

Using Photo-Elicitation to Enrich Sensemaking of Football Coaches' Well-Being Over Time: A Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

HIGHAM, Andrew, NEWMAN, James, RUMBOLD, James and STONE, Joseph <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9861-4443>>

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Using photo-elicitation to enrich sensemaking of football coaches' well-being over time: a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis

Andrew J. Higham ^a, J. A. Newman   ^b, J. L. Rumbold   ^c and J. A. Stone   ^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK; ^bSchool of Sport and Physical Activity, College of Health, Wellbeing and Life Sciences, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK; ^cSchool of Sport and Exercise Science, College of Science and Engineering, University of Derby, Derby, UK

ABSTRACT

Well-being is multifaceted and shaped by various aspects of a person's life across diverse contexts and dimensions over time. As such, innovative qualitative methods are needed to make sense of the temporality, context sensitivity and ecological nature of well-being. This study applied a multi-modal Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) and photo-elicitation approach to explore how professional football coaches make sense of their well-being over a 10-month period. Seven male football coaches from the United Kingdom were interviewed at four time-points across a professional football season, providing reflective photographs to support sensemaking. Two Group Experiential Themes were developed: (i) The struggle to remain whole: Balancing self, role, and relationships, and (ii) The challenges of navigating experiences, connections, and anticipations. The multi-modal LIPA approach captured the temporal, contextual, and reciprocal influences between personal, relational, and cultural systems on well-being. Visual methods facilitated rich, metaphorical insight into tacit experiences that shaped well-being management, including how coaches navigated role transitions, family dynamics, and institutional norms. The photo-elicitation approach actively opened up conversations, enhancing participants' self-awareness and well-being management. This research advances understanding of how the dynamic and contextualised nature of well-being can be explored using multi-modal longitudinal qualitative research methods.

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Introduction

Human well-being comprises multiple dimensions, such as mental, physical and social (VanderWeele & Lomas, 2023). Despite its multidimensional nature, well-being is often compartmentalised with prefixes such as 'mental' or 'physical', reinforcing an unhelpful false dichotomy. This is problematic because, as Simons and Baldwin (2021, p. 985) state, 'no part of the human experience, and no determinant, is purely physical or mental'. Thus, there is a drive towards more multidimensional and ecological descriptions of well-being that account for various aspects of a person's life, acknowledging that well-being can permeate and traverse a multitude of contexts and dimensions (Bone, 2015).

Well-being is both a mode of 'being-in-the-world' and the felt experience of that existence, shaped by ongoing interactions within one's environment, reflecting the inseparability of person

CONTACT Andrew J. Higham   a.higham@hw.ac.uk  Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland EH14 4AS, UK

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and context (Seamon, 2018). Seamon (2018) highlights there is no *being* without *place*, which spatially, environmentally, and temporally conditions existence. Thus, the interplay of biopsychosocial and socio-contextual factors (e.g. health, habits, culture) over time determines well-being management (Bone, 2015). Conceptualisations of well-being typically overlook what *being* entails, which is of concern considering *being-in-the-world* (i.e. lived experience) is central to understanding well-being (Holst, 2022). This is important given that well-being is a temporal, evolving experience influenced by past, present, and future life narratives and contextual interactions (Rush & Grouzet, 2012; Smith, 2024). Consequently, more temporal and contextualised qualitative explorations of well-being are advocated (Hamling et al., 2020).

Professional football coaches represent a suitable workplace population for examining well-being, as they operate in high-pressure environments which can lead to poor well-being and performance. Over the past decade, research on this population has increasingly explored factors influencing well-being, including stress and coping (Baldock et al., 2021, 2022; Dixon & Turner, 2018), burnout (Lundkvist et al., 2012), job insecurity and dismissal (Bentzen et al., 2020). However, studies that explicitly focus on coaches' understandings and experiences of well-being remain limited. Baldock et al. (2021) progressed knowledge by adopting a semi-structured interview approach to investigate football coaches' ill/well-being, though they fixated more so on stressors and ill-being experiences (Baldock et al., 2021). Later, Baldock et al. (2022) utilised a longitudinal mixed methods approach (i.e. psychometric questionnaires and interviews) to explore the relationships between ill/well-being and performance (e.g. managing workload), organisational (e.g. job security), and personal (e.g. work-life balance) stressors.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approaches have explored football coaches' well-being. Higham et al. (2023) used football coaching docuseries as *windows to glance* at contextualised well-being experiences. Furthermore, Higham et al. (2024b) conducted interviews and implemented an IPA approach to unearth sense making of football coaches' well-being over a singular timepoint. Despite this, Higham et al. (2024b) acknowledged that temporality and change are important aspects of well-being experiences which were not necessarily captured. Thus, Higham et al. (2024a) utilised a combined IPA and photo-elicitation approach to explore a woman coach's well-being experiences and sensemaking throughout a season, whilst working within a men's professional football club. The use of images aided interpretations of well-being and uncovered tacit and latent meanings (e.g. the hardship of being a woman in the *men's game*). Despite such developments, the high-performance context of men's professional football often encourages coaches to suppress well-being concerns and leads to a lack of self-care (Cronin et al., 2020). This is particularly concerning for men in this vocation, as discussing well-being is often stigmatised and prevents them from seeking support. Since coaches are key socialising agents embedded in dynamic complex environments, understanding how they experience and make sense of well-being, particularly across time, is critical to capturing its evolving nature.

An approach which can capture the flow and experiential nature of well-being is Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) due to its temporal, hermeneutic, phenomenological and idiographic foundations (Farr & Nizza, 2019). LIPA can illuminate how coaches make sense of their lived experiences through a hermeneutic lens which is shaped by their unique contexts, identities and interpersonal relationships (Smith et al., 2022). This is valuable for investigating phenomena (i.e. well-being) which develop from ongoing, dynamic person-context interactions (Seamon, 2018). Smith (2024) draws upon an elemental model of human development to emphasise that humans develop and change across the life course. One such model is Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model.¹ Specifically, when addressing context and time, Smith's (2024) experiential timeline foregrounds how retrospective and prospective gazes (i.e. reflections, present experiences and anticipations) inform well-being sensemaking in context. Thus, a LIPA approach can provide insight into how well-being is constructed and understood over time.

To promote disclosure and extend the idiographic and contextual commitments of LIPA, researchers have advocated the integration of multi-modal approaches in the exploration of

complex and sensitive constructs (Smith et al., 2022). One such approach is photo-elicitation, which has been applied to explore complex issues in areas including healthcare (Morrison & Williams, 2020), quality of life (Burton et al., 2017), athlete and coach well-being (Higham et al., 2024a; Trainor & Bundon, 2025), and eating disorders (Hockin-Boyers et al., 2020). Auto-driven photo-elicitation facilitates the co-construction of meaning by inviting participants to supply and engage with visual stimuli (e.g. images) during interviews (Romera Iruela, 2023). Visual stimuli serve as distinctive forms of data, capable of capturing complex, multilayered meanings in a format that is both accessible and readily interpretable (Phoenix, 2010). When integrated with IPA, photo-elicitation can deepen researcher-participant dialogue by eliciting symbolic and metaphorical interpretations and drawing out unspoken, emotionally resonant dimensions of lived experience, thereby facilitating richer and more nuanced accounts (Burton et al., 2017). The incorporation of visual methods (e.g. photo-elicitation) enables participants to not only *tell* but *show* complex phenomena that may be hard to articulate or convey (Phoenix, 2010). Specifically, photo-elicitation fosters an action-oriented perspective (cf. Romera Iruela, 2023) that makes participants' observations on life and social systems meaningful to outsiders, whilst also enriching understanding of well-being in context and empowering participants to actively shape the research process by making their lived realities more visible (Bates et al., 2017). Consequently, the present study aimed to explore professional football coaches' well-being sensemaking over time using a multi-modal LIPA and photo-elicitation approach.

Method

Research design and philosophical underpinning

This study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2015). A relativist ontology assumes that reality is subjective and contingent, asserting that well-being is experienced differently by each participant, shaped by biography, culture and context. A social constructionist epistemology complements this, asserting that knowledge about well-being is co-constructed through interaction between individuals (e.g. participants and the researcher). These philosophical commitments necessitate an approach that is sensitive to participants' evolving accounts of their experiences and acknowledges the interpretive role of the researcher. A LIPA approach was adopted because it aligns with relativism by exploring how participants' realities shift over time (Farr & Nizza, 2019) and with social constructionism by emphasising the contextual, dialogical nature of meaning-making. Semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews further operationalised these commitments. Images were not treated as objective artefacts but as prompts that invited participants to construct, reflect on, and renegotiate their understandings of well-being. This process reflects the epistemological stance that knowledge emerges in the space between researcher and participant and is enriched by multiple representational forms.

The application of a LIPA approach is also explicitly idiographic and interpretive, requiring the researcher to engage in a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2022). Specifically, participants strive to make sense of their experiences, while the researcher interprets this sensemaking considering broader sociocultural and temporal contexts. This iterative engagement reflects the view that knowledge is not fixed but evolves as participants' accounts unfold and as researcher interpretations are refined.

Participants

Seven male professional football coaches ($M^{age} = 39 \pm 6$ years; $M^{coaching-experience} = 14.1 \pm 3.5$ years) were purposively recruited via email and social media (see Table 1 for participants' characteristics). The inclusion criteria for the study were (i) the participant speaks English, (ii) they worked in men's football and (iii) they had a minimum of three years, paid full-time coaching experience within the

Table 1. Participants' characteristics (each coach has been provided a pseudonym for anonymisation).

Participant	Age	Coaching experience	Coaching role
Connor	40–45	17 years	U16's Games Coach
Craig	40–45	15 years	U21's Professional Development Group Manager
John	45–50	14 years	First Team Manager
Max	40–45	8 years	Assistant First Team Manager
Michael	40–45	16 years	U21's Professional Development Phase Coach
Pete	30–35	17 years	U16's Assistant Coach
Tom	25–30	11 years	Assistant (transitioning to) Head of Coaching

English Premier League (EPL) (i.e. tier one) or English Football League (EFL) (i.e. tiers two, three and four). Ethical approval was granted (ER44690456) via Sheffield Hallam University's ethics committee.

Longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis approach

Participants were provided with an information sheet, photo-elicitation guidance and the opportunity to ask questions before providing informed consent to participate. A semi-structured interview guide was developed beginning with prompts designed to ease participants into the discussion by encouraging them to recall familiar experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The initial prompt, 'Talk to me about your coaching experiences within football', was followed by more exploratory questions relating to the coaches' well-being and provided images to elicit deeper insights. For example, 'How does your provided image capture your current well-being?' Coaches were interviewed at four specific timepoints throughout the 2022–23 season² (see Table 2). These timepoints captured core events (e.g. Winter World Cup, transfer window, league relegation battles) and possible workload fluctuations (e.g. start of season increasing workloads, or Winter World Cup providing opportunity for rest) that may shape well-being experiences. The interviews ($n = 28$; $M_{Duration} = 85.8$ minutes; $SD = 19.5$) were conducted and recorded via Zoom.

Photo-elicitation approach

An auto-driven photo-elicitation approach (cf. Romera Iruela, 2023) was employed to yield insider perspectives and bridge potential communication gaps that may result from being located outside the participant's physical culture (i.e. sport; Phoenix, 2010). This helps to convey experiential significance via images and reduce potential power imbalances between researcher and participants (Bates et al., 2017; Burton et al., 2017). Coaches selected their own images related to well-being to encourage reflection, provide experiential insight (Bates et al., 2017; Morrison & Williams, 2020) and to situate their experiences within a specific culture (Trainor & Bundon, 2025). Coaches were asked to provide at least two images that represented their well-being for each interview. To accommodate their demanding schedules and to support creative interpretations, coaches were offered the choice of capturing their own photographs (e.g. using a smartphone) or sourcing copyright-free images online, which resulted in the collection of 84 images. Participants were instructed to avoid including clearly identifiable or vulnerable individuals (e.g. children) unless appropriate consent was obtained (Morrison & Williams, 2020). Any identifiable features in the submitted images were edited out (e.g.

Table 2. LIPA interview timepoints and contexts.

Timepoints	Context
1: August	End of preseason and beginning of the football season
2: December	End of the calendar year, festive period, and Winter World Cup
3: February	Start of the new calendar year and end of transfer windows
4: May	Conclusion of the season and potential league promotion 'play-off'

blurred) to preserve anonymity. Coaches emailed images prior to the interviews, which enabled the lead author to familiarise themselves with the material and prepare image-informed questioning.

Data analysis

We followed and adapted foundational LIPA guidance (cf. Farr & Nizza, 2019) to analyse the textual data, but we did not conduct any specific analyses on the provided images. Although steps are provided here on the analysis, this was an iterative and fluid process whereby stages were revisited and refined. Firstly, the initial participant's interview was transcribed verbatim and re-read to develop familiarity. An adaptation at this stage was interpreting the participant's narrative considering their supplied images. For instance, interpreting whether the participant may have used specific aspects of their image to convey components of their lived experiences (e.g. Pete addressing how the bookshelves in the background capture his wider knowledge). Then, a line-by-line analysis of data at timepoint one was conducted by the first author, and exploratory notes were produced. This included descriptive, linguistic or conceptual comments related to both narratives and supplied images (e.g. Connor's reference to wearing a 'mask' illustrated his sense of not being his authentic self, while Tom's supplied image of a person holding a mask conveyed this notion visually). Afterwards, experiential statements were generated, informed by the exploratory notes, to capture salient converging and diverging aspects of experience. Experiential statements were then clustered into preliminary personal experiential themes (PETs; Smith et al., 2022) and then refined following discussions by the authors on the PET's scope. This process was repeated for subsequent interviews, whereby a PET was established for each timepoint, enabling the comparison of well-being experiences over time via narratives and images. Finally, this iterative process was repeated for each subsequent participant, culminating in the development of group experiential themes (GETs; Smith et al., 2022) to reflect patterns of convergence and divergence across each timepoint for all participants. The lead author maintained a reflective diary throughout the study to document sensemaking and observations at each timepoint, to support critical discussions and promote transparency within the research team.

Research quality and rigor

To ensure flexibility and context-specific consideration of quality criteria, a relativist approach was adopted (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Aligned with an interpretivist paradigm and the LIPA framework, the authors acknowledge that their personal and professional values (axiology), along with prior involvement in male football contexts, may have shaped initial interpretations, but facilitated the contextualisation of accounts. For instance, the research team had previously engaged in various research, media, and consultancy projects within professional football. To recognise and challenge potential presuppositions, the authors held monthly meetings to critically reflect on interpretations and enhance reflexivity, with the aim of using our knowledge to help co-construct sensemaking. Specifically, participants led the construction of knowledge as they were asked first to discuss why they supplied the image and how it captured their well-being. The interviewer would then highlight features of the image to *open up* and prompt further sensemaking (e.g. query people and objects and how they relate to well-being experiences and management).

We drew upon quality indicators for achieving excellence in IPA (Nizza et al., 2021), particularly, the importance of constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative. Data were carefully extracted to develop seasonal stories that captured each coach's evolving experiences in men's football and how these shaped their well-being over time. To convey rich, temporally grounded insights, the lead author used participants' images in conjunction with experiential accounts (Smith, 2024).

Analytic depth was further supported by close reading of transcripts (e.g. linguistic features) and sensemaking of participant-generated images (e.g. abstract meanings). This is exemplified in the theme *The struggle to remain whole: Balancing self, role, and relationships*, where Tom's meaning-



Timepoint 3

Figure 1. No third space.

making was deepened through shared interpretation of both language and visual material. For example, Tom selected an image (see **Figure 1**) to reflect how he felt engulfed by work demands, which constrained his ability to manage well-being and left no 'third space' for 'me time'. The lead author used the features of the image to prompt deeper reflection, such as asking, 'if one person represents work then who is the other?' This led Tom to the realisation that he was 'pinched' between professional and personal obligations. This dialogue led to co-constructed and enriched insights that may not have emerged without the photo-elicitation approach.

In line with IPA guidance (Smith et al., 2022), which emphasises the value of situating analytical interpretations within broader social contexts and theoretical frameworks, we considered contextual systems and temporal subjectivity (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For example, at timepoint two, Pete reported an increased sense of control due to better workload management. However, this coincided with the season's winter break, which may have temporarily afforded more time to manage his well-being. Accordingly, the following findings are presented with attention to divergent and convergent PETs, contextual timepoints, tentative theory, and the richness of narratives captured through GETs.

Findings and discussion

Two GETs are provided below (see **Table 3**). The first GET (The struggle to remain whole: Balancing self, role, and relationships) is presented as a summary to foreground the contextual work-life experiences associated with well-being management. The second GET (the challenges of navigating experiences, connections and anticipations) captures participants' seasonal journeys and illustrates how sensemaking of well-being fluctuated over time.

Table 3. A presentation of subthemes within each GET.

Group Experiential Themes	Subthemes
The struggle to remain whole: Balancing self, role, and relationships	Importance of 'third spaces': The endeavour to disassociate and rest Who am I? The challenges of (in)authenticity Transitioning into fatherhood and the importance of family
The challenges of navigating experiences, connections, and anticipations	'The life experiences you have, I think, mould, and shape you' 'I think the quality of my interactions with family and colleagues, greatly dictates my well-being' 'You are looking forward to it'

The struggle to remain whole: balancing self, role and relationships

Within this theme the need for a 'third space' to provide greater opportunity for rest and recovery was highlighted by coaches as something they found beneficial for managing their well-being. Coaches viewed a third space as somewhere other than work or home within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) where they felt able to have personal *me time*. By striving to find, if not achieving a third space for reflection and dissociation from work (Oldenburg, 1999), the coaches' accounts hint at an awareness of the need for self-care, to escape the pressures of life, and to relax in a way that is usually not possible when working to fulfil the social obligations of home and work. Tom best captured (see [Figure 1](#)) the need for a third space in the latter stages of the season:

I feel like I need three spaces of work, family, and then me. Just the way that having a baby is you don't get a lot of time outside of your family one ... it means I can't get that third space, which is my space to do whatever I want to just relax. (Timepoint 4)

Tom's 'third space' illuminated his desire to detach not only from work for rest but the hecticness of daily life. This is symbolised by [Figure 1](#) with Tom pinched between 'work' and 'home' demands, leaving him unable to acquire his third space. Tom's awareness of this *pinch* only emerged after discussing components of the image with the researcher. Initially the image captured the demands of work, but when asked who the people were, Tom conveyed how they represent him caught between work and home demands. This highlights the benefit of utilising images to gain richer insights and prompt deeper sensemaking from participants. The overwhelmingness Tom experienced was most likely because he had recently transitioned into a new work role and not long since become a father, which both demanded his time and energy. This could be further exacerbated by the timepoint itself, as Tom's club were battling to avoid relegation to a lower professional league division. Accordingly, Tom's sensemaking of well-being appears amplified by two major life transitions (e.g. chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) occurring at the same time, alongside a challenging period at his workplace. Interestingly, these events are not isolated to those operating in the profession of football and are synonymous with many other professions, capturing the possible transferability of findings. Multiple coaches also expressed how they had to navigate their (in)authenticity throughout the season due to numerous systemic interactions and demands within their context. For instance, Tom (see [Figure 2](#)) and Connor captured how coaches felt like they were wearing masks. This was pertinent for Connor, who throughout the season experienced vast amounts of instability due to a change of ownership:



Timepoint 1

Figure 2. Navigating (in)authenticity.



Timepoint 1

Timepoint 2

Timepoint 3

Figure 3. Importance of spending time with family.

The bit that's probably rubbed off [due to the takeover] is I've had to change. I'm normally quite positive, chatty, enjoy being in people's company. That would be my sort of personality ... [now] it's been about keeping my head down, getting on with your job because there's, all sorts of silly power plays going on ... it is draining, it's like me having a mask on ... I've not been particularly authentic ... that's probably around self-preservation and making sure I stay in a job. (Timepoint 2)

Connor's statement, 'it's like me having a mask on', suggests coaches engage in impression management strategies (Goffman, 1959) to engineer a particular conceptualisation of themselves before others to avoid appearing weak or vulnerable. This is also possibly because coaches often feel the need to conform to identities and suppress values (Higham et al., 2022) to navigate organisational instabilities (e.g. micro and mesosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Connor appears to demonstrate contextual intelligence as he realises that he must 'change' and withhold his authentic self by *wearing a mask* to survive. Even the greyscale colour of the image symbolises the *dark arts* coaches must engage in to survive. Nelson et al. (2024) report that coaches utilise impression management strategies to disguise disdain, something which would be the case for Connor given his disappointment with the club takeover. Coaches also described how life transitions (e.g. chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) such as parenthood shaped their well-being management. Craig, for instance, emphasised the importance of being a father and spending time with his sons as a key source of well-being. Interestingly, during timepoint one, Craig initially shared work-related images but then spontaneously held his phone to the camera to display an additional photo (see Figure 3) of himself and his sons:

Addressing Craig's spontaneity, he could have easily discussed his children without an image but given he held his phone to the camera suggests that they play a significant role in his well-being. This may reflect how images captured by the participants may have more personal meaning than images sourced from elsewhere (e.g. copyright-free sites). Therefore, Craig used the image of his sons smiling profusely to address how them 'being happy' is 'nourishment for the soul' and that they 'become more important' for well-being when work becomes challenging, illuminating the reciprocal, interpersonal, and contextual aspects of well-being (Higham et al., 2024a). At timepoint two, Craig reiterated how family help him detach from work and manage well-being:

Enjoying your time away from work [is important] ... we'd lost that day ... frustration in that. Coming home to this helps, because now your role's different, isn't it? You're part of a family. It's about enjoying the moment.

These reflections indicate that Craig derived emotional stability from family life, particularly during periods of professional disruption, such as staff departures and poor performance outcomes. This is significant given his club's relatively small and cohesive structure, where interpersonal relationships may carry greater importance than in larger private sector organisations. Craig's emphasis on 'enjoying the moment' demonstrates a shift in focus towards present-moment awareness and value-

based living. From an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) perspective, Craig displayed signs of cognitive defusion, mindfulness and engagement with core values (Gervis & Goldman, 2020). His recognition of multiple roles, not just as a coach, but as a father, underscores how value-congruent, humanising experiences outside of work supported his well-being (Gervis & Goldman, 2020). Alternatively, Max described how recently becoming a father had impeded his well-being management due to increased fatigue. While Max did not mention receiving paternity support, he recognised a bidirectional strain between his professional and personal responsibilities. For instance, during timepoint three, Max said, 'It's very difficult to separate them [work and home-life], they're all interlinked ... there'll be frustrations at home that maybe leak into work or vice versa'. These assertions compound the contextualised and ecological nature of well-being (Bone, 2015) as it permeates domains. Thus, how effectively such permeations are managed and supported over time could determine well-being experiences.

The challenges of navigating experiences, connections and anticipations

This GET and its respective subthemes capture how temporal cognitions (e.g. retrospective and prospective) and events shape well-being and its comprehension (Smith, 2024). All themes are structured as spanning time, as they capture experiences and sensemaking throughout timepoints (Farr & Nizza, 2019).

'The life experiences you have, I think, mould, and shape you'

Coaches expressed that well-being comprehension was shaped by their sensemaking of experiences and events (e.g. chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This was captured by Pete, an academy coach, when he abstractly interpreted his timepoint one image of a man standing in front of a bookcase. Pete was prompted to comment on the look of the person in the image and whether it represented them. This initiated further interpretation and reflection, as Pete agreed and went on to convey how his well-being is shaped by contentedness. This contentedness came from the bookshelves in the background of the image, representing the wider knowledge he had gained outside of football. He stated that the wider knowledge he had gained shaped his current values and subsequent well-being. Specifically, Pete reflected on how caring for others shaped his well-being comprehension and management:

My dad died from a brain tumour, and I was caring for him in his sort of [last] five or six months, so there was a bit of a life reassessment ... I've [also] cared for [an ill friend]. He's about that big [gauges height]. So, lifting, carrying, showering, toileting him ... I think I've probably been fortunate in the sense ... to care for other people at various times in my life. So, I think there's sort of an inherent kindness which I think I am able to apply to myself. (Timepoint 1)

Pete acknowledged how profound life events, such as caring for loved ones shaped his outlook on self-care (e.g. well-being management). He believed that he was 'fortunate' to have experienced caring for others at 'various times in [his] life' because it enabled him to see that there is more to life than work (e.g. coaching) and that caring for oneself is as important as caring for others. The importance placed on caring for others for his own self-care contrasts literature on coaching in professional sport, since the competitive environment often encourages coaches to care more about their job performance outcomes than themselves (Cronin et al., 2020). Max, an assistant first team coach, captured this at timepoint one, 'I've got to win' and 'you feel that pressure of having to be successful for everyone'. This results in him wanting 'to go home to bed'. This narrative continued within timepoint three, 'You win games of football, everything's great. You lose games of football, it's turmoil ... It's [well-being] dictated by what happens out on the pitch'. Max's diverging narrative illustrates how coaches can care for performance outcomes sometimes to the detriment of their own well-being, as his relentless desire to win and ruminations over performance outcomes (e.g. the past) appeared to result in a lack of self-care (e.g. exhaustion). Max disclosed that if he lost on a Sunday he

would be 'in a mood Monday ... Tuesday ... losing just sticks with you until the next game that you win'. For Max poor results triggered immediate negative emotional responses, but such emotions can 'stick' leading to longer implications for well-being management. Whereas the past events Pete experienced, albeit negative (e.g. caring for ill family members), positively changed his outlook and values regarding what is important:

The life experiences you have, I think, mould, and shape you ... I went through a maturation period where the things I valued changed, and I saw greater value in other areas of my life ... (Timepoint 1)

Pete's account extends the work of Rush and Grouzet (2012), by capturing how utilising a retrospective gaze to acknowledge negative life experiences can positively shape and inform present understanding (e.g. chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Similarly, Michael, an academy coach, utilised this gaze to inform his present well-being comprehension and management. Drawing on his experience, he conceptualised footballing seasons as 'treadmills', a continuous conveyor belt. Here Michael used a treadmill to abstractly convey that seasons will speed up, slow down, have inclines, be arduous, tiresome, and hurt if you fall off. However, Michael emphasised the replicability of seasons, suggesting he knew what could compromise his well-being, 'I just know what it's going to be like. I know what we've entered, because it's the same every year. It's full on'. Through using a treadmill image within the context of timepoint one, Michael portrayed an awareness that the speed and incline of his workload had increased due to 'entering' the start of the season (Baldock et al., 2022). This analogy, established from the supplied image, enabled the interviewer to utilise this shared language in subsequent interviews:

Still on the treadmill. Like I say, just in the last sort of 24 hours, turned the speed down, which is great ... I certainly feel in a better place than I did [timepoint 1] ... [My] holiday next week obviously plays a part in it. The World Cup, everything we've talked about ... I just feel better balanced, more in control, maybe going back to the treadmill, I've turned the speed down and I'm just enjoying that time. (Timepoint 2)

Throughout participation in the study, the photo-elicitation approach helped establish a shared language between the interviewer and participants, mitigating a communication gap (Trainor & Bundon, 2025) and fostering greater rapport and trust. For example, saying 'Are you still on the treadmill?' was considered more accessible than asking, 'Explain how the temporal fluctuations from timepoint one to timepoint two have shaped your well-being'. Thus, images not only capture lived experiences but also serve as a medium for more effective communication and interpretation of those experiences. Regarding the excerpt, Michael reflects on how his well-being was shaped by workplace demands (e.g. the football season) and will fluctuate over time (i.e. speed is inevitably controlled by life events; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). However, controllability seemed important, when he stated, 'I've turned the speed down'. Here, Michael expressed how things are steadier as he enters the festive December period, reflecting his decision to book a family holiday. Though this may have only been possible for Michael because the professional club he works for as an academy coach breaks over the festive period, whereas John and Max (who were first team club managers), experienced an unrelenting festive fixture schedule of competitive games to manage. Therefore, Michael did not have total control when *turning the speed down*, but academy football league fixture scheduling affords more opportunities for self-care (e.g. breaks). During timepoint four, Michael reflected that 'how you deal with what's happening in the current is guided by sort of experiences from the past', emphasising the role of retrospective sensemaking in managing well-being (Smith, 2024). This suggests that coaches draw on their personal biographies (e.g. experiences, knowledge, and beliefs) which act as interpretive filters that shape how well-being is managed and understood.

'I think the quality of my interactions with family and colleagues, greatly dictates my well-being'

A present focus is crucial for experiencing and understanding well-being (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). Thus, where a coach finds themselves (e.g. residing at the top of the league unbeaten compared to

experiencing an unstable club takeover) can greatly influence their perceived well-being. The instability caused by club takeovers and structural changes can ripple throughout a club fragmenting one's life and well-being. For instance, multiple coaches experienced some form of club and staff restructuring leading to increased instability and impeded well-being management. The accounts of Connor and Craig are shared to capture the temporal influence club takeovers and staff transitions (e.g. the present context) have on well-being throughout the season. Connor expressed how the structural transitions of a club takeover created insecurity and conflict, insofar people were losing jobs and toxicity spread throughout the club (see [Figure 4](#)):

It's just realising how much other people impact your well-being ... I get a phone call 'heads up, I'm hearing on the grapevine, that one of the coaches [you're] close to has gone and knocked on the door of the top guy and basically just tried to throw you under the bus' ... I remembered that just killed my bank holiday weekend. I let it kill my family's bank holiday weekend. (Timepoint 1)

Most people will probably say [] I must be in a great place ... That's what they'd [work colleagues] see. What they don't see is the impact that the environment and the people in it have on you. So, they probably don't notice that I sit on my own sometimes now, go off to a different room, that I'm quieter than I've ever been. Like they don't realise the other side of things ... it's bound to impact you. (Timepoint 2)

Interestingly, Connor's provided image not only informed his present sensemaking of well-being but made his lived experiences more accessible for the interviewer (Phoenix, 2010). For instance, supplying a chemical toxicity warning sign communicated the significant threat Connor perceived he was *exposed* to. This was not a fleeting experience but more so one which could spread uncontrollably and have a lasting impact. Connor emphasised throughout the study how socio-contextual interactions at work shape his well-being because they can *seep* (e.g. like toxic waste) into wider domains (e.g. family life). This demonstrates mesosystem interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) whereby work-related problems (e.g. organisational changes and conflicts; Higham et al., 2022) can *pollute* (e.g. shape) home-life exchanges. To try and mitigate the challenges he faced, Connor adopted a 'Four A Model':

The best thing they [the club] ever did for me was to help me develop a skillset like a Four A Model where I could stop and go, right, I'm stressed as anything now, what can I do? What's going on for me? ... Going through that Four A Model, assess, accept, adapt, apply. (Timepoint 3)

The 'Four A Model' Connor mentions aligns with an ACT approach (Gervis & Goldman, 2020) as it prompts him to be more self-aware of being present in situations with an emphasis on acceptance. Connor's narrative illustrates how developing individual skillsets are more worthwhile than organisational support, which he views as 'ticking a box'. This alludes to organisational support lacking



Timepoint 2

Figure 4. The influence others and context have on well-being.

intention and worth from Connor's perspective, meaning he would rather rely on himself to manage his well-being. However, a lack of organisational stability and support finally took its toll on Connor within timepoint four as he felt like he was 'crawling through a sewer of shit'. To capture this, he provided an image of a man holding a torch whilst standing in a sewer, mimicking a scene from the film *Shawshank Redemption*. This conveyed his struggle with enduring the fractured socio-contextual environment and symbolised himself crawling through to the end of the season because he had little left to give. Connor concludes the hardship stating:

I'm done, it's taking energy now to deliver ... there's probably an element that you're still in a bit of shock. Like I entered this season in a really good place with the whole same staff core that have done well ... I'm at a point now where it's gonna look very different. I feel drained. I just want to work out what I'm doing. (Timepoint 4)

Consequently, because of enduring toxicity and a fragmented context throughout the entire season, Connor contemplated leaving his role. This came to fruition not long after concluding the study as Connor left the club he had spent over a decade with. Thus, poorly managed transitional events over a relatively short space of time, combined with the *toxic* volatility of professional football, appeared to shape well-being management. Alternatively, Craig's well-being seemed steadfast throughout the season despite experiencing instability when key members of staff left the club. He attributed the stability to strong work-based relationships (e.g. a sense of being 'all in it together'). In valuing the genuine relationships between staff members, Craig selected multiple images (see [Figure 5](#)) throughout the season to capture how they (i.e. club staff) were foundational for well-being management.

Craig's timepoint two image was used as a prompt by the interviewer to enrich sensemaking. Specifically, Craig was asked whether he noticed anything about the image, which led him to state, '[if] you look at it [image] a little bit more ... there's only one or maybe two [people] not making physical contact with each other'. He followed with 'It might sound a silly little thing, but I think it gives an indication that people feel comfortable with each other'. Craig's deeper analysis of the image spurred his interpretations regarding the importance of togetherness:

From a well-being perspective, these are the people that have the biggest impact ... this is all the full-time staff at the training ground. So, my well-being is always gonna be impacted by the quality of the relationships I have with these people. (Timepoint 2)

I think the quality of my interactions with family and colleagues, greatly dictates my well-being ... I do want to be somewhere, where [there's] similar-minded people, in terms of values, connecting, working hard, giving their best ... So yeah, the quality of the relationships is really important. (Timepoint 4)

Craig's accounts highlight the interpersonal nature of well-being and how relationships between coaches and other individuals within their life (e.g. micro and mesosystems; Bronfenbrenner, [2005](#))



Timepoint 2



Timepoint 3

Figure 5. Good staff and strong relationships are important for well-being.

can mutually shape well-being experiences. Exemplifying the narratives of Connor and Craig demonstrates the temporality of well-being and how contextual events (e.g. club takeovers and staff leaving) could fragment perceived well-being when club relations are weak.

You are looking forward to it'

Coaches addressed that their understanding of well-being linked to how they made sense of anticipated experiences and events (e.g. chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Michael captured the duality of future events and how they can shape well-being in varying ways (see Figure 6). Firstly, Michael addressed how anticipated events can instil well-being:

In terms of the schedule, lightning. I've got four days off next week. [I'm] in a fortunate position, being able to go away with family and take the kids [on holiday] ... It's [break with family] been a long time coming. I didn't manage to get away with them this year ... they went away in the summer. It's just part of the job, so that's why the odd time when it does come up, I suppose it does positively affect your well-being. (Timepoint 2)

Michael was able to capitalise on the U21's breaking for the Winter World Cup and the U18's breaking for the festive period by booking a short holiday, highlighting how academy football seems more conducive for rest periods during the season compared to first team football. Yet, Michael conveyed that he could not go away on holiday with his family during the summer (e.g. off-season) due to work, stressing the tensions between managing work and family life within professional football coaching populations (Higham et al., 2023). Michael's account highlights a sense of *imprisonment* in the game where coaches are sporadically *released* to visit family, and such behaviour appears to be institutionally reinforced and accepted, creating concern for coaches' well-being. A reason why an anticipated future event with family aided Michael's sense of well-being is that when he visualised going on holiday with his family, prompted by his chosen image, he experienced positive emotions such as happiness:

I can already feel those feelings when [I think about it], that's why I put the image in there because you are looking forward to it ... But yeah, it'd be good for everybody else in terms of my wife, the children, because they know that I will be there. Not just there and not there. (Timepoint 2)

Michael conveys how well-being can be aided when focusing on future events that are perceived as pleasant (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). Michael's comment 'not just there and not there' referenced being both physically and mentally present, something he has struggled with during the season. Seemingly, he feels happy when thinking about spending time with his family because he will be able to disconnect from work by switching off his laptop, phone, and most importantly his mind. During this period, he believed it would allow him to have 'a bit of a breather' and 'battery recharge', something which other coaches have desired (Higham et al., 2024b). Similarly, during



Timepoint 2



Timepoint 4

Figure 6. Looking forward to holidays, but uncertain over the future.

timepoint one, John used a prospective gaze to manage his well-being whilst searching for a new role. John communicated how he felt 'left behind' whilst out of football and 'a better person when in than when out of the game'. To convey how obtaining a new job would aid his well-being, John stated:

I suppose my well-being wouldn't change if I got a million pounds tomorrow, but it would probably change if I got another job or if I got back into the thick of football. (Timepoint 1)

John's proclamation signifies how important working in professional football is to his life. From a social identity perspective, returning to football helped John to regain part of his identity as a professional football coach (Higham et al., 2023). Thus, Michael's and John's accounts signify the importance of prospective gazes in managing well-being (Smith, 2024). Specifically, identifying periods of rest and identity reformation, implying that more opportunities for rest and broader identity formation, such as during mid-season breaks, would be beneficial for managing well-being. However, Michael also alluded to the potential consequences of ruminating over the future, as he portrayed apprehension due to uncertainty over the club's future:

Just that uncertainty ... which pathway will we be going on from a club point of view, and also the impact of that, sort of [for] me personally ... I know that the outcome of the playoffs will ... trickle down and impact us next year in terms of what we've got access to ... also myself personally as a coach ... the outcome of this season at first team level, how will that impact me next season? (Timepoint 4)

Michael captures the 'win at all costs' nature of the end of footballing seasons (Higham et al., 2022) as timepoint four greatly shapes the entire socio-contextual landscape (e.g. ecological systems) of the club. From Michael's account, future events, which have not yet happened and are out of his immediate control (e.g. playoff finals), appear to hinder well-being management as he was experiencing sustained bouts of apprehension and instability. This was in part due to the uncertainty over the club's future, which in turn fuelled ruminations about his personal future (e.g. job security), suggesting that focusing on unpleasant future events is detrimental for present well-being (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). Thus, even when seasonal breaks approach (e.g. at the end of the season), some coaches may struggle to look forward to them, as the competitive pressure of professional football often creates well-being *cliff edges* that overshadow any sense of relief. This led Michael to summarise that retrospective and prospective gazes can inform present well-being management:

What's happening in the current is probably the most impactful, but then the outcome of that, as in this example [play off outcome], will impact what happens in the future and how you deal with what's happening in the current is guided by experiences from the past. (Timepoint 4)

Michael's narrative demonstrates the temporal dimensions of well-being lived experiences, as it is apparent that past, present, and future events shape well-being comprehension and management. This was apparent for John, the most senior participant (e.g. in terms of age and managerial role), as at the start of the study he was hesitant to discuss his well-being, possibly because his identity revolved around being a coach, captured by the images he supplied of himself coaching. At the end of timepoint one's interview John stated, 'I'll give you a pat on the back. I don't ever talk about myself the way I have' and then at the end of timepoint two said 'It's one of the big things I've taken from doing this with yourself. The power of images and reflection'. As timepoints progressed, it was evident that a change in John's behaviour occurred as he became more open to discussing his well-being and aware of the benefits of engaging in activities with others outside of football for well-being (e.g. identity expansion). John's images began to diversify, including more images of his family (see Figure 7).

Within timepoint three John stated, 'You probably won't realise or understand how you've helped us to reflect, ask questions and even get some answers. It's been very strong, powerful from my point of view'. John concluded in timepoint four claiming that engaging in this process of using images to discuss well-being helped him to 'open up' and realise it is 'okay to actually talk to somebody about how you're feeling emotionally ... mentally and physically'. John's parting comments were 'I just



Figure 7. Feeling more like a 'balanced husband, father and coach'.

hope I've helped you as much as you've helped me' and that due to engaging in the study, he now looks forward to feeling more like a 'balanced husband, father and coach'.

Methodological and applied implications

This study raises several methodological considerations for advancing longitudinal qualitative research on well-being. The recurring use of participant-sourced images demonstrated that images were not only visual prompts embedded within a particular time and place (Trainor & Bundon, 2025), but also operated as evolving interpretive anchors, with meanings shifting as participants revisited and re-narrated experiences across timepoints. This temporal instability of visual meaning suggests that future qualitative research should move beyond treating images as static prompts and instead analytically attend to how visual artefacts are reworked longitudinally. Integrating photo-elicitation within a LIPA design also foregrounded epistemological tensions between idiographic narrative coherence and the metaphorical, affective qualities of visual data, indicating a need for greater transparency in how such data are analytically integrated (cf. Barker et al., 2025). The reflexive and potentially agentic influences of repeated visual engagement, where participants appeared to reframe experiences or engage in forms of reflexive regulation (e.g. heightened self-awareness), raise important methodological and ethical questions concerning the boundaries between data generation and intervention. Future research would benefit from examining these effects explicitly, rather than considering them incidental by-products.

Addressing methodological concerns raised by Yin et al. (2025), the multi-modal LIPA approach of combining online interviews with visual stimuli (e.g. photo-elicitation; Romera Iruela, 2023) facilitated discussions with a population that is often used to suppressing signs of vulnerability. This suggests that incorporating participant-sourced images may not only enrich but also reshape online interview dynamics within contexts where emotional expression is constrained, warranting further methodological examination. Specifically, the process of sourcing images prior to the interviews *prepared* coaches for eventual discussions, affording participants the opportunity to talk more meaningfully about themselves *through* the images and *open up*, as opposed to *close off*, which is common when discussing sensitive topics like well-being.

The methodological approach adopted raises questions regarding the permeability of boundaries between qualitative research and applied practice. The integration of visual stimuli with reflective (e.g. mindfulness) approaches highlights the potential for research encounters to take on intervention qualities, suggesting a need for future research to critically examine when and how such methodological designs may shape behavioural or experiential change. As such, future research could evaluate the process and outcome of photo-elicitation interviews over time as an explicit intervention designed to enhance well-being.

The LIPA and photo-elicitation approach captured how well-being is shaped and experienced temporally, which is of importance given well-being is not a static state (Hamling et al., 2020).

This further illuminated how participants navigated their contexts and utilised retrospective and prospective gazes to aid their sensemaking and management of well-being over time. Such temporal movements in sensemaking were only observable through repeated engagement across timepoints, highlighting how longitudinal qualitative designs offer analytic insight into the evolving, rather than static, nature of well-being. The findings advance the work of Rush and Grouzet (2012), showing the importance of temporal distance (i.e. the distance away from the present moment that an individual's thoughts span) and that the further away an event is from the present moment the less impact it will have on well-being. Whereas the present findings detail how distant past events, some of which can be deemed negative in nature (e.g. Pete caring for ill father and friend), can aid well-being sensemaking and management. Thus, not only recalling on positive distant events but also seemingly negative can be beneficial for well-being management.

Integrating human developmental theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) with IPA (Smith et al., 2022) enhances its interpretive and contextualist foundations. While IPA encourages researchers to situate participants' meaning-making within their lifeworld, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) ecological perspective offers complementary, contextualised lenses for exploring how both immediate (i.e. proximal) and more distant (i.e. distal) environmental influences shape lived experiences over time. In turn, this complements research that recognises the socio-contextual and ecological nature of well-being (Bone, 2015) and builds on Smith's (2024) recent efforts to address the unfolding (i.e. longitudinal) nature of experience in IPA work. Thus, a temporally and ecologically informed lens enables researchers to explore how well-being is shaped by evolving and underlying socio-contextual influences that may remain overlooked in singular timepoint IPA studies. Specifically, the present findings acknowledge intangible influences such as authenticity, organisational culture (e.g. macrosystem) and the passage of time (e.g. chronosystem; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), suggesting that applying this framework to wider settings, including exercise, health, business and organisational contexts, could provide fruitful insight into how well-being is experienced and supported across diverse sectors.

The narratives presented within this work were from UK-based white male coaches working in men's football with various job roles and whose perspectives are likely shaped by such roles and westernised culture, which may lead to different contextual circumstances and lived experiences. Future research should seek more diverse demographic and cultural insights to understand how well-being is experienced globally within workplace contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored professional football coaches' well-being through a multi-modal qualitative design that integrated LIPA, photo-elicitation, and an ecological framework. Building on these methodological advancements, future research could more explicitly examine how coaching biographies shape the comprehension and management of well-being over time. One promising avenue would be to invite coaches to construct visual timelines of well-being-related images spanning from their sporting childhoods to their current professional roles. Such an approach would enable researchers to explore temporal tensions, life transitions, and shifts in meaning-making across key developmental and career stages. Extending visual methodologies further, future studies could also incorporate video-elicitation to capture a more situated and embodied understanding of well-being within diverse coaching cultures. Participant-generated videos may provide richer contextual insight into everyday practices, interactions, and environments that shape well-being. In line with Trainor and Bundon's (2025) call for participant-generated visual data to enhance context-specific explorations of psychological constructs, video-elicitation represents a valuable methodological progression for accessing the complexity of participants' lived experiences. Collectively, these approaches offer opportunities to deepen longitudinal, biographical and culturally sensitive understandings of well-being across sporting and wider workplace contexts.

Notes

1. The PPCT model does not aim to provide definitive answers but offers a framework to tentatively illuminate the dynamic and multi-layered contextual elements of well-being over time, capturing the interactions within and between an individual and their world (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The PPCT model describes how personal characteristics (e.g. age and gender), proximal processes (i.e. person-environment reciprocal interactions), contexts (e.g. interrelating socio-contextual environments), and time (i.e. life transitions and historical events) contribute to well-being experiences and sensemaking. The interrelating socio-contextual environments influencing well-being are of interest as they capture the physical culture (i.e. sport; Phoenix, 2010) of participants, which encompasses microsystems (e.g. football club), mesosystems (e.g. player-staff relations), exosystems (e.g. sports media), macrosystems (e.g. organisational cultural norms), and chronosystems (e.g. sporting and life events).
2. The 2022–23 season in the Premier League began on the 5th August 2022 concluding on the 28th May 2023 and the Championship started on the 29th July 2022 concluding on the 8th May 2023. Both seasons were anomalies compared to previous seasons because the 2021–22 season was condensed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and started a month late. This meant professional football teams had less rest and preparation time for the upcoming 2022–23 season. Then, due to the 2022 Winter World Cup, the Premier League and EFL Championship paused for 6 weeks in November and resumed late December. This caused congested fixture schedules in December 2022 and January 2023 where some professional football clubs played three league matches inside seven or eight days, creating a high workload for professional football coaches and players.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributors

Andrew J. Higham is an Assistant Professor in Psychology within the School of Social Sciences at Heriot-Watt University. His current research interests include exploring well-being and ill-being within sporting contexts and the application of creative qualitative research methods to study lived experiences.

James A. Newman is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at Sheffield Hallam University and a Health and Care Professions Council Registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist. His main research interests revolve around safeguarding and welfare in professional sport, with a specific focus on maltreatment, abuse, and bullying.

James L. Rumbold is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Derby in the United Kingdom. James is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. His applied research interests center around individual differences and stress management spanning a range of sport, work, and health contexts.

Joseph A. Stone is an Associate Professor in Skill Acquisition and Performance Analysis within the School of Sport and Physical Activity at Sheffield Hallam University. His research focuses on examining sport performance and coaching guided by an ecological dynamic framework.

ORCID

Andrew J. Higham  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1087-2593>

J. A. Newman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4957-836X>

J. L. Rumbold  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1914-1036>

J. A. Stone  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9861-4443>

Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, participants in this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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