Goffman’s (1959) further notion of idealization. In particular, during his employment at the Illyria Warriors, Adam presented an idealized version of his abilities; he intentionally demonstrated what he could offer the team in recreating the existing spread sheet in order to provide clearer GPS data to his co-workers, and followed this by investigating the correlation of training load to injury rate based on his practical work.

These actions have been understood in terms of Kelchtermans and Ballet’s (2002a; 2002b) notions of ‘micro-political action’ and ‘micro-political literacy’. This study has shown that Adam had an existing micro-political literacy that was borne from his time as a player. He then utilised these micro-political actions as he went forward in his career as a strength and conditioning coach, an approach that was initially successful whilst he was a volunteer at Elsinoire Eagles. His early success resulted in a full-time contract of employment at Illyria Warriors, and as such, he continued to use a similar strategy, but this proved not to be as fruitful. During this internship, Adam’s micro-political actions and his attempts to impress his superiors (in particular the head coach), he inadvertently highlighted the professional incompetence of his line manager, Luke.
In this interpretation it has been demonstrated how Adam had failed to read his new micro-political landscape and adapt accordingly. This has been analysed in terms of Goffman’s (1959) notions of ‘dramaturgical discipline’ and ‘dramaturgical loyalty’. Whilst Adam showed intellectual involvement in his practice and the wider culture of the club, this research asserts that he focused too deeply on his desire to impress his superiors and positively affect the team’s performance in the singular way he believed to be necessary and correct. By doing so, and showing Luke’s knowledge gaps, he scuppered any chance of forming a cohesive, strong, social community with his peers. The consequences were that Luke micro-politically excluded Adam from his responsibilities and his idealised self-image of what it meant to be a strength and conditioning coach. This left Adam feeling isolated, and rendered him vulnerable, in the context of Kelchtermans’ definition (Kelchtermans 2005; 2009). Adam felt powerless, threatened and questioned without being able to defend himself appropriately. As Adam was not fully in control of his own role, he suffered from significant lapses in self-esteem. He was somewhat dismayed with the realisation that in spite of what had happened he remained reliant on Luke if he was to progress his career and be able to take advantage of potential opportunities in the future. This left him feeling trapped, helpless and without agency. Adam’s accumulation of experience whilst being an employee, and in particular the effects of his relationship with Luke and its eventual breakdown, resulted in Adam leaving the club.

6.3 Contribution and Future Research

This thesis has explored the everyday realities of a novice strength and conditioning coach’s experiences of working in the complex and contested area of professional sport. Adam’s account demonstrates how the strength and conditioning practice is multifactorial and removed from the simple application of the sciences. The present study therefore
contributes to the field of strength and conditioning in a number of ways. By adding to existing strength and conditioning literature which is dominated by bio-scientific grounded research, this thesis provides an analysis and social understanding of the multifarious social complexities of the strength and conditioning profession: a much-needed, alternative to the traditional positivist understandings of the profession. Additionally, this thesis has built upon work by Thompson et al. (2014) by utilising Keltchermans and colleagues’ case study of teaching to draw parallels with Adam’s narrative account, in particular the notions of professional self-understanding, micro-political action, micro-political literacy and vulnerability, as well as Goffman’s (1959) notions of impression management and front. Further to these, this thesis has also attempted to add the use of Goffman’s (1959) notions of idealisation and in the case of teams in particular, dramaturgical discipline and dramaturgical loyalty, something not before attempted in the strength and conditioning literature. Therefore, this thesis has advanced the understanding of the strength and conditioning profession by beginning to explore a new frontier of research. By addressing the field in this manner, such research can help better prepare future practitioners for employment roles, encourage dexterity of thought and flexibility of approach in managing the micro-politics of hierarchical, professional relationships. It can also be used as part of coach education for neophyte strength and conditioners entering the profession.

Throughout Adam’s narrative he continually hinted at the emotional aspect and effect of his tenure. It would be a recommendation of this thesis that future sociological strength and conditioning research undertakes extensive, more in-depth research into this underexplored area, by utilising Hochschild’s (1983) theorem of emotions in practice, as initially explored by Potrac and Marshall (2014). An addition to this would be the exploration and interrogation of Goffman’s (1959) notion of dramaturgical circumspection.
There is a need to better observe the daily realities of strength and conditioning practice. Whilst the traditional positivist understandings have unquestionably advanced our practical knowledge of how to improve athletic performance, we must seek to close the gap between theory and practice in order to truly understand the real-world effectiveness of our bio-scientific knowledge when applied in the field. Real-world practice does not exist in the vacuum of a laboratory setting; instead it is affected by multiple factors. It exists within our understanding of the self, in the interstices of the relationships we have with other professionals and in the cause and effect actions that are triggered as our behaviour reverberates with and within those around us.

The foundations of strength and conditioning coaching lie within Selye’s *The Stress of Life* (1956) that explores the theory of biological adaptation, looking at how single cell organisms are affected by various external stresses. Selye’s work must be developed in this context, for the reason that humans are not single cell organisms but complex, multicellular beings that are likewise affected by stresses and occurrences in the surrounding environment. Science in practice only works if external influencing factors are minimised, but in sport, athletes to not work in the sterilised environment of a laboratory. Simply observing and analysing the cause and effect relationship of training variables upon the human body is inadequate. There is a need to observe how coaching practice is manifested in everyday routines that takes place in differing environments, within gyms, in the open air, within professional surroundings and within the micro-political realities in which coaches and athletes operate. It cannot be assumed that these realities remain static; instead they are ever-changing and evolving due to other external influences acting upon them. Simply, what works one day, may not work the next and it is the hope that this thesis has provided an
account which stresses this need to be taken into account by the scientific community as whole.
Reference List


Davis (1990).


126


