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Lived Religion of Coaches: A Phenomenological Study

Research in religious education has a poor track record in the area of sport. Too often the work is only practice-based and can disgrace the societal significance of sport. In response, this study examines the lived religion of coaches in competitive youth sports. Through a phenomenological approach, the study presents how coaches describe their spiritual experiences, beliefs and practices in their everyday coaching. Insight drawn from this qualitative research leads religious educators to consider implications within the field of sport.

This study is emerging research in religious education with an eye toward the field of sport and religion. The researcher seeks your insight especially toward the discussion section of the paper/presentation based upon the results from the qualitative research.

Introduction: When one considers the prominence of professional, school-based, and community sport in North America, it is fair to state that sport is generally underappreciated by researchers. More specifically, religious educators rarely address sport's significance despite sport's capacity to capture the imagination of players, coaches, and spectators alike.

This study is part of a larger project examining spirituality in everyday, competitive sport. Having previously studied adolescent athletes' spiritual practices, this study focused on describing the spiritual experiences of coaches in sport. Our previous study found a significant engagement by youth with religious or personally meaningful rituals in sport (e.g., signing the cross or wearing a luck pair of socks), and so we wondered what role do coaches play in socializing these actions? Athletic coaches are often seen as influential mentors for young people, as they dedicate many hours of their time for youth. Instead of turning to elite or even professional coaches, however, this research study investigated ordinary, volunteer coaches of youth sport who gain little to nothing in terms of professional advancement through their coaching.

The study engages these spiritual experiences through the lens of current research about lived religion (Ammerman 2014) so as to broaden and deepen thinking about how religion is experienced in our world. Ammerman argues that an empirical understanding of religion demands more than counting worship attendance and daily prayer occurrences. It means knowing the actual spiritual practices and experiences of people, and how these relate to their religious backgrounds. It is with this lens we view the spiritual experiences of coaches.

Purpose: The aim of this study is to develop a rich description of the spiritual experiences of youth sport coaches.

Methodology: This research follows the approach of transcendental or psychological phenomenology of Clark Moustakas (1994). This methodology attempts to look at things simply as themselves, setting aside the prejudgments and presuppositions of the researcher in order to get at an experienced phenomenon (1994, 41). For this study, we sought to

determine the phenomenon of spirituality in coaching. Phenomenological studies seek to offer the richest and most descriptive data (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999), which is a fitting method to capture the complex phenomenon of spirituality.

We interviewed eight youth coaches of mixed genders involved in school-based sports in local Catholic schools. (Engaging this population increased the possibility of finding religion or spirituality in sport, despite the public nature of these schools in Alberta.) The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by a third party. The researcher then highlighted significant statements (i.e., horizontalization) and organized clusters of meaning into themes (Moustakas 1994). The researcher next wrote individual textural descriptions (i.e., the participants' experiences) and structural descriptions (i.e., the influence of the context on the experience) for each interviewed participant.

Results: Initial results from the interviews completed in September 2015 reveal a diverse set of spiritual experiences in sport as experienced by different coaches. For instance, coaches spoke of several spiritual experiences, including familial-like connections with players, a sense of timelessness and oneness when coaching, and the moral tension between striving for victory and the development of players as people. Influences upon the coaches played a large role in shaping these spiritual experiences. For example, a sense of responsibility, demands of role modelling, and an increase in age were part of the context that spurred these experiences. Further results in the form of themes—with stories told by participants—will be highlighted in the presentation at the annual REA meeting.

Discussion: Based upon these interviews, the researcher wishes to discuss with conference attendees the results/themes taken from the spirituality for everyday coaches.

Conclusion: Sport in our society remains significant, if not increasingly so. Investigating the spiritual experiences of ordinary coaches enables a broader understanding of coaching that leads to opportunities and challenges for religious education.

I look forward to feedback from colleagues at the REA conference. Thanks for attending in advance.

Bibliography

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