"You can stay now, you are trusted": navigating qualitative fieldwork in sport coaching

Item Type	Article (Version of Record)
UoW Affiliated Authors	Edwards, Christian , Vinson, Don and Cale, Andrew
Full Citation	Simpson, H., Edwards, Christian , Vinson, Don and Cale, Andrew (2024) "You can stay now, you are trusted": navigating qualitative fieldwork in sport coaching. Sports Coaching Review. pp. 1-23. ISSN eISSN: 2164-0637; pISSN: 2164-0629
DOI/ISBN	https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2024.2395139
Journal/Publisher	Sports Coaching Review Taylor & Francis
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Link to item	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21640629.2024.2395139

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"You can stay now, you are trusted": navigating qualitative fieldwork in sport coaching

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ABSTRACT

The study tells my story [Harley-Jean] as an ethnographic researcher, addressing the complexities within qualitative coaching fieldwork. I story how, during a season-long ethnographic study on basketball coaches' decision-making, I negotiated the space as a researcher and became an integral and trusted member of their coaching context. Drawing on my arts-based reflective diary, I reflect on how I navigated my interactions with the coaches and negotiated the research space. My story contains three central plots: (1) "Who is [Harley-Jean]?" highlights how I started my journey in my selected research field. (2) "Passing Coach's test" illustrates how I presented my worth within the Basketball context and negotiated trust, and (3) "You are trusted now, you can stay" captures how I became a trusted member of the team. The stories artfully convey the interactions and messiness of negotiating the position of a researcher and how building trusting relationships is central to high-quality fieldwork.

Introduction

Navigating ethnographic fieldwork

Ethnographic inquiry is becoming increasingly popular within sport coaching research, offering rich and meaningful insights into coaching contexts. To access the highly distinctive cultural realities of coaching, fieldworkers often use in-depth methods to interpret the layers of the social meaning of how participants live, interact, and view the world (Cushion & Jones, 2014). One key element of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork is becoming an "insider", who is afforded the opportunity to make sense of what is going on within the participatory practices, collecting close-up data on everyday interactions (Anderson & Austin, 2012). However, within the broader

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academic discourse on navigating fieldwork, being an insider is not as absolute as it is often made out to be (Tracy, 2019). For example, insider status does not always translate to an unfettered level of access (Robson & McCartan, 2016). A more worthwhile way to interpret the complexity of the researcher's status in a field may be to consider one's participation in terms of a "continuum of enmeshment and a potpourri of overlapping roles" (see Tracy, 2019, p. 130), thus balancing the social tensions of identity, subjectivity, and power that all work simultaneously, enabling or constraining the researcher's position and relationships within the field.

Illustrating the dynamic continuum of enmeshment, Woodward (2008), Purdy and Jones (2013), and Townsend and Cushion (2021) detail how their roles were often blurred, uncomfortable, and at times, problematic. Specifically, Woodward (2008) and Purdy and Jones (2013) described how they found themselves performing inauthentic, role-playing behaviours, which sometimes involved sidelining their true feelings. Additionally, both Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, and Littlewood (2020) and Lata, (2021) outlined fieldwork as a trust-building activity that comprises closing the social distance between a researcher and the participants. Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, and Littlewood (2020) also highlighted the importance of becoming through social, personal, and political experiences (see Vinson, Simpson, & Cale, 2023 for further insight on the notion of identity work as "becoming"). Collectively, Purdy and Jones (2013) and Townsend and Cushion (2021) also illustrate how a field is not linear and straightforward and provides rich insight into aspects of practice considering the micropolitical workings, describing some interactions relating to navigating the field. Collectively, this evidence demonstrates that the journey to becoming an insider is neither linear nor straightforward (Cushion, 2014; Purdy & Jones, 2013).

The body of work discussing the varying levels of micro-access has emphasised the juggling act of managing the emotional impact of the researcher-participant relationship, identity management, and ethical dilemmas (Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2020; Cushion, 2014; Lata, 2021; Purdy & Jones, 2013; Woodward, 2008). Despite a set of highly rigorous studies detailing the social exchanges between the researcher and the participants (i.e. Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2020; Lata, 2021; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Purdy & Jones, 2013; Townsend & Cushion, 2021; Woodward, 2008), the researchers' negotiations have not been the primary focus when explaining the immersion process. As such, this work does not often explicitly detail the processes behind collecting the data or discuss the researcher's role and negotiations in the field, that is, the extensive time, patience, energy, and willingness to become immersed within a coaching context (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Developing further theorised insights into understanding the researcher's story of their qualitative work may help unpack the

complexities of engaging with in-depth sport coaching fieldwork. Such work would contribute to unveiling the practical and methodological messiness when entering and navigating the field. Resultantly, it is essential to offer a more transparent approach to the researchers themselves and the fields that they are situated in to understand further the *how* and *why* of doing qualitative work and contribute to further insight into knowledge production, methodological rigour and the decisions made within context. Therefore, to enhance our understanding, the current paper aims to build on previous work by focusing on the micropolitical interactions within ethnographic fieldwork. Here, we use the concept of trust to interpret these negotiations, presenting these insights through a confessional tale. In providing the tale, we aim to unpack the everyday complexities of navigating the field, offering practical insight and pedagogical support for ethnographers to better understand and anticipate future challenges in the field.

The notion of trust within the researcher and participant-relationship

The notion of trust has been posited as foundational to the researcher-participant relationship and the process of negotiating healthy, comfortable boundaries (Tracy, 2019). Sztompka's (1999) theoretical account of trust as a component of human interaction offered a conceptual understanding of the researcher's position in conducting fieldwork. Here, trust becomes necessary for enduring social interactions and developing relationships within the field (Sztompka, 1999). Studies like those described above (e.g. Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2020; Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2014; Lata, 2021; Purdy & Jones, 2013; Woodward, 2008) engaged in reciprocity and exchanged life stories and personal experiences, confirming the importance of trusting relationships and how connections were built over time through acts of reciprocity and social interactions (i.e. the reciprocal act; Sztompka, 1999).

Building a trusting relationship between two or more people (i.e. the researcher and participant) is often maintained through personal and professional boundaries where the researcher is usually unfamiliar with the context but aims to enter the restricted space (Chaudhry, 2018; Sztompka, 1999). For example, trust operates at both individual and an institutional level, and thus can be tied to both societal and organisational structures (Mikecz, 2012). Individual trust is constructed through people, offering a sense of security, and is highly dependent on the integrity of the unknown (Sztompka, 1999). The perception of trust presents a perennial epistemological gap (i.e. between the self and the researched), where individuals cannot gain immediate sufficient knowledge of how individuals act within unknown future situations (Sztompka, 1999). From the initial researcher

and participant uncertainty, there is no way of knowing how individuals will (inter)act; therefore, researchers must demonstrate good intentions, motives, and articulated reasons for being in the field (Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh, & Kahryn, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Sztompka, 1999). Sztompka's concept of trust is formed through reciprocal exchanges and social interactions within the field, where trust is harnessed through individuals working in favour of another's needs or, at the very least, to cause no harm. Building trust relies on the researcher's interpersonal skills and showing empathy towards the participants. In this way, trust becomes an inseparable strategy to deal with the uncertainty of the social environment (Tracy, 2019). To show the process of building trusting participant-researcher relationships within sport coaching fieldwork, Tuval-Mashiach (2017), p. 126) presents the metaphor of "raising the curtain" as a way of revealing the "backstage of fieldwork" and so leads us to a consideration of how a more transparent approach might aid our understanding of how researchers might build trusting and insightful relationships.

"A way to raise the curtain and enter the backstage of fieldwork"

To raise the curtain, requires researchers to share more personal narratives and continue to push for more diverse and novel methods for collecting and representing data (McGannon, Schinke, & Blodgett, 2019; Day et al., 2023). Expressive writing offers a way to detail personal insight into the challenges and lessons learned within the field (Van Maneen, 1988). The emergence of novel written methods such as storytelling, diaries, and letters has expanded the toolbox available to qualitative researchers (Sanders, Wadey, Day, & Winter, 2019; Szedlak et al., 2021). Such methods often guide the reader to delve deeper into the researcher's attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions. In the same way, Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff (2020) aimed to push the qualitative community away from the neatly presented insights, where researchers occasionally present a sanitised account of how the research data were collected and produced. Such sanitised accounts may provide insight and everyday practical guidance on navigating the qualitative field (Cavallerio, Wadey, & Wagstaff, 2020; Sanders, Wadey, Day, & Winter, 2019). Confessional tales are increasingly being used to explore the author's experience of the research process (e.g. Bowles, Fleming, & Parker, 2021; Peters, McAllister, & Rubinstein, 2001; Sanders, Wadey, Day, & Winter, 2019; Watts, 2011; Wind, 2008). For ethnographic researchers, the confessional tale is often seen as a hermeneutic process, describing personal feelings and private mistakes through a reflexive stance, detailing the lived experience that stimulates an honest and open discussion about the realities of ethnographic inquiry (Sparkes, 2020; Whitley & Johnson, 2015).

To share the current confessional tale, we drew on Van Maneen's (1988) storytelling approach that encouraged a reflexive writing style, elucidating the first author's [Harley-Jean] fieldwork experience. This tale seeks to take the reader behind the scenes, offering a meaningful account of the researcher's role (Sparkes, 2020). The stories will offer a reflexive account, exposing fieldwork's interpretive nature and focusing on entering the backstage of the micropolitical interactions when positioned within ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, we use the theory of trust (Sztompka, 1999) to be explicit about everyday negotiations as a researcher through the medium of a confessional tale. Specifically, I tell the story of how, during a season-long ethnographic study on coaches' decision-making, I negotiated the space as a researcher and became an integral and trusted person within the coaching context.

The background of my confessional tale

As a White British female PhD student embarking on a research programme exploring coaches' decision-making within a team context, I began my ethnographic approach as a stranger entering a British Male Basketball Team. Starting my PhD, I noticed how the decision-making literature often required more contextual detail than was presented in order to understand the coaches' decisions. My fieldwork aimed to do more than collect data about the coaches' decisions. Instead, it was a process of delving into the coaching team and understanding their everyday activities, cultural values, and the decisions made within a team context, aiming to build a trusting researcher-participant relationship. Therefore, by aligning with Crotty's (1998, p. 9) statement, "there is no meaning without a mind", my worldview embraces a constructivist epistemology, that reality is based upon social experiences of the world. I accept that knowledge is fallible and reject the view that things are merely found; instead, it is a process of shared interaction and construction over time (Crotty, 1998).

Context and participants

The coaching team consisted of three coaches'; Mike, the Head Coach, and his two assistants, Freddy and Dan, who all held a vast range of coaching experience, including community coaching, coaching in university settings, coaching internationally (outside of the UK), and coaching in the highest league of Basketball in Britain (The British Basketball League, BBL). Mike, the head coach, held a level 4 Basketball coaching qualification, the highest level available in Basketball, accredited by Basketball England. Mike had eight years of experience within the National Basketball League (NBL) and six years within the BBL. Mike was employed full-time. Freddy and Dan

held a level 3 basketball coaching qualification and had five years of professional experience within the BBL. Before starting the study, ethical approval was attained from the Research Ethics Committee (CBPS20210006), and all names are pseudonyms.

Methodology and methods

To gain insight into the coaches' decision-making when positioned within the field, I adopted an interpretive ethnographic methodology, focusing on the field experience, attempting to make sense of the epiphanal moments, and reflexively mapping multiple discourses within the social space (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In collecting my thoughts through my ethnographic journey, I engaged in an arts-based methodology and participatory methods (i.e. photographs and drawings) that offered a unique way to engage with and reflect on my experiences (Lomax, Smith, & Percy-Smith, 2022). My drawings and photographs helped me identify and understand the basketball context and what was happening within the culture, reflexively interrogating my day-to-day experiences (Forde, 2021). The drawings and photographs offered a unique way to engage with my involvement as the project evolved – a form of wandering and sense-making that facilitated my journey of ongoing interpretations and analysis (Berger, 2005). My drawings were employed as a verb, "not created for exhibition but for the development of thought and understanding" (Gravestock, 2010, p. 197). For example, my drawings offered another avenue to critically reflect and guide a deeper understanding of my experiences within the coaching context. The process avoided viewing the illustrations as objective structures but rather as exploring what is seen following uncertain paths (Hendrickson, 2019; Taussig, 2011). I engaged in observing the world through expression and embodied knowledge, where I was not only reflecting on what was seen and heard but also my emotional attachment to the context, where I could critically interpret my positions within the context.

The drawings portrayed within the "tales from the studied context" below aim to act as pictorial representations to enhance the reader's understanding of the experience, connecting with the reader on an emotional, behavioural, and embodied level, allowing an empathetic understanding to emerge when considering the theory of trust (Sztompka, 1999). The illustrations aim to help the reader interpret and visualise the everyday events (e.g. where I would sketch moments that would occur within the context when getting to know the coaching team), capturing my experiences and conveying knowledge as a creative medium as I journeyed through the ethnographic endeavour (Forde, 2021). As my time with the coaches increased, the illustrations gained revised significance through self-reflexivity as an

ongoing process (Forde, 2021). Therefore, in light of subjectivity, I engaged in the methodological messiness, where new paths led to deeper connections. Through my reflective diary, I created a layered meaning of contextualised understanding of the context, a different way of thinking, feeling, and knowing (Phoenix, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Data analysis

From the standpoint of both a story analyst and a storyteller, I engaged in a narrative thematic analysis, an analytic method seeking to identify patterns across the data generated from my reflective diary (Cavallerio, Wadey, & Wagstaff, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). In storytelling, I employed an in-depth, prolonged immersion, an adventure to present a story that represents life rather than a recipe procedure (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Smith, Sparkes, & Caddick, 2014). The story narrative focuses not only on the story told by the researcher but also on what the story does *to* and *for* the storyteller (Frank, 2010).

I began with initial immersion, which Smith and Sparkes (2016), p. 264) labels "narrative indwelling", by reading and re-reading my diary transcripts and noting initial thoughts at the margin. I delved into revisiting and reorganising the continual interpretations and making sense of my reflections, drawings, and photographs, adding depth and providing a richer insight into the experience. In extracting the reflections, I immersed myself in the coding process, identifying initial codes and detailing them into a timeline of events (e.g. start to finish, outlining key moments), exposing my experiences within the field (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). I constantly revisited my illustrations and written reflections as they pushed me further to consider my experiences in new ways, embracing an embodied practice of critical analysis connecting written and visual reflections (Forde, 2021).

As a story analyst, I outlined the structure of events, detailing the written reflections, drawings and photographs that best represented my significant moments within the field (Papathomas & Sparkes, 2016). I embodied sensorial and relational accounts of my experiences, where I continued to label events that were representative of the timeline parallel to my experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). For example, the early stages of the timeline of events would consist of meeting the coaching team, discussing the research, and understanding the context. As I began building the stories, I engaged in several meetings with [Don and Andy-acting as critical friends] debating, challenging, and interpreting meaning from the events and redefining and constructing events that represented the narrative. The collaborative process with [Don and Andy] continued to challenge and question my interpretations of my experiences within the field. This was

not about the confirmability of the data but a process of critical epistemological reflexive dialogue, challenging my position when constructing the stories. From the reflexive analysis detailing the problematic situations that arose, three major story plots were constructed and are described below.

Adopting a connoisseurial attitude

The interpretations of my confessional tale should be judged on whether they resonate with other researchers when preparing for qualitative fieldwork. In adopting a connoisseurial attitude, the confessional tale does not look to make conventional objective statements; instead, I ask the reader to engage and judge the quality of the work on naturalistic generalisations (Smith & Atkinson, 2017). For example, does the story give you, the reader, a meaningful picture of the experience? Is the story credible in a way that represents different perspectives? In what way does the story show empathy and respect for all the participants, and are the participants portrayed in an ethically informed way? How does the story allow the reader to learn something new? The following section provides thick, rich practice descriptions, encouraging readers to reflect and make connections that stimulate curiosity and provoke action (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

Tales from the studied context

Situated under contemporary interests of "reflexivity", my epistemological confessional tale foregrounds my voice to reveal how I entered and negotiated the coaching field and built and maintained trusting relationships when attempting to understand how the coaches made decisions. To express my thoughts, emotions, and reactions to the field, the three linked story plots represent a journey of becoming a trusted member within the basketball context. The three plot lines include (1) "Who is [Harley-Jean]?" and highlight how I started my journey in my selected research field, (2) "Passing Coach's test" illustrates how I presented my worth within the basketball context and built trust, (3) "You are trusted now, you can stay" captures how the head coach confirmed I was trusted and part of the team. In presenting this tale, along with the descriptions of each plot, verbatim quotations and images from the reflective diary are used to illustrate the three-story plots and pertinent literature is used to aid interpretation.

Figure 1. A sketch representing the beginning of the ethnographic journey, entering the context as a researcher.

Story plot 1 – "who is [harley-jean]?" highlights how I journeyed into the field

'Who is "[Harley-Jean]?" The drawing, Figure 1, illustrates the first story, detailing the initial discussion with the coaching team led by [Andy], who provided agency and credibility within the basketball context. I began negotiating with my identity and my role as a neophyte ethnographer, where I viewed the initial discussions with the coaches as a valuable learning experience where particular features of my identity were encouraged, such as the coaching I had undertaken with male teams, my educational qualifications, and my high level of playing experience in football. In attending the first few sessions, the environment was a restricted space whereby, as a stranger, I was positioned on the continuum of enmeshment, where I had no authorisation to access the coaching team and the practice space. The context presented difficulties, where trying to become a familiar member within the space developed into a problematic start (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). I, for example, had no access to the buildings or the coaching space unless the coaches were present. So, I began "hanging around" the sports hall entrances, waiting for the coaches to arrive and let me in. Despite having ethical consent to undertake my research, I felt uninvited; I wandered the basketball reception areas and watched practice from afar, asking questions in a polite, curious, and naïve manner. My diary entry reflects my initial interactions where I felt like an "outsider".

My first experience of ethnographic work, I feel so out of place; I am just standing around trying to watch what is going on. I haven't spoken to anyone; I feel nervous and struggle to make conversation; I don't know where to start! I don't know the head coach very well; he always seems so busy! I am beginning to worry about my data; I am not even sure this is the best approach for my research. I have no idea how I will collect anything that's any good.

In problematising the notion of becoming immersed within the field, my immediate position did not translate to the level of access I had envisioned (Tracy, 2019). The written extract highlights my initial shock of entering the unknown and experiencing the realities of ethnographic research, where, without being a trusted member, gaining acceptance proved difficult (Jones, 2006; Purdy and Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2020). Such difficulty continued to shape my position within the field (Tracy, 2019), where I was experiencing a physical distance between myself as a researcher and the basketball coaching team., The researcher-participant dichotomy was exposed, specifically the physical distance, where the coaches had no time for me as a researcher. As a result, similar to Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen, Littlewood, and Richardson (2018), I could not observe the day-to-day activities. Consistent with Lata's (2021) experiences, I was experiencing uncertainty and realised that my immersed position within the basketball coaching context would not be achieved instantly. I was not a familiar member of the coaches' context, so in an attempt to build trust, I began bargaining for anything to do with my research in a very soft, apologetic manner (Sanders, Wadey, Day, & Winter, 2019). My few minutes with the coaches resulted in me constantly saying, "Thank you for your help; apologies for being in the way". This apologetic approach continued for a few weeks, during which I worked with [Christian and Andy] to overcome my concerns. My diary entry disclosed that my research was not going according to plan.

I have been hanging around at practice for the past three days. I still find it awkward. However, I have been speaking to Freddy a bit more. As I left, the head coach walked in; I enthusiastically said, "Hello Mike, how are you?". It was the quickest conversation ever; he must have known how nervous I was. I remember constantly saying, "Thank you for helping me with my data; I appreciate it, and I am sorry if it is annoying or burdens you". This is all I said to him, and nothing about my research. Honestly, I don't know why I am saying thank you or sorry to him because my data so far is not good enough.

I continued with my apologetic approach, undervaluing and damaging my research project by saying, "I know how busy you are", which presented Head Coach Mike with doubts despite the success of the project depending on his willing participation. Similar to Mason-Bish (2019), I offered myself

as a reluctant researcher, going into any conversation with a degree of anxiety. I was unprepared for the challenge, and I needed to spend more time ensuring Mike was well-briefed and engaged with the details of my project. My interpretation of Mike's impression of me was a hesitant and unenthusiastic researcher, where I was not trusted, as my diary entry entitled. "Finally, I am Home", expressed my first difficult conversation with Mike.

I headed down to Mike's office, ready for practice, reflecting on how my conversations have changed. It was nothing in-depth, but it was much better than when I first arrived. I always think about the timing of things and when to approach him. I knocked on the office door; there was a long pause, and the door swung open. Bad timing! He looked so angry, he did not say hello, [he] just started shouting and explaining how today was a bad day for the research stuff. Mike continued to state that he has so much going on with the team and league, doesn't need any more distractions, and doesn't have the head space or the time to be thinking about research. I was still standing in the doorway, where Mike began hinting at my research as distracting. I felt awful, and such a moment reaffirmed my feelings about starting the research project in the first place; I was filled with doubt and worry. I had no idea what to say, so we were silent. Again, I apologised and explained that he had a right to stop the study, even though I thought, "Please don't". Mike sipped his coffee and gathered his notes, ready for practice. He said, "Leave tonight, come back tomorrow". I replied, "Yes, of course", and left immediately. As I walked out, assistant coach Dan said, "Have you just been in the office?" I nodded, and Dan replied, "Oh my, I bet you have taken the hit for our loss yesterday". I nodded and left. What an evening!

In reflexive consideration of my position within the field, the diary expressed the complexity of my first difficult conversation with a busy head coach, responding to a weekend loss, and the doings of ethnography within a professional coaching context. The exchange between Mike and I highlights the realities of entering and building trusting relationships with participants who, at this point, had little time for me as a researcher (Molnar & Purdy, 2016). I developed uncertainties about my project, with circulating questions; "Was this the right context?" "Should I have used a different methodology?" "Should I have tried something else?" "Is it me, or am I doing something wrong?" The following questions were shared immediately with [Andy – acting as a critical friend], reflecting on the evening I had been sent home. From the critical discussion, we revised my plans, discussing alternative perspectives on how I could continue with my research project. A few days later, I asked to meet with Mike, ready to readdress the research aims and details of the project and hopefully broker some element of trust (Sztompka, 1999). The conversation highlighted the importance of sharing specific details of my research plan, the potential benefits in

more depth, and the sharing of more personal insights about myself, as well as my motives for being in the field (Sztompka, 1999). This continued to emphasise the researcher-participant relationship, where there were no other means to bridge the anonymity gap between the researcher and the participant other than building a trusting relationship (Sztompka, 1999). Building a trusting relationship with Mike would take my time, patience, energy, and willingness to immerse myself within his context.

Story plot 2 – "passing the head coach's test", illustrates how I presented my worth within the environment

Story plot two (see Figure 2) addresses how I began to illustrate my worth within the environment, where I required less of [Andys'] time and agency in passing Mikes' test of trust (Sztompka, 1999). There was no quick fix to building a trusting researcher-participant relationship; this was the biggest challenge of becoming closer to the coaches. Through my coaching and educational qualifications, combined with my pre-existing high-level

Figure 2. Mike's office door, where I often paused before entering.

playing experiences in football and understanding of the conventions of the sporting field, I felt movement within the continuum of enmeshment, positioning myself in a legitimate social position to be closer to the coaches (Ball, 1990; Tracy, 2019; Wagstaff et al., 2012). I gained cultural familiarity, where my commitment built anticipatory trust, extending my loyalty favourable to Mike's interests, needs and expectations (Sztompka, 1999). I began learning and understanding the basketball context by hanging around the coaches, trying to be helpful, carrying the equipment bags, filling up the water bottles and collecting the loose balls throughout practice. Like Purdy and Jones (2006), I became the most enthusiastic person in the room where no job was too much. My diary entry reflects how I became a scoreboard wizard, situated courtside with the coaches watching practice.

I have started to notice the pressures on Mike, so I always try to be around and help with the jobs; this creates opportunities to chat with the coaches, asking for details about practice or how their day is going. I have a few jobs now that I get on with, like water bottles, ice packs, scoreboards, and towels for practice. I am now a wizard on the scoreboard; however, I need to work on remembering the foul counts.

Through my new responsibilities and being situated courtside, I became more immersed within the context, where I populated a job list that I kept in my pocket and tracked my daily activities. Proactively, my job list prompted other tasks and avoided me asking the coaches questions about how I could be of help. My highly effective organisational skills stood out to Mike and made him less hesitant to give away more responsibility. I had become an enthusiastic helper, working in favour of supporting the team and slowly becoming a trusted member (Purdy & Jones, 2013; Sztompka, 1999). Despite the increase in responsibility, at times, Mike was still unsure of my motives. I noticed he remained carefully guarded when discussing information about the club and the individual players (e.g. team selection and tactical decisions). I acted as a set of eyes for Mike during the everyday basketball activities, listening to and responding to Mike's coaching reflections. As a result, our conversations developed from very superficial interactions (e.g. passing corridor conversations) to more in-depth discussions about the team and Mike's decisions. Like Mason-Bish's (2019) in-field struggles, I began juggling my identities within the field; for example, as my diary entry shows, "Why risk being told to leave"?

During practice, the players started arguing. It was heated, and Mike started getting annoyed. Freddy and Dan stood quietly courtside. It was apparent something was about to happen – a fight broke out between two players. Mike watched for a few seconds and then ran over to pull them apart. The practice stopped, and Mike shouted for everyone to enter the locker room. With my researcher hat on, I paused before following the team into the locker room. I didn't think it [involving myself in serious situations]

was part of my role yet, so I stayed on the court to make sure the balls and scoreboard were ready for when they came back onto the court. After about 15 minutes, a player stormed out of the locker room and left the arena. A few minutes later, the team and coaches returned to the court, where Mike told everyone to go home for the night. Mike was furious, and the coaches and I started walking to Mike's office. I was presented with another moment: either head into the office with the coaches or leave for the evening and return tomorrow. I decided to go despite the richness of the situation. I had become [more] immersed in my research, but it felt right for me to leave them to it as it was a very heated situation.

The extract details the juggling act – where the following incident created levels of trust either to be built or seeking a potion that was seen to be overstepping the line. For example, I could have stayed and discussed the practice (i.e. the incident) with the coaches, but I did not want to risk being told to leave. Despite helping the coaches daily during training, I remembered I was not a part of the coaching team. I had become more aware of my boundaries and my position within the field. Like Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, and Littlewood (2020), I began balancing the tensions of each unfolding situation within the context, negotiating, and navigating my way to maintaining my position. This balancing act may illustrate how navigating the context is not black and white; instead, it is a continuum of enmeshment that is at play, evidently with points of overlap within the varying levels of micro-access, in which micro-interactional processes were constantly being shaped within the field (Tracy, 2019). On the day of the fight, within the circumstances, I felt I had made a good decision to discreetly leave, where I was experiencing another field shift of trust (Sztompka, 1999). I continued to engage in the coaches' day-to-day activities, the highs and lows of practice, wearing the badge [with the kit I had been given] and attending all team practices. I made several personal sacrifices to ensure I was spending time with the coaches within the basketball context, where, similar to Lata (2021), I noticed how more time generated a thread of connectedness, loyalty, and interest between myself and the coaching team (Sztompka, 1999). Aware of my purpose in becoming closer to the team, I was spending much longer than I had planned with them, and I soon realised that it was time with the team that created a sense of connectedness. I continued to demonstrate commitment, where Mike, over time, gave away more responsibility (e.g. access to the buildings, kit duties and locker room preparations); however, this came with additional responsibilities, pressures, and complexities. For example, my diary reflections from a post-game incident and the consequences of my emerging responsibilities.

Everyone was on a high, it was a great result! I am starting to feel part of the team. I was coming out of the locker room with the kit bags, and James

[a player in the team] was sitting courtside. Mike had told him not to attend this evening's game. As I walked past, James said, "Hey", and I replied, "Hi, James". I didn't want to interact because of the mid-week incident [a fight broke out between a few players during team practice]. This was terrible timing; Mike was also coming out of the locker room behind me and shouted, "Don't fucking speak to him [James]!". Mike stormed to his office with Dan and Freddy walking behind. I jogged after Mike and approached him. I heard Mike say to Dan and Freddy, "I don't know why she is speaking to him; she knows what's happened". Before he could finish the sentence, I interrupted and explained that I was only being polite; I had to walk past him to get to your office. I stated, "I was being polite; it is not my place to ignore players; I am a researcher". However, [at this point], I realised I had become part of the coaching team. Mike shouted [at me] for talking to James. My role within the context blurred, and I juggled different identities and roles. I had been accepted, despite only realising by being told off. The same evening, we [Mike, Dan, Freddy, and I] sat in Mike''s office after a big win, chatting about the game. Dan asked me what I thought about the game; Mike joked and said, "Don't ask [Harley-Jean]; she is dead to me after this evening", and everyone laughed. However, to some extent, Mike was serious, and I started to see more of his values. [If] I am seen as one of them [i.e. part of the team], I had to live up to the expectations and standards of the coaching team.

Aligned with Sztompka's (1999) understanding of building trust through human interactions within social situations, there was now a level of trust to be betrayed. In confronting the above situation head-on, I proved my commitment and loyalty and that I was a trusted member within the team. Like Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, and Littlewood (2020) reflections, in this situation, I was required to manage the emotional impact when positioned within the field, interpreting and adjusting to the moral and ethical questioning of being a researcher within a competitive basketball context. The immediacy of the fieldwork was troubling, associating and disassociating from the role of a researcher and often feeling conflicted and confused, but on reflection, the blurring of the lines between each situation proved both necessary and beneficial in gaining entry, acceptance, and most importantly, developing researcher-participant trust (Sztompka, 1999).

Story plot 3 – "you are trusted now, you can stay" captures how I became part of the team

Story plot three (see Figure 3) illustrates how I developed control of my position as a researcher in becoming a trusted member that was deeply embedded within the field. My relationship with Mike, whom I now call Coach, has changed; our conversations are different, and we share
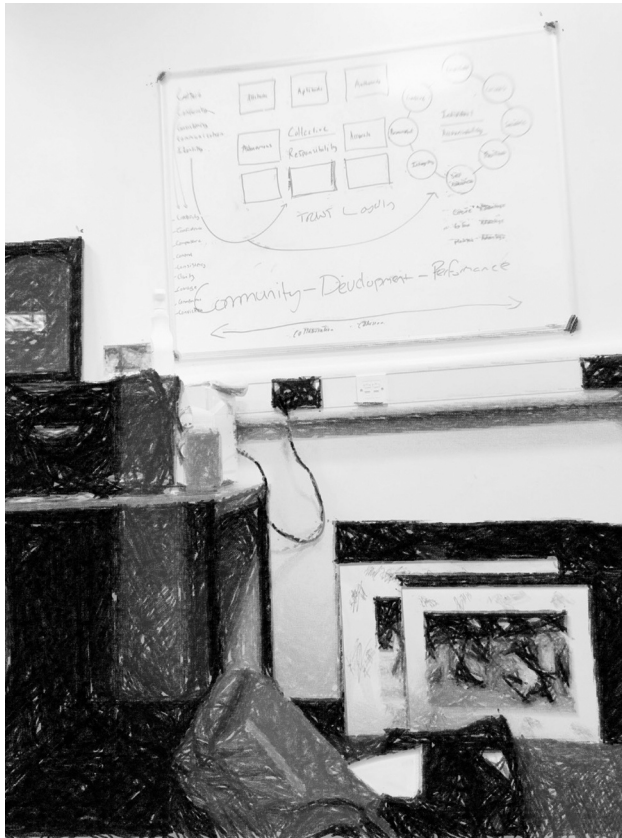
Figure 3. A phone call between Mike and his mentor within the office.

stories with personal meanings and information previously not discussed. We would actively spend time together, spend evenings in bars, and travel to practice and games. By gaining Mike's trust, I moved closer to the coaches, where honest and open conversations took place; I was negotiating my continually shifting position (Tracy, 2019). Over time, the coaches and I built a sense of togetherness through human interaction (Sztompka, 1999), where care was now welcomed, and together, we would experience the weekly highs and lows as we travelled around the country for the competitive fixtures. My trusted position was built over time and required patience and crafted interactions, where there was a period of "brokering" trust, where [Andy's] presence diminished within the context and was not needed. I was proving my worth through my interpersonal interactions and learning the context, which led to more space and responsibility unsupervised within the context. For example, my relationship with Mike had developed, as my diary entry expressed how I sat in Mike's office during a personal phone call.

I was sitting in the office; team practice was not for another few hours. Coach's phone started buzzing on the desk, like usual; I began to get up, ready to leave. Mike said, "No, it's okay, sit down; you are trusted now; you can stay". I tried my best not to listen [to his phone call], but it was so insightful that Coach turned up the volume so I could hear. It was his mentor – they were discussing elements of the game.

The extract illustrates another critical moment within the field (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007), where Coach directly articulated that I was now trusted and asked me to stay during a personal phone call. The comment reaffirmed that I had not been trusted before this point and offered clarification of Mike's previous hesitant behaviours towards me (Sztompka, 1999). Irrespective of whether Mike deliberately turned up the volume, I was close enough to hear the reflective conversation at a vital point of the season. After the conversation ended, Mike continued to discuss his thoughts, reflecting on his conversation with his mentor. I was now at the heart of my research questions about coaches' decision-making and in a position of trust to delve beneath the surface. However, in reaching this point, I had to hide my excitement, as this was a personal phone call discussing Mike's concerns and vulnerabilities in his coaching. As a trusted member, I had to mature into this space as an immersed researcher, consciously aware of my responses and situations within the context (Molnar & Purdy, 2016). Until then, Mike looked confident, and I had not witnessed his backstage vulnerabilities (Jones, 2006). I aimed to be empathetic, professional and a reflective listener, balancing the tensions of reciprocal trust and respect (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007; Sztompka, 1999). This intent is illustrated in my diary entry entitled, "Two away, back-to-back wins!"

We had finally arrived back home. Mike and I were slumped in the office; we were shattered and hungry but happy with the two away, back-to-back wins! We chatted about the game and reflected on Coach's decisions over the weekend. He started discussing other games over his career. He pointed at a picture on his desk, [a group of players] sharing stories about overcoming moments of struggles and winning crucial games. Mike said [pointing at another photo], "I was younger here, better looking". We both laughed. He continued to chat about his career, identifying critical moments and what has shaped him, showing me photo albums, tactics books with score sheets glued in and drawings of offensive plays. Mike began reading a poem underpinning his coaching values and what drove his success. Coach mentioned how he has been dramatically hurt during his career, and people have taken chunks out of him in the past, where people he loved had betrayed his trust. I listened and empathetically smiled [maturing into my role]. That night, I knew my role had changed; my position within the team and my genuine care for the coaching team was more than just collecting my data and answering my research questions. I was one of them!

The final extract from my reflective diary offers a rich insight into my position within the field, where I had become one of them [a member of the coaching team] and reaffirmed Coach's hesitant behaviour towards me when I first entered the context. It was essential to prove my pure intentions and show commitment through my actions, where Coach and I built a trusting relationship that had previously balanced on the edge (Sztompka, 1999). I was now in a position to discuss Coach's game reflections, personal and professional struggles and movements in preparing for the weekly fixtures. As a coaching team, we had developed a sense of mutual care for one another, where trusting relationships had been established. At this point, I had achieved longevity within the field, where, over time, through commitment, investment, and a sense of belonging, I reached the heart of my research questions and dedicated my time to the context of my chosen field.

Conclusion

The findings extend knowledge by artfully conveying the challenges, negotiations, messiness, and social strains of negotiating the space during a season-long ethnographic study on coaches' decision-making. The three-story plots detail the micropolitical interactions, using the theory of trust to be explicit about negotiating the field and how I experienced movement within the continuum of enmeshment, often evidencing a "potpourri of overlapping roles" (Tracy, 2019, p. 130). I aimed to move in from the periphery through human interaction, with no means of bridging the gap other than resorting to time and proving I could be trusted (Sztompka, 1999). By overcoming various challenges and social strains, I became part of the coaching team, navigating and negotiating the difficulties of building trust and maintaining a strong rapport with the coaches while collecting rich, high-quality data. Throughout each story, I aimed to lift and enter the backstage of the micropolitical interactions when positioned within ethnographic fieldwork, using the theory of trust to be explicit about the everyday negotiations as a researcher through the medium of a confessional tale. Building upon recent work (e.g. Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2020; Hall et al., 2024; Purdy and Jones, 2011; Townsend & Cushion, 2021), the current confessional tale critically engages in embodied means, which, as an ethnographer, I discuss identity, relational networks, and the contextual know-how to enable access to the research context and navigate the doing of the fieldwork over such an extended period.

The current work contributes to the qualitative research community by providing a rich account through the genre of a confessional tale, offering a transparent, honest picture of how I, the researcher, became immersed and maintained the space to achieve the data within a professional sports club.

The stories provide valuable hidden insights through lived experiences, grappling with negotiating the micropolitical interactions, such as power relations, ethical dilemmas, voice, subjectivity and interpretation (Sparkes, 2020). The confession shares the processes behind collecting the data, exposing the researchers' negotiation(s), and problematises the notion of being immersed and juggling social situations. Collectively, driving a more power-conscious and rigorous reading of coaching research will help drive the field forward, where the current tale has not only raised the curtain but entered the backstage on qualitative fieldwork and the broader academic readership, unveiling the methodological messiness and offering theorised insights into unpacking my interpretations of the experience.

In presenting the reflexive analysis, we hope to provide a frame of reference for better understanding the process of conducting ethnographic research in socially yet contested fields. Through reflexive recognition of the problems and complexities involved in moving within and between academic and research fields, the tale has embraced the messiness of working through the field, doubts, vulnerabilities, and challenges, especially when things do not go as planned. In exposing the moments of difficulty, we recommend you revisit the questions proposed within the section "connoisseurial attitude" to judge the quality of the work critically. We are confident that the tale has exposed the doings of qualitative fieldwork, unpacking the everyday complexities of navigating the field, and now offers practical insight and pedagogical support for ethnographers to better understand and anticipate future challenges in the field.

In doing so, we have brought the field role position into a sharper focus demonstrating the use of reflexivity, level of criticality and rigorous self-awareness that has relevance for social science more broadly. We hope the work extends and ignites interest in others to reflexively look at how researchers navigate the spaces within the field, considering the messiness of methodological approaches when presented with the real-life struggles of being a researcher. The tale prompts critical questions on how researchers can succumb to a field's context and belief systems and how we can reconstruct our research practices to provide valuable challenges and critiques, exposing the hidden, tragic and shameful parts of research. Collecting rich qualitative data is rarely straightforward and often problematic and complicated. Therefore, future research must continue to understand the researcher's challenges, negotiations, messiness, and social strains of navigating the spaces within the field and further problematise the seemingly productive or unquestioned aspects of social life.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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