

COACHES AS PHENOMENOLOGISTS: PARA-ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK IN SPORTS

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HOW MIGHT (AND SHOULD) A PERFORMANCE STUDY of sport differ from other sorts of performance studies? Can and should we transpose methods sharpened on subjects like theater, carnival, ritual, and music onto athletic activities? Will performance studies of sport look like other sorts of performance studies or might sports teach us something distinctive about performance, something not available in our encounters with other sorts of performance genres?

From my perspective as an anthropologist interested in sports, I feel that performance studies of sports should not look like performance studies of other genres, just as they should not always resemble each other. Of course, some types of sports research in performance studies will more closely resemble other genres—we might fruitfully engage as ‘performances’ things like audience-performer relationships (e.g., Atkinson 2002; Guttman 1986; Kennedy 2001; Rinchart 1998), sporting rites, such as Olympic opening ceremonies, fixed competitions or halftime shows (e.g., Campbell 1996; MacAloon 1997; Migliore 1993), the stadium environment as theatre (Raitz 1985), television presentations of sports events and other mediated presentations of athletes (e.g., Downey 2006; Rader 1984; Rowe 2003; Wenner 1989, 1998; Williams 1993), and the like, of course.¹ These forms of analysis tend to treat sport as spectacle, emphasising the division between spectator and athlete, even if it is only for methodological reasons.

Beyond the most popular spectator sports, however, we find that the division between audience and performer is not so great; many spectators are themselves amateur participants (see Downey 2006). If we are truly to engage with sports, we must eventually go onto the field or pitch, into the pool or ring or racecourse, and ask what athletes are doing. We may find that the view from the field is very different to that from the grandstands (e.g., see de Garis 1999; Shore 1996: 75-100). This means that we must allow sports to transform how we understand performance, to learn *from* sports *about* performance. We might talk about a performance study of sport that follows the athletes: into try-outs, through training, into the locker room, onto the field, back into the locker rooms at interval (not staying to watch the halftime show), into rehab, attempts to hang on to prowess, failure, and retooling for careers after sports are over, maybe even discovering sport in a new way as a part of their personal lives.

One important consideration in this follow-the-athlete trajectory of performance studies of sport is that athletes have coaches. The observation is so obvious as to be banal. But in this short format, I

want to focus on ways in which coaches are like performance analysts, making them potential allies in our research.

Coaches have many different roles; they are strategists, they direct athletes' physical conditioning, they motivate and discipline players, and they make pragmatic decisions about who plays, where, and how. In youth athletics, coaches are at once fictive aunts and uncles, baby-sitters, task-masters, evaluators, and role models. One important role for a good coach, however, is that coaches often teach athletes skills or advise them how to improve techniques. They play a role as a developmental guide, studying players' performance, intervening in athletes' use of their own bodies, and attempting to alter and improve techniques. For this reason, I will argue, coaches are potential allies for performance analysts, but for them to serve as allies, we must take them seriously and treat their forms of knowledge as not so different from our own; they do a kind of *applied* performance analysis.

Coaching the *bananeira*

In order to illustrate this type of applied performance analysis, I want to briefly share an incident that happened to me while I was learning to do a handstand, or *bananeira*, in the Afro-Brazilian martial art, capoeira, an activity that is at least arguably a sport (although it also has dance-like qualities).² Capoeira is a type of acrobatic danced game, done to distinctive music, first performed in its present form in Salvador, Brazil, where I did my field research. Because no definitive universal rules exist for capoeira games and no decisive 'winner' emerges from a match—yet they are still quite competitive—capoeira is generally not considered a fully-fledged 'sport'. Some practitioners and advocates have even encouraged reform to the art so that it might be recognised as a 'sport', perhaps even included in the Olympics (see Downey 2002).

While learning, I struggled with the *bananeira*, a type of handstand that is widely used when playing capoeira. The *bananeira* differs from an Olympic handstand in that a capoeira practitioner must watch an adversary while doing it and continue to move, walking about on the hands if necessary. This makes the technique much less symmetrical, static, and geometrically balanced than the handstand typically done in gymnastics. If an Olympic handstand has a single perfect form, *bananeiras* are deformed, twisted, moving, legs flailing, hands stepping, neck craning, fending off potential attacks.

Before class one day, I was practicing the *bananeira*, making one failed attempt after another to remain balanced on my hands while one of the school's *contramestres*, or drill leaders, studied what I was doing. After watching for a few minutes, Boca do Rio, the drill leader, said: 'You're doing it wrong.' He proceeded to pantomime my motion in a broad caricature that highlighted certain ridiculous qualities. He held his arms straight up in an exaggerated wind up, bent over abruptly, and pitched himself onto his hands, arms locked, body straight, out of control. His legs flung his body toward a handstand as if, with just the right amount of force, it would land in the right place, balanced, upright, in the *bananeira*. As he pantomimed my movement, I felt absurd.

He held up one finger, a Brazilian way of signaling, 'pay attention.' Then he did another exaggerated pantomime, this time drawing attention to crucial moments in the technique, highlighting key kinesthetic traits of the movement using a hyper-correct model. He bent over at the waist and slapped his hands on the ground, freezing for a moment to show me *emphatically* that he was not using momentum to fling his body upright. He then looked between his legs, meeting my gaze and holding it to demonstrate the proper head position and focus *prior* to launch, and then he *gently* pushed off the ground—elegantly, slowly—emphasising how his weight shifted subtly to his hands and did not leap. After holding the position, he told me off-handedly: 'Just stand up!' It was great coaching.

Although he made it look easy, the exaggeration of the ‘correct’ technique was spectacularly difficult, as I later learned when I did it for my own students. The flexibility demanded in the back to pike the body so completely and the unbelievable strain on the shoulders generated when all the weight shifts slowly to the hands before the feet leave the ground, the shoulders pushed into hyperflexion, make this hyper-correct technique that he demonstrated virtually impossible. Although I have discussed dimensions of this pedagogical intervention elsewhere, here I want to emphasise what Boca do Rio had to do to come up with this awkward, exaggerated, excruciating distillation of ‘correct’ technique, one so extreme and hyper-correct that it was practically useless. His exercise, in fact, arose from an astute phenomenological analysis. It demonstrates that our intelligence as a ‘coachable’ species arises not merely from our receptivity to learning, but also from our savvy and creativity as teachers (see Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976, 89; see also Wood 1986, 194-195).

In that moment, when he contrived this intervention, my instructor was doing something the best developmental coaches do: he studied my movement, compared it to his own skilled sense of right movement, and created an exercise that would generate an experience for me to transform my own relationship to my body in the bananeira. He was applying a sophisticated form of practical phenomenology, theorising about experience in movement, and actively scaffolding my perceptions in order to guide my individual invention of a viable bananeira technique.

Para-phenomenological coaching

Three steps were apparent in the coach’s practical account of his applied phenomenology: first, he perceived and sought to change my perceptions of my own prior technique. To change my perceptions, he needed to heighten my awareness of my own bodily position and motions during the failed attempts at the bananeira. When I was shamed by his pantomime, it highlighted how my own proprioception had failed, how unaware I was of my absurd technique. In my experience, this is one of the ways in which movement coaches do phenomenological work; they bring into awareness what is inchoate or unconscious. They help to make the athlete’s body itself an object of heightened perception. Drew Leder (1990, 30-32) specifically addresses the fact that in skill acquisition, the body, typically absent from our overt experience, must often be made the object of our perceptions before it can act as a skilled vehicle for our actions.

In fact, research on manual action suggests that humans are not very good at consciously knowing how they are moving; recollection of actions, even immediately after moving, are often extremely inaccurate. As Georgieff and Jeannerod (1998, 469) discuss, studies of pointing experiments indicate that even normal subjects ‘appear to be unable to consciously monitor the signals generated by their own movements,’ especially if they cannot see these movements.³ Because most sport training, unlike some forms of dance, seldom takes place in front of a mirror, it highlights how feedback for bodily awareness is essential to many types of performers; and in many developmental settings, feedback proceeds through social channels with expert practitioners rather than only through one’s own proprioceptive senses.

In the second step of Boca do Rio’s practical phenomenology, he created a specially-tailored exercise, perhaps one that he had never used or seen, in order to give me a ‘corrective’ experience. The exercise itself was a form of analysis and theorising about my experience and what might alter it, applied to the technical problem of fixing my errant bananeira. If he were right about my experience, this exercise would change what I perceived and what I accomplished. It was not just the ‘right technique’ modeled for me; it was a corrective experience into which he led me. Simply modeling the bananeira correctly for me to imitate had been insufficient to teach me; he had to pull a phenomenological trick out

of his bag to get through to me.

Russian pedagogical theorist Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) wrote about the ‘zone of proximal development’; that is, given what a student knows or can do, what is the next stage that he or she should move to in the course of development. In his action, Boca do Rio was charting a trajectory to the ‘next’ level of skill, in a direction he felt was salutary (in fact, he was probably pitching above my head, but that’s another story). He diagnosed practically what was just beyond my current level of expertise while, at the same time, he herded my development, encouraging me to avoid certain pitfalls (like learning to do a handstand more quickly but with an incorrect, and uncorrect-able head positioning). He could have just as easily encouraged me to pursue some other technique. In this action, Boca do Rio offered a valuable insight into what counted as skill, how its development might proceed, and what proficiency would, ideally, eventually look like. It was a practical indication of the nature of physical skill.

This sort of skill acquisition in sports highlights an important trait of performance that tends to get obscured in studies of other genres. Performance genres tend to get reified—kathak dance, blues guitar, tango—making it easier for us to assume that a ‘thing’ is getting ‘transmitted’ in the apprenticeship process. But no-thing gets transmitted, like a virus or a code, in the learning of a physical technique; no matter how many times Boca do Rio did a bananeira in front of me, I did not ‘catch’ it or have it transferred to me. Rather, Boca do Rio was guiding my own invention of the bananeira technique, using my own distinctive bodily resources. Our bodies were so different—his small, wiry, and jaw-droppingly flexible; mine hulking, old, and stiff by comparison—that we probably did not ‘do’ the bananeira in the same fashion. But he was an expert practitioner and had been studying how different people moved for over a decade, so he was able to guide my invention of a bananeira. This is the third step of his applied phenomenology: my own ‘discovery’ of a knack for doing this movement. Boca do Rio had guided me to invent my own form.

The term ‘guided re-invention’ is anthropologist Andrew Lock’s (1980, 1) portrayal of the way in which language learning takes place, how children encounter an environment specifically constructed, with elements like distorted, simplistic, and emphatic adult speech, to encourage their development of language competence. This learning environment provides a kind of ‘scaffolding,’ to use a term provided by Wood and his colleagues (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976), with structured opportunities for perception and action, so that novices will develop their own competence (see also Downey 2008.). This requires more than just unreflective models of right behavior; it requires rich pedagogical structures that, implicitly, take the novice’s perspective and experience into consideration, that build progressively upon what a novice can successively perceive and accomplish.

In fact, because of the extraordinary gap in physical expertise between my ability and the task Boca do Rio was demonstrating, one can argue that my bananeira was not an ‘imitation’ of his, as this term has come to be used in studies of social learning. Instead, Michael Tomasello (1990) introduced the concept of ‘emulation’ to describe a learning process in which an observer learns about the physical situation or qualities of objects from the action of a model. In this case, I was learning about the physical qualities of my own body from Boca do Rio’s demonstration, but I was not necessarily copying ‘how to’ do the bananeira; I still had to discover that on my own, and it took more than a year of further experimentation for me to discover it.⁴

Coaching and performance analysis

One thing that makes a coach's phenomenological work more accessible to the performance analyst—one reason that our colleagues with clipboards might be extremely good allies—is that athletic coaching is often under-theorised (and I mean no insult by saying this). That is, sports' coaching, such as in capoeira, *sometimes*, is not overly encrusted with elaborate, pre-fabricated performance theories, unlike, say, Indian *rag* theory or philosophy in *yoga*, Taoist-Buddhist teaching in the martial arts, or classical musicology in Western art music. The more I read about some of these other performance traditions, the more convinced I am that certain types of 'native discourse' may be more of an obstacle to phenomenological research than finding no formalised, formulaic discourse in a genre. So often these 'native discourses' are not native to practice itself, but instead are imported from high status, parallel fields in the same society: religion, philosophy, sacred texts, academe.⁵ Of course, these ideas are fascinating, but treating coaches as what Doug Holmes and George Marcus (2006) have elsewhere referred to as 'para-ethnographers,' as engaged in knowledge practices like those of ethnographic researchers, allows us to stand alongside them and listen to what they say rather than treating it as raw material, 'discourse,' for us to analyze or replacing it with a calcified, intellectualised ideology.

Phenomenologists since Edmund Husserl have been dedicated to studying how perceptions and concepts arise in awareness without prior abstract, theoretical commitments. Similarly, the best developmental coaches must study each player individually to diagnose his or her idiosyncratic technical, perceptual, or skillful difficulties. Likely, we have all had lousy developmental coaches, ones who always see the same 'problem' regardless of the athletes' weakness; likewise, we have run into single-minded performance analysts, those who impose the same analytical frame regardless of the material to be examined.

In order to engage in performance analysis at this level, alongside coaches as ethnographic phenomenologists, a number of potential problems need to be highlighted: firstly, a problem of scale or bounding of the object of study. Is the object a sporting 'performance,' that is, a single event, or is it 'performance,' in the sense of the heightened physical skills or a body of practice cultivated by athletes? If it is the latter, physical skills, performance theorists may be forced to consider a wider range of research techniques and intellectual disciplines with which to converse: ethnography from anthropology, individual-level testing and observation from psychology and sports science, behavioural analysis and symbolic interactionist tools from microsociology, and many other tools from such fields as physical education, physiology, movement analysis, neurosciences, or child development. If our subject is skill and athletic performance on that level, rather than the sporting event, the scale of analysis will shift: it will become longitudinal, requiring a longer attention span than event analysis; personal, requiring us to tangle with ethical obligations; and microsocial, leading me to the second challenge I perceive.

That second challenge is to consider what counts as 'analysis' in our disciplines, whether performance studies or related fields like anthropology or cultural studies. Like the problem of scale, we will have to content ourselves with a different level of analytical narrative. It may be more difficult to see macrosociological tensions like class conflict, global forces such as empire or post-colonial domination, or political hegemony and resistance at this level of detail. Certainly, we can conjure them up, as we have become so capable of doing. But taking coaching seriously as 'para-ethnographic' phenomenology may mean, as Annelise Riles (2006) has cautioned, that our analysis might appear 'shallow' initially. To an audience accustomed to tying performances to gender inequality, group identity, or other forces in the Bourdieu-ian social cosmos, describing the complexity of a handstand might appear thin intellectual gruel. But there is a richness in this finely detailed phenomenological analysis, which doesn't always wind up with the same theoretical protagonists and culprits, which doesn't always resolve into

the same socio-political scorecard.

This leads to the third challenge I anticipate: getting serious about phenomenology. Increasingly, the word 'phenomenology', at least in anthropology, is used with reckless abandon, as though it were simply equivalent to participant's-eye-view or '-emic' description, that is, using native categories. But phenomenology since Husserl is a rich philosophical tradition that makes at least two central demands on practitioners: 1) that they study how phenomena, things as they are perceived, arise in perception, and 2) 'bracket' or set aside pre-existing assumptions about the nature of reality. For example, even assuming that sport is 'performance' may do violence to the way athletes perceive or enact what they are doing. No-holds-barred fighters with whom I worked, for example, see their activity as emphatically not 'performance,' like theatrical professional wrestling; for them, fighting in no-holds-barred is 'real' (and that's their category), unlike fixed matches and cooperative interaction in settings like the W.W.E., the most popular professional wrestling franchise. Unlike many forms of hermeneutical analysis, or symbolic interpretation, a phenomenological perspective is a much more demanding commitment to experience, a much more radical renunciation of a theoretical 'view from nowhere.'

Under ideal circumstances, it may be hard to tell the difference between what the most astute developmental coaches are doing and what we might do if we, too, stood beside them and took seriously the value of athletic abilities on their own terms. Far from giving us no ground on which to stand, this move would give us a pitch or a ring or a field or mats, and people to share them with.

Endnotes

1. On a range of issues, most notably gender and sexuality, research in sports argues that they are a forum for the performance and construction of meaning more pervasive in society. One might call this approach a 'metonymic' analysis, where the technique is to show that sports are a part of, and representative of, symbolic relations observable in a much broader context. The literature on gender, especially masculinity and heterosexual normativity, is too immense to cite here, but this form of metonymic analysis extends to other themes as well. For example, the journal *Sport and Social Issues* had a special edition on 'Indian' mascots in North American sports that focused on the use of these symbols, how they affected images of native North Americans, and the controversy surrounding them (see *Sport and Social Issues* 2004, Vol. 28, Number 1).
2. The incident is discussed at greater length in a different context in Downey (2005: 45-48).
3. My own practical experience as a capoeira practitioner and instructor and salsa teacher suggests that students are frequently unable to perceive what their bodies are doing; novices often need basic correction in bodily postures, even simple ones, because imitation alone is not sufficient to produce the same movements.
4. Using this strict reading of 'imitation', virtually no technically difficult act could ever be said to be learned entirely through imitation. With virtual every such act, a substantial amount must also still be learned about the environment, tools, or internal sensations of the action before a person can competently imitate an action. Therefore, even a perfectly successful 'imitation' of the external form of a complex act likely would not yield a successful result because the task must be specifically calibrated to external conditions that vary in each instance.
5. Consider the way that concepts from the study of the African diaspora are creeping into capoeira as a means of 'explaining' practices with which they have little relation; Robert Ferris Thompson's (1974) ideas about 'getting down' or Henry Lewis Gates' (1988) discussion of 'signifyin(g)' are grafted onto capoeira practice because of their high prestige.

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