The enactment of political skills in community sport coaching

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Abstract

Community sport coaches play a vital role in delivering sport and physical activity schemes to achieve (non)sporting government policy goals. While research has started to examine the social, relational and emotional features of this work, political skills remain underexplored. It is unclear which political skills are required and how they are enacted, learnt, and developed. This study addresses this gap through online semi-structured interviews with 17 community sport coaches, examining the political skills crucial for managing workplace dynamics, building relationships, and achieving professional goals. Through our application of political astuteness (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017) and political skill (Ferris et al., 2005, 2012) the findings highlight: a) the importance of reading and building effective relationships with key stakeholders in response to organisational and policy demands, b) the personal and interpersonal skills required to achieve goals strategically, and c) how these skills are typically learnt on the job, outside of formal coach education. This study contributes new insights to the critical social analysis of sport work by identifying the political skills underpinning community sport coaching practice. It also highlights the need to develop these skills in the coaching workforce and raises important questions about coach education and professional development.

Key words: Political skills, Organisational life, Relationships, Community sport coaching, Coach education

Introduction

In recent years, scholars in the sociology of sport have paid increasing attention to relational, interactive, and emotional dynamics that are an inherent feature of coaching work in community sport contexts (e.g., Gale & Ives, 2019; Gale et al., 2019, 2022, 2023; Ives et al., 2021, 2022; Nelson et al., 2022, 2024; Potrac, Ives, et al., 2022). Such inquiry has prioritised the development of a nuanced knowledge base addressing the ways in which community sport coaches give meaning to, and engage in, their everyday working relationships with others (e.g., participants, parents and guardians, colleagues, and managers) (Ives et al., 2021). This evolving line of sociological research has provided important new insights that serve to challenge the rationalistic and overly functional representations of human interchange in community sport coaching that have traditionally dominated in the academic literature, as well as in professional preparation and development programmes (Grills & Prus, 2019; Ives et al., 2021). For example, Gale et al. (2019) highlighted the circumstances in which community sport coaches may employ covert interactional strategies (i.e., uncovering moves, secret monitoring, fabrications, and setting traps) when assessing the trustworthiness of colleagues. Potrac, Ives, et al. (2022) outlined the importance of dramaturgical discipline, dramaturgical circumspection, and dramaturgical loyalty in community sport coaches' interactions with various others. Nelson et al. (2024) provided novel insights into the various deceptive impression management techniques (i.e., disguising disdain, flattering insincerely, camouflaging alternative approaches, covering-up mistakes, and selectively reporting favourable metrics) that community sport coaches employ in their efforts to cope with the ambiguities, pathos, and accountability systems that are an everyday feature of their working lives.

Importantly, the findings outlined above collectively illustrate how, rather than being characterised by the unproblematic wielding of social influence over others, community sport

coaches are inextricably engaged in micropolitical activity involving the subtle, strategic, and often contested negotiation of power, interests, and relationships within organisational settings, positioning them as both targets and tacticians of influence (Ives et al., 2021). That is, in the pursuit of various organisational (e.g., the successful facilitation of community sport programmes) and personal goals (e.g., the development and maintenance of a positive reputation in the eyes of organisational superordinates and service users), community sport coaches must iteratively navigate organisational settings that are influenced by the hopes, fears, expectations, wishes, choices, and actions of various stakeholders (Grills & Prus, 2019; Ives et al., 2021). As such, their workplace interactions with others can be characterised by ideological diversity (i.e., different views and beliefs about what is best or right), competition, conflict and negotiation between individuals and groups, as much as it is by unproblematic collaboration and collective subscription to shared goals (Grills & Prus, 2019; Ives et al., 2021).

While the limited existing research is to be applauded for providing some important, critical insights into the ways in which community sport coaches attempt to navigate their "ongoing, and, at times, problematic joint actions" with others, there remains considerable scope for enhancing our knowledge of the micro-political features and realities of this form of work (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 3). One such line of knowledge generation concerns the application and development of community sport coaches' political astuteness skills (Hartley, 2017; Potrac, Hall, et al., 2022). Within this study, political astuteness skills refer to a set of relational, cognitive and behavioural skills, knowledge, and judgements that community sport coaches use in their efforts to a) understand the interests and preferences of multiple stakeholders in different situations, b) (inter)act in generative ways, and c) manage the self in their respective quests to achieve important organisational and personal outcomes (Hartley, 2017, 2020; Potrac, Hall, et al., 2022). While some seminal work perhaps portrayed

astuteness skills and organisational politics in a heavily pathological manner (e.g., blaming, attacking, and covertly manipulating people), they have since also been recognised for their capacity to bring about productive benefits (Hartley, 2017; Leftwich, 2011). Indeed, researchers have highlighted how political astuteness skills are essential to the achievement of successful negotiation, limiting the problematic outcomes of inter-personal conflict, and sustaining meaningful collaboration between individuals and groups (Hartley, 2017).

In terms of its aims, this paper utilised in-depth online interviews to generate original knowledge regarding the participant community sport coaches' political astuteness skills. Specifically, the study examined a) the importance the participants placed on reading and building effective working relationships with others both internal and external to their organisation, b) those personal and interpersonal skills that they believed were required to achieve these ends, and c) how they understood these skills to have been learnt and developed. The significance of this paper, then, is two-fold. Firstly, it speaks directly to recent calls for greater critical exploration of the development and application of political astuteness skills in community sport coaching, as well as sport coaching more generally (e.g., Nelson et al., 2022; Potrac, Hall, et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2023). Secondly, this study responds to a wider lament among community sport coaches and practitioners regarding professional training and education focused on the development of crucial interactive and micropolitical dimensions of their work and, relatedly, on strategies that could be employed to help navigate these challenges (Ives et al., 2023; Holdom et al., 2024). Such knowledge and skills are essential if community sport coaches are to build the strategic alliances with, and alignment between, a diverse range of stakeholders and partners that are necessary for the facilitation of beneficial outcomes for individuals, groups and communities (Hartley, 2017; Smith et al., 2022). Through highlighting specific examples of where, how and why theory has been deployed in practice, we hope this can serve as a useful tool for others to think with as they

prepare for (and reflect on) the political realities and intricacies of their individual roles and contexts.

Conceptual Framework: Political astuteness skills

Mainstream conceptualisations of political astuteness (Hartley and colleagues, 2013, 2015, 2017) and political skill (Ferris et al., 2005, 2012) were combined to frame our exploration of the participant community sport coaching work. Together, both frameworks offer insight into how individuals can skilfully interact with others at work to achieve their own as well as organisational goals. Following extensive fieldwork in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) developed a framework of *political astuteness skills.* This research conceptualised political astuteness as a valuable set of capabilities (skills, knowledge, judgement, and behaviours) and proposed that individuals deploy "political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent to achieve outcomes" (Hartley et al., 2013, p. 24). According to Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017), political astuteness comprises five key dimensions. Namely, *personal skills, interpersonal skills*, *reading people and situations*, *building alignment and alliances*, and *strategic direction and scanning*.

First in this framework is *personal skills,* which require individuals to be self-aware of their own motives, choices, and behaviours as well as the potential consequences of these. Workers with excellent personal skills are proactive in nature, desire to understand the views of others, and exercise self-control. According to Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) *interpersonal skills* comprise both *soft skills* (i.e., influence the thinking and behaviours of others as well as making others feel valued) and *tough skills* (i.e., negotiating, standing up to pressure, and managing interpersonal conflict). Politically astute workers also possess the ability to *read people and situations* to develop intuition toward, "the dynamics that can

occur when stakeholders and agendas come together" (Hartley, 2017, p. 203). *Building alignment and alliances* describes the ability to work alongside key stakeholders who may have contrasting interests, goals, and motives. Here, of importance to Hartley is the notion of 'sufficient alignment' rather than 'complete consensus'. In other words, it is unlikely that an individual can obtain the full buy-in of *all* stakeholders they work with. Instead, generating enough buy-in is usually a more realistic and proficient way of making progress in attaining individual and organisational ambitions. Fifth and finally, *strategic direction and scanning* describes attempts by workers to engage in longer-term planning towards organisational goals whilst being mindful of internal and external factors that may impact on the organisation and their desired actions. Hartley and colleagues' (2013, 2015, 2017) theorisation of political astuteness offered a particularly useful heuristic device for understanding the importance that community sport coaches placed on self-awareness and self-control as well as the use of soft (i.e., listening, communication, and making people feel valued) and tough interpersonal skills (i.e., negotiation skills and the management of interpersonal conflict).

We also found Ferris et al.'s (2005, 2012) complementary theorisation of *political skill* helpful in interpreting the strategic interactional work of community sport coaches. Ferris et al. (2005, p. 7), defined *political skill* as "the ability to understand others at work and use this knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance personal and organisational objectives". From this viewpoint, Ferris et al. (2005, p.6) explain that organisations are political arenas where "informed negotiation, bargaining, deal making, exchanges of favours, and coalition and alliance building characterises the way things really get done". The political skill framework comprises of *social astuteness*, which refers to individuals who are "keen observers of their social environment" who can comprehend "not only the intricacies of their surrounding but also the motivations of themselves and others

acting within that setting" (Ferris et al., 2012, p. 491). Those who are high in political skill possess *interpersonal influence* which refers to an individual having "subtle and convincing personal style that exerts a powerful influence on those around them" (Ferris et al., 2012, p. 10). Furthermore, politically skilled individuals have *networking ability* which permits them to build beneficial capital, coalitions and alliances, garner the regard and respect of those around them, as well as inspire commitment and personal obligation from others (Ferris et al., 2005, 2007, 2012). Possessing the ability to effectively network can result in "significant and tangible benefits, such as gaining favourable reactions to ideas, enhanced access to important information, and increased co-operation and trust" (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 11). Finally, individuals who are high in political skill can convey *apparent sincerity* which enables them to be "seen by others as being honest and sincere in their words and actions" (Ferris et al., 2012, p. 492). The theorisation of Ferris and colleagues (2005, 2012) was found to be particularly useful for understanding and explaining how the community sport coaches strategically evaluated situations and used these insights to tailor their social interactions with significant others. Further, it facilitated insights into how community sport coaches adapted and adjusted their decisions and action to elicit desired responses and outcomes from others, as well as build, generate, and capitalise on those networks that they established. Using the theorisation of political astuteness in combination with that of political skill provided a more robust and comprehensive analysis of the data than either theory could have permitted in isolation (Ives et al., 2023). In doing so, this helps to advance our (conceptual and empirical) understanding of the strategic interactions of community sport coaches.

Method

Interpretivist approach

This study was conducted from an interpretivist perspective, which is defined by an internal-idealist ontology (i.e., reality is shaped by perception), a subjectivist epistemology (i.e.,

knowledge is socially and subjectively constructed), and an idiographic methodology (i.e., a focus on individual cases) (Potrac et al., 2025). This perspective enables a nuanced exploration of individual viewpoints, providing a framework to understand the multifaceted complexities of social interactions and behaviours in community sport coaching. It also supports the analysis of how coaches navigate the ambiguities and challenges within their respective environments (Potrac et al., 2025).

Participant selection and recruitment

Criterion-based, network, and snowball strategies were utilised to recruit community sport coaches for the online interviews (Mason, 2017). The criteria that informed the purposive sample were individuals who were a) responsible for the management or delivery of community sport and physical activity initiatives designed to contribute to the health, wellbeing, and development of individuals and communities, b) 18-years or over, c) currently employed in the public, private, or third sector, and e) willing to talk openly about the political features of their work. Following ethical approval (EN: 4265) from the second author's institutional Research Ethics Committee, the research team began the process of participant recruitment. Initially, this involved using our existing community sport networks (i.e., community sport trusts, sports clubs, and charities) and contacting relevant organisational leads to present them with an overview of the study. Having secured their support, the research team were provided with email addresses and contact numbers for the coaches who were of relevance and had shown interest in our study. We then asked these recruited participants to direct us towards other community sport workers, who met the study's inclusion criteria and who might provide information rich cases. The table below provides further background information about the community sport coaches involved in this study.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Online interviews

In line with our interpretivist approach, we employed one-to-one online semi-structured interviews as our primary method of data generation. Prior to conducting the interviews, the research team iteratively developed an interview guide to direct the conversations. This guide was informed by the authors' reading of organisational science literature addressing political astuteness. The semi-structured interview guides were shared with the participants seven days prior to their interview so that they could familiarise themselves with and think about the questions. This approach helped participants to share rich insights and associated experiences regarding the topic of study (Gale et al., 2023). The interview guide required the interviewees to share illustrative examples of a) what political skills they implemented, b) how they implemented each political skill and with whom, c) what they hoped the implementation of each political skill would achieve, d) what personal, organisational, and/or occupational pressures required them to implement these political skills, and e) how they acquired these political skills and how they might effectively be developed within the community sport coaching workforce more widely. Before each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose (e.g., aims, methods, ethical arrangements, and the extent of participant involvement). All participants had the opportunity to ask any additional questions regarding the study before providing written and verbal voluntary consent. Participants typically asked questions that led to further clarification of the study's purpose, which we addressed before commencing the interview.

Reflexivity was integral to maintaining the integrity of the research process (Flick, 2017). Our long-standing interest in the micro-political dynamics of coaching, rooted in our collective experience as coaches and/or coach educators, motivated our commitment to understanding the social sensibilities essential for effective coaching practice and relationship-building. Recognising that our personal experiences, beliefs, and knowledge

could influence our engagement with participants and the interpretation of data, we consistently reflected on our assumptions throughout the data collection process. For instance, we acknowledged how our coaching backgrounds might shape our assumptions about participants' responses, which helped us approach each interview with an open mind. We made a deliberate effort to remain mindful of how our positionality shaped our interactions with participants and informed our interview approach. This included avoiding leading questions based on our own experiences.

All participants were interviewed on a single occasion by the first, third, fifth, sixth, and eighth authors via Microsoft Teams. Conducting the interviews online allowed us to effectively engage with participants across diverse geographic locations while fostering a relaxed environment that enhanced the quality of interactions and encouraged more open and detailed responses (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Additionally, involving multiple researchers in data generation offered several advantages: a) it facilitated team debriefing meetings to review notes and discuss shared experiences, enabling us to reflect on interpretations, learn from each other's perspectives, and integrate theoretical insights to refine areas of focus for future interviews; and b) it improved efficiency by helping to maintain researcher freshness, reduce fatigue, and minimise both time and resource expenditure.

Each interview averaged 68-minutes (min. 31-minutes; max. 122-minutes) and the total volume of data generated was 1160-minutes. Clarification, elaboration, and detail-oriented probes were used in the interviews to elicit clear, comprehensive descriptions and enable participants to confirm, correct, or expand on the interviewer's understanding (Aurini et al., 2016). For instance, clarification probes such as "Can you clarify who was present when you used that political skill, and who was it directed towards?" ensured a clear understanding of the context. Elaboration questions such as "Why was it important to use that political skill in that environment?" prompted participants to reflect on their reasoning.

Lastly, detail-oriented probes, such as “How can community sport coaches be better supported in developing their political skills? Can you provide examples?” sought practical suggestions for fostering skill development in coaching contexts. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure a complete and accurate record of the data. Pseudonyms are employed throughout this article in efforts to protect the identity of the people and organisations involved.

Data analysis

Data generation and analysis were iterative, concurrent, and recursive in nature (Ives et al., 2025). Indeed, the research team tagged back and forth between an emergent or emic reading of the data set, and the etic application of theories, models, plausible explanations, and reflection and writing (Tracy, 2018, 2020). Our analysis comprised two intersecting phases of interpretation. The first phase entailed the use of *emic analysis.* This process began with data immersion whereby all interviewers made detailed notes on a shared google spreadsheet that captured the rich and significant experiences that struck us. Reflexive dialogue was central at this stage, with the first author engaging in initial discussions with each interviewer to exchange ideas and reflect on early findings. These conversations provided a space for critical reflection and dialogue, enabling us to consider how our experiences as (former) coaches and/or coach educators might influence data analysis. By sharing individual insights, we began to open up detailed interpretations of the data and expand our collective understanding of the developing themes. During these discussions, we identified a variety of skills and attributes that participants felt were essential to being politically effective within their respective environments. We also observed consistent patterns across interviews, highlighting key competencies (e.g., personal and interpersonal skills), how participants acquired and deployed political skills, and suggestions for developing these political skills in the coaching workforce. Following this, the first author then went through each of the

transcripts and began a descriptive primary cycle of coding, identifying meaningful units in relation to the questions. These first level codes involved assigning words and phrases to data chunks that captured their essence and were used to establish the "what, who and where" (Tracy, 2020). Reflexivity was maintained as the first author remained mindful of personal biases, particularly regarding prior knowledge of political skills in the workplace, actively questioning how these could influence category creation. For example, when coding the data, the first author paused to reconsider interpretations shaped by personal experience, ensuring the analysis also stayed grounded in participants' perspectives.

The emic reading of the data was accompanied by a phase of *etic analysis* by the first and last author. Here, we engaged in analytical secondary cycle coding that required us to critically examine the primary codes, synthesise codes into 'hierarchal umbrella' categories, and organise them into interpretive concepts. These coding activities were guided by our goals and the research questions driving this study (Tracy, 2020). The second layer of analysis was informed by the initial emic phase, helping us further refine and structure the developing themes. During this phase, the first and last author engaged in discussion and debate regarding the organisation of meaning units and themes into overarching categories, ensuring a coherent and rigorous analytical structure. Our aim in this phase was to interpret our analysis using connected literature and theorising and begin to answer more complex questions of 'how,' 'why,' or 'because' (Tracy, 2018). Analytical memos were used to make preliminary links to theories that might help to explain our data. We initially found Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) concepts particularly useful for interpreting participants' experiences. As the analysis progressed and insights were shared with the rest of the research team, the work of Ferris et al. (2005, 2012) was introduced as a complementary framework. This addition enriched our interpretive lens, broadening the analysis and enhancing its rigour by providing an additional perspective to frame participants' experiences.

The initial analytic insights were shared with the rest of the research team for comment and feedback, which was then followed by an active process of jointly examining, discussing, writing, and rewriting (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This collaborative dialogue with critical friends was essential to ensure rigour in our analysis. It also included thoughtful and reflective engagement with theory and previous literature to develop a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the data (Ives et al., 2024; Ives et al., 2025). What follows, then, is an interpreted thematic discussion of what we considered the key features of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding political skills in the workplace (Nelson et al., 2014). We acknowledge that our interpretation represents one of several possible readings of the data. While the theoretical frameworks we employed offer a legitimate and valuable perspective, we recognise that our interpretation is shaped by our specific context, our prior knowledge, experiences, and research interests (Denzin, 2016).

Research Findings and Analyses

Our analysis led to the production of three interrelated themes. These are a) the importance practitioners placed on reading and building effective working relationships with significant working others, b) those personal and interpersonal skills required to achieve desired ends, and, finally, c) how these skills tended not to feature in their formal education and but were learnt out of necessity on the job.

Reading and reacting to political working environments

Consistent with Hartley's (2013, 2015, 2017) theorisation of *building alignment and alliances*, and Ferris et al. (2005) discussion of *networking ability*, the participants shared how building productive relationships and coalitions with key contextual stakeholders (e.g., participants, parents/carers, colleagues, managers, external partners and funders) was important for achieving their work-related goals. In doing so, the findings of this study build on an emerging body of literature that identifies the importance of community sport coaches

developing and maintaining productive working relationships with significant others (e.g., Gale et al., 2019, 2022, 2023). The present study extends this scholarship by identifying how community sport coaches strategically establish positive relations with working others as these connections translated into "significant and tangible benefits" (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 11). That is, securing desirable working outcomes required the participants to establish relationships aimed at facilitating identified ends. For example, Steve shared the importance he placed on developing and sustaining productive working relationships with employees of funding organisations to retain their continued financial investment. Grant also shared with us the value of creating positive working relationships and connections with participants to maintain their attendance and positive evaluations of his schemes:

> We want to be leading in everything that we do, we want to be the best and a big part of that is having that positive relationship with the guys at the [our Funders], making sure that what we're doing is meeting the needs of the funding and meeting the aims of their organisation as well as our own. Constant communication making sure everybody understands each other's opinions and positions. It's about being open and transparent and working closely with those who support your programmes through funding. Building a strong relationship with the funding organisations allows for the provision to be sustainable long term which is important. **(Steve)**

> Building the trust and the relationship with the participants means they will be more open with you, and you can help them. In the areas I work in there's some kids with problems and they're quite vulnerable and can easily be persuaded to go down different routes that aren't good for them. So that positive relationship and connection with them is key for us so hopefully we can do the best for them. Why would they turn up on a Friday night to our session if they feel like the coaches don't care about them? Or if

> they don't trust us? It's important you and the other coach create a good atmosphere for them and get on with each other as well. They wouldn't want to be there if it was a bad environment. **(Grant)**

Another key skill identified by the community sport coaches was their ability to effectively *read people and situations* (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017). Here, the participants explained how they would acquire information by 'reading' their social landscape. The *socially astute* coaches were able to 'tune in' to effectively observe interaction patterns and interpret the agendas and motivations of those present (Ferris et al., 2012). It was this political sensitivity that allowed the coaches to engage with people more productively. These findings contribute to a limited body of literature identifying that community sport coaches seek to read and write themselves into the micro-political realities of their working contexts (Ives et al., 2016, 2021). For Steve, this involved doing his "due diligence, to assess, to understand what other organisations want, know your facts, and know what we can bring to the table." In the below examples, Tim and Susie expressed the importance of being able to observe and interpret social cues to appropriately respond to coaching colleagues and participants on their schemes:

> You need to be able to read a room, know who you're talking to and sensing any atmosphere and quelling an atmosphere if there is one. If you can read people well, you understand their motives and you can gauge how they're going to be, what they're going to be receptive to [...] I try to sense the tone; I ask a lot of questions. I'm wonder man. You know, I'm just wondering what you think to this. I'm wondering if you think this would be an appropriate avenue. I wonder what you would feel if I told you I was thinking about this. I wonder what would be successful. **(Tim)**

> In terms of participants, you need to read the children to establish if they're enjoying the session or if something needs to change. Football for instance is massive thing that girls are not very keen at playing with boys, but if I have a mixed group and the boys are getting a bit aggressive with their football, which they can do, and you see the girls slowly starting to sit off onto the side you need to change things, so they are still enjoying it. If you've got football the last thing of the day and the parents are slowly starting to turn up, you don't want them to turn up and see their child sat out. **(Susie)**

Importance of personal and interpersonal skills

Research into community sport coaching has increasingly served to demonstrate that practitioners strategically manage how they present themselves to significant working others through impression management and emotional labour (e.g., Gale & Ives, 2019; Gale et al., 2019, 2022; Nelson et al., 2024; Potrac, Ives, et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2016, 2021, 2022). The present study extends these findings by identifying that the participants' work required them to develop and enact socio-political intelligence. Participants described how they implemented a range of *personal skills* when working with colleagues and community participants. For example, Darren explained the importance of being *self-aware,* (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017) by focussing his energy on processing his thoughts, emotions, and actions:

> I need self-awareness. Got to be aware of how I'm behaving and portraying myself within the setting. When circumstances change, especially going towards Christmas, you've got nativity plays, but the weather is changing so you've not got access to the facilities outside, or you've got to use a smaller space inside. This can all be frustrating as a community sports coach as it makes it harder to deliver your sessions. Obviously, I can't turnaround and pass all this back on to the school. I've got to be adaptable and

> able to work within whatever is given to me. I can't display these feelings of frustration going into a session also with the possibility of that coming across to the children too. Instead, it's a case of 'It's no bother? Don't worry about it, that's fine, everything is going to be ok.' If I did portray those feelings, it could lead to a breakdown of relationships between myself and the staff or myself and the school which then hinders the relationship between them and my employer as well. **(Darren)**

Some participants felt that the ability to exercise *self-control* was a key *personal skill* required to do the job effectively (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017). In Tim's case, he was able to regulate and alter his response to avoid undesirable behaviours (e.g., an impulsive negative verbal outburst):

> I have a colleague who has quite a fiery personality and we were at we were at loggerheads about a decision and it, as it transpired, because of a breakdown in communication [...] One thing led to another. It got into quite a heated argument to the point that she became quite aggressive and shouting. She stood up, was using quite strong physical gestures, like pointing and confrontational, and she said something along the lines of "it's not my fault that you're not confident as a coordinator and you need to sort that out" and then she left. I had to demonstrate quite a strong amount of self-control to not react in the same tone and the same manner that I was being greeted with. I wanted to scream and shout back, I wanted to fight fire with fire, but I went with ice. I needed to remain calm. I think it would be a total breakdown in the way that the organisation or the service functions. **(Tim)**

The participants also described how they needed to implement a range of *interpersonal skills* (e.g., listening, communication, and making people feel valued) when working with other external partners, colleagues, and community participants. Participants shared how they

used *soft skills* (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017) to purposefully cultivate relationships. Stewart found that *listening to others* was one way to achieve this:

> To be an effective leader, you've got to listen. And it's something that I'm very keen on with my staff. We have regular meetings on a monthly basis where I sit down to them just listen and see how they're finding the business, are they working towards their objectives? Is there any more support they need. **(Stewart)**

Being able to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders is considered a key workplace skill (Ferris et al., 2005, 2012). Indeed, many of the participants in this study expressed how being clear and transparent in their communication allowed them to effectively communicate with a wide variety of working others (e.g., community participants, colleagues, and business partners). For example, Josh, Hugo, and Harris expressed how vital it was to have 'varied vocabulary' and the 'social skills' suitable for the different population groups that attended their schemes. Below, James shared the importance of effectively utilising in-person conversations with those coaching staff he line-managed:

> People can communicate in the wrong way [...] I try as much as possible to deal with things face-to-face. I don't like to deal with situations on the phone as it's difficult to read people and their body language, there's so many non-verbal ques that you can't pick up on. I've got to build those levels of communication with my staff so I can sit and talk to them, be able to have those tough conversations in an unemotional way. Be clear and direct on what the situation is, but I also need those soft skills like making sure everything is ok and checking in with them which helps me to build trust with them. **(James)**

Another key *soft skill* demonstrated by the participants was their ability to *make others feel valued* (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017). For example, Steve liked to recognise the dedication and effort shown by his coaching staff through personalised incentives and rewards:

> The coaches and youth engagement workers are out on the evenings and in any weather with young people in hard-to-reach communities. It's a really difficult job, and you know nobody does it to make millions of pounds. They do it because they want to make a difference to the young people. They turn up and deliver high quality provision and what they do for us has a real impact on the organisation so making sure they feel valued is a priority for the club and we constantly make them feel part of the team. We show that we appreciate that work through more than just the wages, we constantly give incentives and rewards, and I think it gives them that extra sort of edge when it's pouring down on a Friday night at 7 o'clock to turn up and deliver the highest quality session and represent the club. **(Steve)**

Our analysis also highlighted that the participants had to use *tough skills* (Hartley et al., 2013, 2015, 2017) to effectively manage their encounters with others. For example, Freddie discussed how he had learnt to deal with misbehaving participants using emotional management techniques to avoid *interpersonal conflict* (Ives et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2024). Tim explained how he deployed *negotiation skills* to persuade a colleague to adopt alternative approaches:

> You've got to be comfortable with chaos. The whole classroom can be going mad, and we've got to be particularly good at just not going to affect us at all. You can definitely have emotions, but we get really good at masking them. So, the kids tell me to F**K off or call you names and I'm thinking my God like, grit your teeth inside. But if that

> kid sees it, that's not good so you have to hide it [...] We always have to try deal with the negative side of their behaviour and we're always positive. We deal with it in the sense of like come on, pack it in but we never really tell the kids off. **(Freddie)**

> I do have to negotiate with colleagues, because I'm one of two coordinators and a lot of the time we are on different wavelengths to regards to how we would go about things. So, I have to navigate that as well and use persuasion to try and bring her round to my way of thinking. We generally disagree on quite a lot; we've got different management styles. Mine's very humanistic, I listen, value them, motivate them, and adapt and practise on a on an individual basis whereas my colleague is quite authoritarian and she believes you should tell staff to go and do something. They should go do it, no questions asked. **(Tim)**

Development of political skills

When asked to explain how they had acquired and developed those political strategies discussed above, participants shared with us how their political astuteness and associated skills had principally been learnt via an apprenticeship of observation and experientially through reflections on practice. Here, participants spoke of learning from working alongside and observing politically competent senior colleagues. For example, Steve described how he sought to keep "an eye on who is really good at their job and try to glean best practices off them." These findings are consistent with both Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) and Ferris et al. (2005, 2012) who suggested that political knowhow tends to be learnt incidentally 'on the job' in various emergent and informal ways (e.g., experience, role models, and learning from mistakes). Our participants shared:

> In my first month I shadowed other colleagues and that was interesting I learned so much going to different classes, like going from a year six class and they all talk to then

> you go to a nursery, and they just look at you it's a big step. I watched how different coaches interacted, spoke, stood, and delivered. I think learning these skills comes from a mix of hard work, learning as you go and some CPD. **(Andrew)**

> Seeing how different people go about things. A lot of our lives, we don't realise that we're learning off other people, and we do very unconscious learning behaviours and learn how to deal with certain situations. I've just done that without even realising and it's done me well. **(Josh)**

Importantly, Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) and Ferris et al's (2005, 2012) empirical research suggested that experience on its own is generally seen to be insufficient. Consequently, they propose that a combination of planned, structured, and directive development opportunities could be more powerful in supporting the acquisition of these social sensibilities in the workplace (e.g., formal programmes, attending a bespoke learning set, mentoring, and engaging in simulations of challenging scenarios). When asked about the formal qualifications they had completed, participants shared that the political features of the job and those skills needed to politically navigate their work were rarely, if at all, covered. For example, Martin and Grant shared with us:

> Social interaction and managing relationships on coach education courses was not covered, absolutely not. I wish, I would love that. **(Martin)**

> Focus is a lot more on the football delivery rather than the engagement. The social skills are diluted, very diluted. You get an overview of some of the social skills, but you're not told the ways to implement them. **(Grant)**

This finding is consistent with existing sport coaching literature in this area (e.g., Consterdine & Taylor, 2022; Ives et al., 2016; Holdom et al., 2024) which has served to

question whether formal coach education provision adequately prepares community sport coaches for the everyday realities of the job. In keeping with the suggestions from Hartley and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2017) and Ferris et al. (2005, 2012) and sport coaching literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2024; Consterdine & Taylor, 2022; Gale et al., 2018) on how workers can become more politically skilled, our participants mentioned the potential utility of mentoring schemes and in-situ support from more senior and experienced colleagues to aid the workforces' development of important social skills:

> You need more one-on-one mentors. When I join if someone would assign me that one-on-one mentor who's been in my position for numerous years, it would help me develop. If I have a big problem, it's not going to the big boss, because that's a scary thing, especially for new starters. It's going through a colleague on my same level but just done this for two or three years longer than me would be beneficial. It would be nice to have that mentor-mentee relationship. **(Freddie)**

> I think if there was more of like a mentor scheme or if there was just more of an opportunity where new coaches can go and watch experienced coaches and learn from them. Like an open training session, for example, where coaches can go, they can go and watch a session [...] You can get a real sense for the atmosphere, for the vibe, everything. Let's say you were an experienced coach, and I was a novice. For me to come and watch you coach and then maybe if I could have a Q and A with you after. That would really set the tone of where I need to be and what I need to work towards. That's more realistic than watching 5-minute videos and reading stuff off a whiteboard or PowerPoint presentation. **(Joe)**

While these recommendations are consistent with calls for mentoring within the coach education and learning literature (Cushion, 2015; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), it is important to

acknowledge that numerous factors can influence the success of mentoring interventions (Bailey et al., 2019; Chambers, 2018; Leeder, 2019). The implementation of mentoring raises critical questions regarding the funding of mentoring interventions, availability of an appropriately qualified mentoring workforce including the selection, training and development of mentors, compatibility between mentors and mentees, as well as mentors and mentees having the necessary time, space, and equipment to facilitate productive interactions, amongst other issues (Gale et al., 2018; Sawiuk et al., 2022). In this respect, it is important to acknowledge that sport coach mentorship does not operate in a social, political, or technological vacuum (Cushion 2015, Leeder & Sawiuk 2021, Potrac 2016), thus mentoring is not a panacea that can uncritically resolve all coach education and development ills (Cushion 2006).

Conclusion

This study offers original empirical and theoretical insights into the political social sensibilities that community sport coaches utilise in response to their work. While existing literature has explored interactional strategies for relationship building and achieving workplace goals, such as emotional and impression management, as well as techniques for assessing trustworthiness and repairing fractured relationships, this study extends this research by identifying additional political skills necessary for navigating the dynamics of work and workplace relations. It also emphasises the importance of developing these skills among the coaching workforce and raises critical questions about how they can be fostered through coach education and professional development. In doing so, the study makes a significant contribution to the limited coaching scholarship in this area, further contributes to critical understandings of sport work, and provides an evidence base that can inform the training and development of community sport coaches.

It was identified that community sport coaches placed particular importance on building working relationships and effectively utilising these in response to organisational demands as well as deploying appropriate personal skills (i.e., self-awareness and self-control) and interpersonal (i.e., listening, communication, making people feel valued, and influencing) skills. It was found that community sport coaches tended to develop these working practices through observing others, as social sensibilities were rarely covered as part of their formal coach education. This study directly responds to calls for more nuanced understandings of the political features of sports work (Ives et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2022; Potrac, Hall, et al., 2022) and, in doing so, contributes towards growing critical social scholarship addressing the everyday social realities of community sport coaching (i.e., Gale et al., 2019, 2022, 2023; Ives et al., 2016, 2021; Nelson et al., 2024).

While recognising the potential significance of our findings, we propose that future work should focus on developing a more in-depth analysis of: a) how community sport coaches read and respond to internal stakeholders, external organisations and their employees, as well as the policy and funding landscape, b) those personal and interpersonal skills that community sport coaches utilise to effectively enact their work by navigating their social relations and the different forms of influence that may arise from these (Nichol et al., 2023), c) how coaches acquire their understanding of specific political social sensibilities and strategies, d) the impact of political (il)literacy on workplace effectiveness as well as the health and well-being of community sport coaches, e) consider the impact of intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, geographical location, and sector (e.g., private, public, third sector) on the socio-political skills that community sport coaches perceive as important, and the role that social position and social/cultural capital may play in how these skills are

learned, enacted, and perceived**,** and f) explore how organisational and social forces, including contextual demands and performativity pressures, shape coaches' perceptions of the socio-political skills deemed important, and how these influences affect the practical application of these skills. To explore the issues outlined above we would encourage a diverse range of qualitative data collection methods such as observations, focus groups and stimulated recall (Nichol & Hall, 2024). Finally, future research should not only further consider the extent to which formal coach education adequately prepares community sport coaches for the social features of their work, but should actively seek to (co)design, deliver, and evaluate educational interventions aimed at enhancing the political skills of the community sport coaching workforce (Potrac, Hall, et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2022).

Practical applications

Our findings have important implications. Participants expressed how political social sensibilities were rarely, if at all, covered as part of coach education. This is problematic and likely to lead many community sport coaches to experience a praxis shock when entering the profession, requiring them to learn these essential skills ‘on the job’. To help remedy this situation, we would encourage those responsible for the facilitation of coach learning (i.e., coach educators, coach developers, coach mentors) to dedicate curriculum time to helping community sport coaches gain a deeper understanding of the micro-political realities inherent to this work, while also developing the social sensibilities needed to build relationships, communicate effectively, and manage social dynamics within their community coaching network. In addition, we suggest that social sensibilities be integrated into continuing professional development activities, ensuring coaches continually refine and reflect on these skills throughout their careers. This approach would not only equip community coaches with the tools to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics but also enhance their overall

effectiveness in coaching and relationship-building within their networks. Here, we might learn from the participants' recommendations alongside those of the organisational science literature which promote the potential value of mentoring as a vehicle for supporting workers to learn, develop and appropriately apply political skill in context (Gale et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2022). When implemented effectively, a mentee could observe their mentor coach model behaviours in the workplace, engage in discussion about how and why they navigate workplace relations and interactions in these ways, and receive feedback or support on their own deployment of these skills in specific situations to help refine their practice (Ferris et al., 2005). Mentors might help their mentee coaches to understand the political dynamics of the job, areas of business, organisation priorities, and policy landscape as well as relationship development and management with important stakeholders (Ferris et al., 2005). This approach would potentially permit mentee coaches to appreciate more clearly "what, when, and with whom to do things in the work environment, along with building the perceptive, interpersonal, and social effectiveness competencies that round out political skill" (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 44). Finally, we recognise that the findings of this study cannot be unproblematically assumed to apply across all coaching settings or forms of sport work. However, we believe the insights provided offer some naturalistic (i.e., generated through reflection on the issues described) and analytical (i.e., conceptual insights presented in the study) generalisability (Grills & Prus, 2019; Smith, 2018).

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Table 1. Background information for community sport coaches research participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Related qualifications	Coaching experience (years)	Job title and full-time occupation	Sector
Martin	33	UKCC Level 3	17	Community Coach	Public and private
Darren	24	UKCC Level 2, Sport Degree	8	School Sport Specialist	Public
Stewart	31	UKCC Level 2	13	Community Operations Manager	Public
Susie	22	UKCC Level 2, Sport Degree	5	Community Coach	Public
Steve	32	UKCC Level 2, Sport Degree	10	Community Engagement Manager	Third
Andrew	21	UKCC Level 2	3	Activity Coach	Public and private
Grant	22	UKCC Level 2, Sport Degree	6	Community Coach	Third
Tim	33	Level 3 Personal Training, Sport Degree	1	Healthy Lifestyle Co-ordinator	Public
Henry	28	UKCC Level 3, Sport Degree	13	Health and Well-being Activator	Public
James	51	UKCC Level 3	15	Community Sport Manager	Private and public
Joe	25	UKCC Level 2	6	Community Coach	Private
Bailey	28	UKCC Level 3	9	Community Sport Development Officer	Private
Josh	18	UKCC Level 3	2	Community Coach	Private
Ollie	23	UKCC Level 2	8	Community Coach	Private
Freddie	24	UKCC Level 2, Sport Degree	10	Community Coach	Private
Harris	22	UKCC Level 2	4	Community Coach	Private
Hugo	24	UKCC Level 3	8	Community Coach	Private