



# Coping with emotional labour in tennis coaching

Richard Buscombe (GBR), G Shone (GBR), A Preston (GBR) & Miguel Crespo (ESP)

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## ABSTRACT

*Viewed through the lens of 'emotional labour' this paper discusses situations in the tennis coach's daily schedule that may lead to perceptions of increased stress and burnout. Resulting from interviews with experienced coaches, our findings revealed; (1) Responsibility; (2) Impression Management; (3) Communication to describe the primary antecedents, response and coping strategies employed by coaches to mitigate against the maladaptive outcomes associated with emotional labour.*

**Key words:** emotional labour, coping strategies

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**Corresponding author:**

Richard Buscombe

**Email:** [coaching@itftennis.com](mailto:coaching@itftennis.com)

## INTRODUCTION

A tennis coach works in a social environment, employed in a service based economy with the outcome of client-customer interactions significantly impacting on the consumer experience. Research conducted outside of sport has shown that positive affective displays during interactions, which in a tennis situation may include providing support through displays of warmth, empathy, positivity and compassion as the client attempts to master a new technique, have shown positive associations with customer satisfaction. Hochschild (1983) coined the term 'emotional labour' to describe the process of, and demands resulting from adjusting one's demeanour, language and tone during social encounters in a planned and strategic manner in order to facilitate a positive outcome. Hochschild proposed that individuals in jobs which require a high degree of face-to-face interaction with the public are particularly at risk of experiencing potentially deleterious effects that result from dealing with emotional labour demands on a daily basis. It would appear that tennis coaches work in environments that make them susceptible to experiencing emotional labour and as such the intention of this article is to first introduce the concept and then to provide suggestions for how a coach may cope with these demands.

According to Grandey (2000) emotional labour may involve enhancing, faking or suppressing one's true emotions. In a sports context this may require a tennis coach to act in such a way as to routinely inhibit, modify or project either positive or negative emotions that are either at odds with their current emotional state or perhaps even run counter to their personality (Cushion et al., 2011). Hochschild (1983) outlines two elements of professional acting 1) surface acting, which is the overt display of a planned outward appearance, 2) deep acting, requiring an individual to evoke in herself, and display the feelings needed in order to convey genuine empathy for those people with whom we interact. The variety of experiences afforded by the sports arena, and the diverse nature of the coaching profession are two alluring features of working in the field. However, even the most experienced coaches can find the variety of clients (age, standard, aspirations in tennis) and service demands (on-court coaching, leading social events, hosting tennis camp) to be challenging when continually modifying the way one is required to act at work. Each of these situations requires social interaction with clients who have their own personalities, emotional state and expectations for the outcome of the encounter. For example a

coach may one minute find themselves in a discussion with a junior performer who is upset that they have not been able to master a new skill and then a minute later find themselves interrogated by an overzealous parent who wants to know why their child has only been selected for the second team when they feel that they are worthy of a first team berth. This diverse range of interactions requires a coach to be able to detect the emotional state of the person with whom they are interacting and then tailor their own emotional persona in order to ensure a smooth social encounter. When working as a tennis coach not only are you required to constantly engage in interactions but these interactions must be purposeful with the outcome holding consequences for the athlete (performance), the coach (perceptions of coaching efficacy) and the



coach-athlete-parent triad. Isenbargar and Zembylas (2006) have highlighted the stressful and demanding nature of dealing with emotional labour and suggest that individuals who are unable to cope with these demands may experience increased stress and burnout.

Burnout has been described as chronic exhaustion caused by a perceived inability to cope with excessive emotional and psychological demands and it has been reported to occur in a range of performance climates (Jackson et al. 1986). Work in this area has served to highlight the role that various moderators (e.g., coping resources) and mediators (e.g., personality characteristics) play in influencing incidences of burnout in occupations requiring high levels of social

interaction. The exploratory work described in the subsequent section describes our attempt to explore some of the antecedents, outcomes and methods of coping associated with emotional labour resulting from the need to manage social encounters when working as a tennis coach.

Eight coaches with a minimum of five-years' experience within their coach-athlete relationship participated. Six male and two female coaches took part, ranging in coaching experience from five to nine years and in age from twenty one to thirty two. All coaches had to be in contact with their athlete or group of athletes for a minimum of five hours per week, with time spent ranging from five to nine hours. Each coach participated in an in-depth interview lasting approximately forty-five minutes. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions thus permitting the participants to contribute as much detail as they wished in addition to allowing the researcher to ask probing questions to draw out fully the participants' viewpoints and experiences (Turner, 2010). An interview guide was followed consisting of general questions (i.e., "how did you get in to coaching?") moving to more detailed enquiry exploring the nature of social interactions in the workplace. The main body of the questions focussed on the nature of, and emotions resulting from these interactions with specific reference to stress and burnout (these terms were not directly used during the interviews). Finally each coach was asked to consider the strategies that they employed to cope with the demands of working in a service based industry. The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, with the aim being to "explore the participants' view of the world and to adopt as far as possible, an insider's perspective" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

The results clustered under three headings; Responsibility, Impression Management and Communication.

### THEME 1: RESPONSIBILITY

Internalising a disproportionate amount of responsibility for managing the coach-athlete relationship and ultimately the athlete's performance had a significant effect on whether the coach demonstrated signs of enduring stress.

"I'm very harsh on myself before the players... I'm struggling to cope with work and balancing everything at the moment so we're not really sure what we are going to do next year... the seasons a write off to be truthful" (Participant 7).

A perceived inability to cope with situations when an athlete underperforms was seen to give rise to a series of negative emotions in some of the participants,

"Angry. I get frustrated easily with them sometimes and can name many situations where I have given them the tools but they have not taken it with them on a match day" (Participant 1).

### THEME 2: IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The theme 'Impression Management' was derived from a collection of often contrasting interpretations. The participants' responses included reference to the need to balance their private and public self to examples where coaches were clearly struggling to manage the different identities that they adopt both at the club and in 'normal' life; ;

"Its life isn't it? It doesn't mean you act... I can't act... I wear my heart on my sleeve... I have never noticed holding my emotions in when coaching... its what I personally love doing" (Participant 6).

"Its funny you mention that because just the other day I saw one of my guys down the shops and he was laughing at the fact I have a life outside of coaching... In any environment you act differently, even down the shops I was more relaxed around the boy... Sometimes I come home and literally collapse... I put

too much into it and feel so drained I can't even be bothered to have my dinner... my girlfriend's always nagging me to take a break from it" (Participant 3).

### THEME 3: COMMUNICATION

Six of the coaches reported that they communicated with friends or family members in order to manage their emotional response when experiencing stressful situations and as such this appears to be a dominant source of coping.

"Even when I'm coaching my old man always comes to watch... when I played he watched and now when I coach he watches, he loves it... it's a routine for us on the way home to have a chat about the game or in general... he is always trying to advise me on what to do" (Participant 6).

However two participants felt less inclined to share their thoughts or emotions with others;

"Sometimes something can really irritate me but I just have to get on with it... I don't really talk to anybody about training or matches to be honest with you... I get very stressed but I decide to do it, I'm the coach so I have to deal with the stress that comes with it" (Participant 2).

### CONCLUSION

Our exploratory work supports the contention that emotional labour is experienced by tennis coaches and furthermore, based on the coping strategies employed by a coach, burnout may result. In our exploratory study, communication was seen to be the primary method of coping with stress resulting from emotional labour although there was a marked difference in the participants' propensity to share their thoughts with others and to whom they confided. In this regard Korczynski (2003) found that workers turned to each other to cope with stress experienced at work. The

coaches in our study did not utilise individuals inside the workplace but alternatively family members. Communicating with individuals not immediately connected to their workplace afforded the coaches an avenue to air their emotions without fear of the consequences. In order to establish structures within a team that supplement the existing support being provided by a coach's family it is proposed that head coaches may consider establishing forums for their coaching team to engage in meaningful discussion at work in a supportive and collaborative environment. For example, the use of a coach mentoring system, structured focus groups and one-to-one pastoral meetings may all prove to be worthwhile endeavours. In order for such strategies to be successful it is essential that the head coach promotes at all times principles that emphasise a non-judgmental and inclusive working community with coaches being made aware of the benefits associated with being inter-dependent when working to achieve the organisational goals and one's individual targets. Instilling these values and making them overt in the working environment will hopefully create a climate of trust and openness where coaches share their thoughts with colleagues. Korczynski (2003) found that establishing such communication patterns helped workers deal with stress encountered at work, in addition to improving team cohesion and facilitating a dense supportive culture among the workforce.

It was evident in our work that a) the coach's playing experiences, b) the interaction and management of the coach's personality with that of the athlete and parent and c) the coach's long term career aspirations all contributed to the experiencing of, and ability to cope with, stress associated with emotional labour. Future research employing nomothetic designs to elucidate the moderating and mediating role of a range of characteristics under these three broad headings would appear warranted.

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