Humour, Masculinities and Youth Sport Coaching: 'Good Morning, Ladies!'

Adi Adams[a]*

[a]*Department of Sport & Physical Activity, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, U.K.;*

*Email: aadams1@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper, I explore male youth sport coaches' use of humour in relation to the reconstruction of masculinities, contributing to an emergent body of literature on the role of humour in coaching. Three creative non-fiction stories developed from my own coaching experiences in a competitive youth football (soccer) academy are used to examine: (1) coaches' reconstruction of hegemonic/esteemed masculinities; (2) coaches' use of humour to encourage re-alignment with hegemonic masculinities, and; (3) coaches' use of (counter-)humour to disrupt hegemonic representations of masculinities. The stories offer sport coaches and educators with a resource to reflect on masculinities, gender relations, and the everyday use of humour within their own contexts.

Keywords: humour, men, masculinities, gender, sport coaching

Introduction

Gender relations (relations between *and* within gender categories) can be understood as socially reconstructed and embedded in organisational and educational contexts through divisions of labour, power relations, emotional relationships, and organisational cultures (Acker, 1990; Connell, 2002, 2008). 'Gender' is interpreted not as a static 'property' that individuals bring with them into 'neutral' contexts, but something relational and malleable which is reconstructed within what Acker (1990) calls 'gendered organisations'; that is, organisations which may already have established sets of gender practices and ideologies, for example around 'masculinities' (i.e. the gender practices defining 'manhood'). The focus in this current paper is on the use of humour to reconstruct gender power relations and hegemonic or esteemed forms of masculinities (Connell, 2002). In this current paper, humour is conceptualised as a dynamic communicative tool within the reconstruction of gender relations, with multiple forms (e.g. sarcasm, parody, irony) and operating with various 'productive' and 'destructive' functions and outcomes (e.g. inclusion, rapport, ridicule, superiority, or to 'test' others' reactions to potentially socially-risky messages) (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). This reflects previous scholarship identifying the centrality of gender and sexuality-based 'humour' in the social reconstruction of gender relations and hierarchies of masculinities (Connell, 2002, 2008), for example within schools (e.g. Francis & Skelton, 2001; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Skelton, 2002), and the workplace (e.g. Collinson, 2002; Holmes & Marra, 2002).

In sport, humour also maintains cultural and pedagogical importance where coaches use humour in their everyday practice to 'guide' and 'correct' others (Aggerholm & Ronglan, 2012). Jones, Armour and Potrac (2002), utilising Goffman (1959), argue that humour enables coaches

to communicate their individuality, while operating as a bargaining tool for achieving 'working consensus' from a group. Speaking to these ideas, Edwards and Jones (2018) highlight male coaches' use of 'inclusionary put-downs' and 'disciplinary humour' where teasing and disparaging comments are used in caring, friendly and 'unifying' ways but also as calculated attacks intended to alienate and re-establish compliance and hierarchy. Framed by Holmes and Marra's (2002, p.1707) suggestion that 'humour can provide insights into the culture which develops in different workplaces or communities of practice,' the current research examines sport coaches' use of humour to reconstruct masculinities in a youth sport setting: an English professional football (soccer) academy.[1]

Sport coaching, the (masculinist) hidden curriculum, and humour as 're-alignment'

The industry of professional football is described as a powerful institution where individual identities are (re)shaped (often in unplanned or unrecognised ways) in line with embedded and socially-dominant knowledge, norms and value systems (Kinkema & Harris, 1998; Mean, 2001; Parker, 2006). This process has previously been referred to in education as the 'hidden curriculum' of everyday educational routines and practices (see Kirk, 1992; Skelton, 1997). Drawing on a masculinities lens, this hidden curriculum within competitive professional football might be re-focused as a 'masculinist hidden curriculum', to better articulate the processes through which gendered identities are shaped by a (football) context consistently described as operating in line with deeply gendered structures and norms, saturated with maleness, 'heightened' masculinity, toughness, aggression, and rife with abuse, intimidation and violence (e.g. Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Parker, 1996, 2001, 2006; Roderick, 2006). Football coaches operate in this masculinity-

[1] See methodology for an explanation of the 'football academy' study context.

saturated landscape as (micro)political practitioners (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Thompson, Potrac & Jones, 2015), influencing, influenced by and drawing upon complexities of practice imbued with dominant values and common beliefs, transmitting both explicit and 'hidden' ideas about 'acceptable masculine practice' (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

In this context, belligerent (masculinist) coaching behaviour is perceived as a 'necessary aspect of preparing young players for the rigors of the game' (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p.148). Also, central to continued player participation is compliance, related to the fear of exclusion (Cushion & Jones, 2006), and an obligation to be 'silent' and not resist or question coaches' actions (Parker & Manley, 2017). The body of knowledge articulated above suggests that a common 'masculinist hidden curriculum' in football functions through the day-to-day activities of coaches and players, achieving a 'working consensus' (Goffman, 1959) around gender relations and enabling (masculinist) attitudes and norms espoused by coaches to be communicated to and eventually embodied by players (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

Re-working Goffman (1959, 1961), to situate coaching interactions within gendered institutional contexts, the everyday interactions, communications and routine operations of coaches (including humour) can be interpreted as employed to win-over and 're-align' others with their own underlying ideological beliefs and values. In *Asylums,* Goffman (1961, p.24) notes how, through institutional arrangements individuals can experience subtle aggressions against their sense of self, becoming 'systematically, if often unintentionally, *mortified*' (p.24, *emphasis added*). Goffman (1961, p.24) highlights how the 'mortification' of individuals (constant judgements and sanctions on deportment, dress and manners) results in gradual shifts in individuals' beliefs concerning appropriate performances of 'self' and 'other'. In Goffman's work (1961), individuals are described as readied into compliance with a dominant 'presenting

culture'. Goffman (1961) articulates the pervasive mortifying and re-aligning effects of institutional life and the difficulties individuals face in negotiating 'the press of judgmental officials and…the enveloping tissue of constraint' (p.45). The process of mortification and being readied into compliance maintains relevance in sport (e.g. Parker & Manley, 2017), where athletes' actions may be at variance with the presenting culture (embodied by coaches, the 'wardens' of sport).

Goffman (1959, p.166-202) is also useful in highlighting how members of interaction groups (team members) use different communication types to achieve various aims in their interactions with other groups (audiences): for example, (i) talking privately about others in derisive and discrediting ways ('treatment of the absent'); (ii) using silence and tact so as not to disrupt particular messages being fostered by co-members for an audience ('team collusion'), and; (iii) communicating subtly with co-members and others to favourably position ideas and practices ('re-aligning actions'). Goffman's work (1959) highlights the agency of individuals, within institutional constraints, to enact power and negotiate social encounters. Related, Goffman's (1961) discussion of 'institutional lingo', including humour, articulates how individuals access and contest privileged power positions. Borrowing from Goffman (1959, 1961), humour is an influential and 'contextually-safe' form of institutional lingo through which institutional 'wardens' can 'test the waters' of acceptable interaction-positions and mortify or 'work upon' or re-align others' thoughts, feelings and actions. Mostly, the use of mortifying humour goes uncontested and 'under the radar' due to power imbalances, however when institutional wardens (read: sport coaches) are contested about their attempts to marginalise, discredit or re-align social performances, their institutional privilege allows them to distance themselves from their 'humour' and position others as unable to 'take a joke', thus circumventing

accusations of mismanagement or abuse (Goffman, 1961).

Statement of purpose and contribution

This current research builds on Jones et al.'s (2011) call for more research examining humour in sport coaching by exploring humour and the reconstruction of masculinities in a youth sport coaching context. Goffman's work (1959, 1961), combined with a masculinities sensibility, helps to build on scholarship employing Goffman to understand individual coaching practice (e.g. Jones et al., 2011; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2003, 2004; Partington & Cushion, 2012). The contribution of this paper is twofold: (1) unpacking the use of humour in sport coaching as a 'contextually-safe' way to encourage and re-align gender performances consistent with a masculinist hidden curriculum, and; (2) highlighting coaches' (counter-)humour and its use in disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in coaches' masculinist gender humour.

Methodology

Context, access and ethical considerations

Observations made during one season (9-months) coaching at the academy of West-Side football club (a pseudonym) are used in the form of data-informed *creative non-fictions* (Smith, McGannon & Williams, 2015) to examine the use of gender humour by coaches. At West-Side academy, in the South of England, boys aged 9-16 are recruited and provided with access to a training and games programme, supported by sixteen coaches, among other support staff (e.g. physiotherapists, scouts, etc). The academy objective is to deliver boys into the adult professional team, or to be sold on to other clubs, reflecting an organised and competitive sport environment (Adams & Carr, 2017).

While issues of access are at the forefront of ethnographic research in the closed-world of professional football, I began this research as a coach at West-Side academy[2]. Institutional consent and gatekeeper consent (from the academy manager) were achieved to document my coaching experiences within this environment: since my intention was to engage in auto-ethnographic writing (e.g. Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2012), consent from players, coaches and parents was not initially sought. Guided by a situational perspective, I reflexively applied ethical and methodological decisions 'in context' rather than in an automatic, ritualistic or 'absolutist' way (e.g. Calvey, 2008; Goode, 1996; Haggerty, 2004; Lauder, 2003; Miller & Tewkesbury, 2010; Spicker, 2011). As the research evolved, with 'others' problematically 'leaking' into my 'porous' auto/self-observations (Tolich, 2010, p.1608), and following my naturalistic exit from the setting to pursue a coaching role elsewhere, I continued to reflect on the methodological and ethical options available to me. This culminated in retrospective consent being sought and granted from West-Side youth players and parents to use coaching observations within anonymised creative non-fiction stories. Consent was sought from players (perceived as the more vulnerable participants, not only in this setting but elite sport academies across the UK), rather than coaches, since it is capturing how *they* are treated in coach-athlete interactions, that is the central interest of this research. Importantly, borrowing from Calvey (2008), my intention in articulating my situational ethical and methodological experience and decision-making is not to subvert professional codes nor to engage in either sensationalism or romanticism of 'covert research'. Gender-related humour was a general feature of the academy environment and formed part of coaches' 'hidden' everyday work. In this respect, my evolving decision-making involved

[2] See Adams and Carr (2017) and Adams and Kavanagh (2018) for further methodological discussion related to this project: for example, in relation to balancing roles as a coach at West-Side and subsequently as a social researcher in the same setting, and also my naturalistic exit from West-Side, taking up a new coaching role at another club.

weighing of harm/deception versus liberatory goals (Barton, 2011), representing those who often cannot offer meaningful representation of themselves (Wall, 2008), and a duty of care to elite youth sport athletes framed by a commitment to retaining a critique of dis-inclusive coaching practices. Following the guidance of Bochner and Ellis (2016) and recent auto/ethnographic work in sport by McMahon, McGannon and Zehntner (2019) on utilising observations of those who have not provided consent, care has been taken throughout to articulate the research and consent process and to maintain a sensitivity to ethical and methodological considerations. In the final re-representation of data, pseudonyms and composite characters and behaviours are used to ensure anonymity.

Data collection, analysis and re-presentation using creative non-fiction

Guided by Brown and Potrac (2009) and Sparkes (2000), the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation were not distinct, linear tasks, but were intertwined. Experiencing what Maykut and Morehouse (1994) have called *indwelling*, I was immersed in the data as soon as data collection began. Coding of data, construction of themes, comparison and sense-making took place allowing more abstract levels of analysis to take place, stimulating a connection of data with theory (Potrac & Jones, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Practically-speaking, observations were made on coaching interactions broadly relating to gender. Hand-written field notes were produced on the days observations took place (or as soon as possible after), typed-up into an electronic (word) document, with further observations conducted in light of initial impressions from previous observations.

Through an iterative 'back-and-forth' engagement with data and literature, a secondary focus (the use of various forms of humour) was adopted in addition to the initial focus (on

gender-related language). Further refinement prompted an unpacking of these combined foci to establish two separate themes: (i) 'negative'/exclusionary use of gender-related humour, and (ii) 'positive'/inclusive use of gender-related humour. This process was conducted manually: field note data were highlighted, connected to themes and concepts, and re-organised across word documents. Finally, data supporting three clear themes were (re)created to illustrate each theme in an engaging narrative format. Continual refinements to the final thematic stories ensued, to improve structure, flow and 'emotional vibrancy' (Cheney, 2001, p.1).

Following Smith et al. (2015, p.59), each 'story' presented is fictional in form, yet data-informed and grounded in personal observations. Each story comprises three-to-four 'incidents' with some incidents representing an amalgamation of multiple similar observations. Not all coaches were observed for equal amounts of time in all spaces: twelve of the sixteen coaches at West-Side are represented. Care has been taken to produce an analysis that is theoretically-informed (Anderson, 2006) and ethically sensitive in terms of protecting identities (Smith et al., 2015). To begin, the 'official voice' of the academy is presented. Each data theme is then illustrated through a non-fiction 'story', followed by an accompanying theoretical analysis.

The 'official voice' of West-Side academy

Like most professional football club academies in England, the academy at West-Side had an official code of conduct and policy regarding equal opportunities and respect with the aim of creating a safe environment within which boys could be coached to reach their potential. The academy code of conduct explicitly refers to this policy. For purposes of maintaining anonymity, the policy has been reworded, but reads along the following lines:

> West-Side Football Club Academy agrees to provide boys with a safe and positive environment free from any form of fear, abuse or discrimination. Boys will be treated

> equally, with respect, and provided a platform to reach their full potential while developing into good people as well as good footballers.

This commitment is clearly stated in official club communications and outlines the responsibility of both coaches and players in creating a positive learning environment. However, as noted in the literature review, *how* coaches coach within the learning environment (the hidden curriculum) is as important as official policy statements or the content of the official curriculum. As shown below, coaches at West-Side academy deployed communication behaviours framed around esteeming hetero-normative, 'tough' masculinity, and marginalising feminine, 'girly' and 'soft' masculinity, contributing to the construction of a masculinist hidden curriculum.

Constructing the masculinist hidden curriculum at West-Side academy

A senior colleague alternates between the playing fields offering 'advice' to the coaches and players of various age groups. As the under-14 boys walk off the field toward me for their scheduled half-time break, he moves closer, calling to the boys: "Jog in then lads. Come on, you haven't done enough to be walking have you?" The boys now jog from the field and sip from their water bottles. "Alright boys, gather round," I find my voice and step in before he gets a chance. I offer my own analysis on the game so far, an attempt to be calm and reassuring, pausing for reflection. My senior colleague steps in, uninvited. I take a step back, watch and listen as he confronts the boys about their performance. "You're letting them walk all over you," he begins.

> If you want to get something out of this game today, you need to be tougher all over the pitch and start winning your individual battles.

Despite the sunshine, the breeze is cold and biting. Most of the boys are wearing thermal undershirts, or 'skins' as they call them. My old 'friend' continues. "You're too soft at the moment lads," he barks. Continuing his team talk, he picks out one of the boys, pointing to the

boy's thermal undershirt, just visible above the neck-line of his West-Side jersey: "Take that stupid thing off." The boy removes the undershirt. It's not the 'done thing' to question an older coach, so I keep quiet, complicit through my silence in this re-alignment of the boys' actions.

"All of you," he says, gesturing to the other boys now. "Come on, get those things off. If you want to keep warm then you need to start working harder and run around a bit more." None of the boys argue. They all remove their 'skins'. "You're better than this. Now get back out there, and sort it out!" Feeling undermined, I take a few steps away down the touchline. I offer some tactical advice to a couple of the boys positioned on this near side of the field, trying to regain my 'voice' (authority?) and restore in their mind (and my own) my sense of usefulness.

In the clubhouse after the game, one coach discusses the performance of a trialist: a young boy hopeful of impressing the coaches and being 'signed'[3] as an official academy player. "He did really well today," the coach explains. Some other coaches nod in agreement. "Yeah, the boy did well, until he cried twice right at the end there. Seems a bit soft." Someone else agrees, "Yeah, not sure he's got what it takes: don't think he could cope with it here." Another coach remarks that he could name a few professionals who have cried after losing a game. This doesn't sway the general feeling. The boy's progress will be monitored, but he won't be 'signed' at this time.

The next week, during a practice game at training, two 14-year-old boys compete for possession of the football. They tussle, until one is eased off the ball and tumbles to the floor. "No foul. Play on!" I shout. Some of the boys shout to their teammate, "Get on the weights!": referencing a need to 'work out' in the gym, and then describe the 'victorious' boy as a "beast" and a "tank." Admiringly, a passing coach tells me: "He's got a bit of bite about him hasn't he!" The 'unsuccessful' boy is on the ground. He stays there, momentarily. "Up you get, be tough,"

[3] This is when boys are offered to sign a formal agreement or registration 'contract,' typically for up to 2-years between U13-U15.

the coach encourages him. The boy stands up and jogs away to rejoin the practice. The coach shouts to him. “You ok?” The boy signals yes with a ‘thumbs up.’ “You need to get in the gym, my son,” the coach adds. The boy smiles at the coach and returns his focus to the game.

The coach turns to me. “He’s too soft,” he says. “We’ll need to toughen him up a bit if he’s gonna have a chance of making it.” “Hmm.” I make a noise which might be interpreted as agreement, although the tone of his comment makes me feel uncomfortable, as if intended to suggest I did not/could not ‘see’ the moment where ‘toughness’ was necessary. He continues, “He used his body so well and he’s got that nasty streak in him. You need lads like that who are gonna mix it up, fight and scrap when it’s needed.”[4] I let out another restrained noise of agreement.

Moving away, around the practice area, I collect stray footballs and encourage the boys to keep up their efforts as the weather takes a turn for the worse. “Come on boys, keep the ball moving! Try to play quick between the lines!” I pull my hat down securely over my ears and my jacket collar up around my neck. “Alright boys, well done today, we’ll finish there.” I call time on the session, offer a quick debrief and send the boys on their way. In the coaches’ locker room a colleague asks how my session went. “Yeah, good,” I respond, adopting an upbeat tone in front of the other coaches, despite some private ‘concerns’ over the quality of the boys’ play. My hands and toes are numb with the cold: “Absolutely freezing out there by the way.” I share some thoughts on the boys who performed well and those who did not. I reciprocate: “How was yours?”

> Good, same, horrible out there. Had some boys crying at the end. They need to fuckin’ toughen up. Soft as shit if you ask me.

I bristle at the comment but keep a neutral ‘face’, not wanting to align myself with this

[4] Incidently, to contrast the coaches certainty about ‘what is required’, the boy being described by this coach did not ‘make it’ to the professional levels.

perspective. “How’s that then?” He mentions a couple of the boys by name, frustrated. “Well, some of them get on with it, but like those two, they fall on the floor and get a bit wet and then they’re crying like girls and just give in for the rest of it.” Another coach offers some thoughts:

> They’re only kids though, mate, most of those boys don’t wear the right kit for that kind of weather. I’m not surprised they’re all crying!

“Yeah, but they’ve gotta be tougher than that, I mean, if they’re gonna make it.” The coach ends the conversation with a clear positioning of those boys as being outside of his conception of ‘how boys should be.’ “They still shouldn’t be crying though, that’s what girls do.” He tucks his laces into dry trainers, slips his feet into them, and leaves the changing room.

Analysis: constructing the masculinist hidden curriculum

Evident in the first part of the story above was my senior colleagues’ exertion of authority and control to ‘motivate’ players to perform (Roderick, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006). Authoritative coaching behaviour was used to ‘educate’ players on the expectations of this cultural field (see also Cushion & Jones, 2006) and like the inmates in Goffman’s (1961) *Asylums*, the boys are “never fully alone…always within sight” (p.33). Progressing, the story tells of the centrality of physicality and toughness (and avoidance of softness) in the boundary-construction of the masculinist hidden curriculum at West-Side academy. Coaches openly referenced ‘feminine’ or ‘girly’ performances, hinting at their own conceptions of what amounts to ‘appropriate’ masculine poise. During interactions with boys, coaches attempted to build shared interpretations of how to be a professional footballer, socially constructing and laying out the ‘terms of contact’ for this institution (West & Zimmerman, 1987), that is, the masculinist hidden curriculum and a way of ‘doing gender’ located in displays of toughness, physical domination, and avoiding softness.

Using humour to re-align masculinities

Walking out to the training field to deliver a session, I see an under-11 age group player engaged in some 'banter' with a coach. Several of the boy's teammates are close by. The boy is wearing pink boots, recently purchased. "Whoa, hold on, hold on…what are those, mate?" the coach asks, a broad grin on his face. The boy smiles. His teammates look over. Most wear brightly coloured boots themselves: various hues of yellow, green, blue, and white. The coach addresses me as I walk by. "Have you seen what's going on here?" The boys' teammates are amused, enjoying the 'ribbing' their teammate is getting from this coach. "Surely that's a fine?" the coach asks, nodding toward the pink boots. He continues talking to the boy wearing them and asks dryly: "Are these why you kick like a girl then?"

Some of the other boys smile. The boy with the pink boots smiles, too. The coach breaks his serious 'act' and smiles. "You know I'm only kidding around!" The coach moves in, physically, drawing the boy in with a side-on hug and ruffles his hair. "Good lad," he adds as he releases the boy, signaling that his 'message' was received in the 'correct' way (as a joke, not serious) and that the boy is a 'good lad' (cooperative, compliant, obedient) for accepting this message and aligning his actions (response) with that 'required' by the coach. He waves and calls out to the other boys. "Have a good one, lads." They return the wave. He pats me encouragingly on the back as he jogs away. "Have a good one, mate." "You, too," I smile and move towards my own group.

"Right, are we gonna get this game going or what?" The under-14s and under-13s age-groups combine for a practice game. Another coach gets the boys moving to stay warm: "That's it lads, nice big girly skipping. Get up nice and high now!" The boys smile as they leap around.

We start the practice game. A handful of coaches are gathered on the sideline to watch the game.

A ball comes in high toward one of the boys on the field. At the last second he moves his arms in front of his chest, seemingly misjudging the flight of the ball. He pats the ball down with both his hands and the ball falls to the floor in front of him. It bounces and then settles on the artificial turf. From the sideline one of the coaches, officiating the game, blows his whistle and indicates a free kick to the other team. “Handball!” he shouts. By the rules of the game, the use of hands to manipulate the ball by an ‘outfield’ player is an infringement. As the shrill of the referee’s whistle fades, another coach shouts onto the field. “That was a bit girly!” He adds, “Free kick to the other team for being so girly!” This makes the coaches on the sideline laugh. Some of the boy’s teammates and also a few younger boys on the other team laugh, too. The boy sprints back into position to help defend the free kick awarded against him. The game continues, and the boys seem on good form and ready for the weekend game.

On the Sunday, game-day, I arrive at West-Side academy at 7.15am. The team bus is parked outside the academy building. Inside the bus, I occupy one of the seats a few rows from the front of the bus, with the other coaches. The stated departure time is 7.30am and time is ticking. We are waiting for a few more boys to arrive. “Where are they?” one of the coaches asks. “Anyone got their number? We might have to leave without them.” At 7.32am three boys are being dropped off at the bus stop by their parents. They make their way hastily toward the team bus. The driver stows their bags into the luggage-hold of the vehicle. The boys move to the door of the bus and climb the stairs. Their coach, sat in the first row of seats stands and greets them, shaking their hands in turn as they move towards him.

“Good morning, ladies! You’re late,” he announces loudly. The freshly gelled hair of boys already seated on the bus become visible, foreheads now peering up over the head-rests of

the seats in front of them. The coach continues his morning greeting of the boys. “Busy doing your hair was it? Load of softies you are!” The boys smile back at their coach and return his greeting “Morning. Sorry we’re late.” They shuffle to the back of the bus to join their teammates, who greet them with laughter and a mocking round of applause, which brings a grin to the coach’s face. “You’re lucky we didn’t leave you here!” he shouts down the bus. The boys look for empty seats. “OK, settle down and find a seat, we’re already late ‘cos of you lot.” The bus drive announces that everyone needs to put their seat-belts on, and the bus pulls onto the road.

Analysis: using humour to re-align masculinities

Coaches’ use of humour in this setting can be read through the ‘hidden curriculum’ of football (Cushion & Jones, 2014): as part of the construction of a framework of hegemonic expectations and meanings around what it means to be a man (Connell, 2002), to ‘fit in’ and be successful in the world of football. Indicative of the embeddedness of coaches’ use of gender humour, the interactions illustrated above did not visibly cause distress, nor stimulate any institutional backlash. However, the use of humour in this way remained contradictory to the ‘official voice’ of West-Side academy. Coaches’ ‘othering’ language is interpreted as an attempt to marginalise, discipline and consolidate gender into ‘appropriate’ hetero-masculine performances (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Skelton, 2002) and re-align boys’ bodily actions (Goffman, 1959). Humour related to gender performance was deployed as a mechanism through which coaches could safely ‘set up’ hegemonic, masculinist ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Importantly, coaches were not coaching ‘abusively’ in the conventional sense of what abuse, intimidation and violence in coaching might look like (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). Boys were not visibly upset within interactions. In fact, boys mostly seemed to enjoy these simultaneously

inclusionary put-downs and disciplinary moments of 'connection' with coaches (c.f. Edwards & Jones, 2018). This interplay between formality/informality and distance/intimacy in coaches interactions with boys functioned as a way to 'test the water' or carefully 'put out feelers' (Goffman, 1959, p.188-189), to hint at social demands, and 'include' boys in academy life through teasing and encouraging them to re-align with particular masculine practices. Typically, this went 'under the radar' and was not contested, although some coaches did tentatively contest the use of gender-related humour.

Using humour to disrupt the masculinist hidden curriculum

As I walk out to the training field with a couple of coaches, a boy walks alongside us. As he passes beyond us, one coach jokes with him: "I'm worried about you with that long hair, mate." The boy responds, "Getting long now isn't it?" The coach smiles, "Yeah, you'll get mistaken for a girl soon!" The boy returns the smile and runs off to join his peers. The coach turns to me and the other coach: "He'll get it cut off soon." "You think?" I question. He continues:

> Yeah, I've got no problem with it. But boys with long hair, when they get older, they're asking for it. That's just the way it is.

The other coach nods at his (receding) hair-line. "You sound jealous, mate." The coach laughs, "Yeah, can't mistake *me* for a girl can you?" He runs a hand over his head, smiles and we all part ways to join our respective age-group teams and begin our coaching sessions.

At the end of the evening, I head toward the academy building. One of the other academy coaches is also finishing his session. He is standing with one of the goalkeeper coaches and a small group of young goalkeepers. He calls over to me and another coach as we are all leaving the training field. "Lads, you gotta see this!" We walk over. The coach encourages a young academy goalkeeper, 12-years old: "Go on mate, show 'em your little things." The boy shows us

the hand-warmers he had been keeping in his pockets for this evening's session. The hand-warmers are the kind you can heat up in a microwave before going outside. They retain and slowly radiate heat to keep your hands warm. The young goalkeeper smiles as he reveals what he is holding. Other boys are now also gathered around, looking to see what the fuss is about. The coach comments, "What's going on with 'keepers these days? They've gone all soft!" Standing nearby, the goalkeeper coach speaks. "It's not soft mate, just smart. You wish you had some!"

> Not really, bit gay isn't it. Wouldn't catch me with them.
>
> But you wear all that [pointing to the coach's gloves, wooly hat, and padded jacket] and you're not diving on the floor every minute.

He then quickly moves toward the other coach and pats him on the stomach: "And you've got a good layer of body fat mate to keep you warm, give the kid a break." Some of the other coaches and boys gathered around laugh and a smile returns to the young goalkeeper's face. The goalkeeper coach then offers the boy some reassuring words.

> Take no notice of him. Well done tonight, you do what you need to do to prepare and keep working on what we talked about.

"Yeah I was only kidding," adds the other coach, distancing himself from his original statement, now 'betrayed' by his coaching colleague who has not supported his attempts to realign the boys' actions in line with his own hetero-normative standard of masculinity. "Good lad, see you next week." The young goalkeeper acknowledges both coaches and jogs away to his parents.

Analysis: using humour to disrupt the masculinist hidden curriculum

Coaches, including myself, were often complicit in the reproduction of a masculinist hidden curriculum at West-Side, sometimes "maintain[ing] the line…[and] stay[ing] in character" (Goffman, 1959, p.166) to project a consistent image to the boys and to avoid undermining other

coaches. However, there were tentative instances when masculinist, hetero-normative interactions were disrupted in this setting, sometimes back-stage/privately between coaches and sometimes front-stage/publicly around the boys. The 'disruptive' moments outlined in the final story above also highlight how coaches might use humour to position themselves outside the gendered (masculine) constraints of the institution (Goffman, 1969), moving beyond simply 'maintaining the line' and supporting (actively or passively) the gender re-aligning actions and performances of coaching colleagues, toward contesting and subverting hetero-normative narratives. In the story above, coaches deployed humour as a form of "destructive information" (Goffman, 1959, p.141): that is, using an inclusionary, yet disciplinary, counter-humour to tactfully challenge and tease the gender-related humour of other coaches and disrupt or 'de(con)struct' the intended masculinist narrative of the interaction. The use of humour in this way, as a contextually-acceptable and non-threatening form of institutional lingo, offered a modest 'in-situ' disruption of masculinist performances that were incompatible with the values of equality and respect, as stated in the policy ('official voice') of the West-Side academy.

Conclusions

Building on Jones et al.'s (2011) call to extend research on the use of humour in sport coaching, this current paper explores coaches' use of gender-related humour in relation to the social reconstruction and disruption of a masculinist hidden curriculum. Three data-informed creative non-fiction stories sketch out the gendered politics of 'humourous' coaching interactions: problematising the boundaries between 'inclusionary put-downs' and 'disciplinary humour' (Edwards & Jones, 2018). Drawing on Goffman (1959, 1961), within a masculinities framework, this research contributes to sport coaching and humour literature by: (1) illustrating how coaches

communicate personal gender ideologies through every-day inclusionary/disciplinary 'humourous' interactions, serving to encourage others to re-align actions in line with hegemonic masculinist expectations, contributing to the subtle reconstruction of the masculinist hidden curriculum at West-Side, and; (2) stimulating thought on how coaches (re)act pedagogically through their use of humour to tentatively disrupt/subvert or 'call out' normative, hegemonic masculinist lines of thinking that contradict the ostensibly inclusive 'official voice' of the organisation.

To clarify, it is not my intention to suggest coaches are insidiously deploying gendered ideologies, through 'humour' or otherwise, as part of a conscious scheme to indoctrinate others: instead, the way coaches represent hegemonic or esteemed masculinities and bodily practices is suggestive of a particular contextually-located 'hidden curriculum' at play (Cushion & Jones, 2014) and a constraining institutional gender logic, with 'appropriate' performances of gender/masculinity being encouraged (uncritically?) from coaches' own socially-constructed ideas about what it means to be a man in this setting. Indeed, socialisation into narrow and 'hard' ideas of hegemonic masculinity is not a one-way process whereby coaches' ideologies are absorbed wholesale by youth players (Connell, 2002). There will be other influences on boys' lives and they may develop along different ideological 'paths' and even reject and contest the ideas of their adult coaches. Work by Adams and Kavanagh (2018) highlights how masculinities among West-Side youth footballers are potentially contradictory, displaying both inclusive and exclusive qualities.

Yet, coaching/gender 'performances' have consequences and effects on other people and their bodies (Connell, 2008, p.136), and in putting their own taken-for-granted ideas about gender 'out there' through interactions with academy players, coaches should be cautious of the way

they may be contributing to how boys think, feel and act as gendered beings. This is particularly important given the established associations between dominating, tough, and 'femininity-avoidant' forms of masculinity with wider male well-being and health-seeking behaviours (e.g. Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000; Courtenay, 2000; Gough, Robertson & Robinson, 2016; Houle et al., 2015). Finally, given the "growing legal and financial implications of oppressive joking relations" (Collinson, 2002, p.283) and contemporary 'player power' responses in youth football to bullying and aggressive coaching behaviour (e.g. Conn, 2017; Edwards, 2018; Malyon, 2018; Wilson, 2018), a significant challenge for modern coaches is reflecting critically on their use of humour (whether intended as inclusionary or disciplinary) to enable inclusive, socially-cohesive and 'fun' work-spaces without (re)producing gender power relation asymmetries and inequalities.

References

Adams, A., & Carr, S. (2017). Football friends: adolescent boys' friendships inside an English professional football (soccer) academy. *Soccer & Society, 20*(3), 1—23.

Adams, A., & Kavanagh, E. (2018). Inclusive ideologies and passive performances: exploring masculinities and attitudes toward gay peers among boys in an elite youth football academy. *Journal of Gender Studies, 27*(3), 313—322.

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, bodies, and jobs: a gendered theory of organisations. *Gender and Society, 4*(2), 139—158.

Adams, A., Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2010). Establishing and challenging masculinity: The influence of gendered discourses in organized sport. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 29*(3), 278—300.

Addis, M. F., & Mahalik, J. (2003). Men, masculinity and the contexts of help-seeking. *American Psychologist, 58*(1), 5—14.

Aggerholm, K., & Ronglan, L.T. (2012). Having the last laugh: The value of humour in invasion games. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, *6*(3), 336—352.

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *35*(4), 373—395.

Barton, B. (2011). My auto/ethnographic dilemma: who owns the story? *Qualitative Sociology, 34*(3), 431.

Bochner, A., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories.* New York: Routledge.

Brown, G., & Potrac, P. (2009). 'You've not made the grade, son': De-selection and identity disruption in elite level youth football. *Soccer and Society, 10*(2), 143—159.

Calvey, D. (2008). The art and politics of covert research: Doing 'situated ethics' in the field. *Sociology, 42*(5), 905—918.

Cheney, T. (2001). *Writing creative nonfiction: Fiction techniques for crafting great nonfiction.* Springer Science & Business.

Cochran, S., & Rabinowitz, F. (2000). *Men and depression*: *Clinical and empirical perspectives*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Collinson, D. L. (2002). Managing humour. *Journal of Management Studies*, *39*(3), 269—288.

Conn, D. (2017). After evidence of bullying at Aston Villa's academy, why has the FA gone silent? *Guardian,* 7 December 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/dec/07/aston-villa-academy-evidence-bullying-fa-kevin-macdonald

Connell, R. (2002). *Gender*. Cambridge: UK Polity Press.

Connell, R. (2008). Masculinity construction and sports in boys' education: A framework for thinking about the issue. *Sport, Education and Society*, *13*(2), 131—145.

Courtenay, W. H. (2000). Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: A theory of gender and health. *Social Science and Medicine, 50,* 1385—1401.

Cushion, C. J., & Jones, R. L. (2006). Power, discourse, and symbolic violence in professional youth soccer: The case of Albion football club. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 23*(2), 142—161.

Cushion, C. J., & Jones, R. L. (2014). A Bourdieusian analysis of cultural reproduction, socialisation and the 'hidden curriculum' in professional football. *Sport, Education and Society, 19*(3), 276—298.

Duncan, W. J., Smeltzer, L. R., & Leap, T. L. (1990). Humour and work: Applications of joking behavior to management. *Journal of Management, 16,* 255—278.

Edwards, L. (2018). Peter Beardsley fighting for his job as Newcastle United youth coach after allegations of bullying and racism. *Telegraph,* 7 January 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2018/01/07/peter-beardsley-fighting-job-youth-coach-newcastle-united-allegations/

Edwards, C. N., & Jones, R. L. (2018). Humour in Sports Coaching: 'It's a Funny Old Game'. *Sociological Research Online, 23*(4), 744—762.

Fink, J. S. (2016). Hiding in plain sight: The embedded nature of sexism in sport. *Journal of Sport Management, 30*(1), 1—7.

Francis, B., & Skelton, C. (2001). Men teachers and the construction of heterosexual masculinity in the classroom. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning, 1*(1), 9—21.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* London: Penguin Books.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental health patients and other inmates.* London: Penguin Books.

Goffman, E. (1969). *Where the action is.* London: Penguin Books.

Goode, E. (1996). The ethics of deception in social research: a case study. *Qualitative Sociology*, *19*(1), 11—33.

Gough, B., Robertson, S. & Robinson, M. (2016). Chapter 8: Men 'masculinity' and mental health: critical reflections. In Gideon, J. *Handbook on Gender and Health* (pp.134—162). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine Publishing Group.

Haggerty, K. D. (2004). Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative sociology*, *27*(4), 391—414.

Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2002). Having a laugh at work: How humour contributes to workplace culture. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *34*(12), 1683—1710.

Houle, J., Meunier, S., Coulombe, S., Tremblay, G., Gaboury, I., De Montigny, F., Cloutier, L., Auger, N., Roy, B., Dion, H. & Bernard, F.O. (2015). Masculinity ideology among male workers and its relationship to self-reported health behaviors. *International Journal of Men's Health, 14*(2), 163—182.

Jones, R. L., Armour, K. M., & Potrac, P. (2002). Understanding the coaching process: A framework for social analysis, *Quest, 54*(1), 34—48.

Jones, R. L., Armour, K. M., & Potrac, P. (2003). Constructing expert knowledge: A case study of a top-level professional soccer coach. *Sport, Education and Society*, *8*(2), 213—229.

Jones, R. L., Armour, K. M., & Potrac, P. (2004). *Sports coaching cultures: From practice to theory.* London: Routledge.

Jones, R. L., Ronglan, L. T., Potrac, P., & Cushion, C. (2011). Chapter 14: Concluding thoughts and ways forward, In R. L. Jones, P. Potrac, C. Cushion & L. T. Ronglan, (Eds.), *The Sociology of Sports Coaching* (pp.179—186). Routledge.

Kehily, M. J., & Nayak, A. (1997). 'Lads and laughter': Humour and the production of heterosexual hierarchies. *Gender and Education, 9*(1), 69-88.

Kelly, S., & Waddington, I. (2006). Abuse, intimidation and violence as aspects of managerial control in professional soccer in Britain and Ireland. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 41*(1-2), 147—164.

Kinkema, K. M., & Harris J. C. (1998). Mediasport studies: Key research and emerging issues. In L. A. Wenner (Ed.), *Mediasport.* London: Routledge.

Kirk, D. (1992). Physical education, discourse, and ideology: Bringing the hidden curriculum into view. *Quest, 44*(1), 35—56.

Lauder, M. A. (2003). Covert participant observation of a deviant community: justifying the use of deception. *Journal of Contemporary Religion, 18*(2), 185—196.

Malyon, E. (2018). Chelsea pledge to assist authorities after three former players accuse ex-coaches of bullying and abuse. *Independent,* 12 January 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/chelsea-abuse-racism-bullying-graham-rix-gwyn-williams-football-association-fa-a8156641.html

Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research.* London: Falmer Press.

McMahon, J., McGannon, K. R., & Zehntner, C. (2019). I am fast but I do not fit: an autoethnography of a swimmer's experiences of 'competitive performance' stigma in two

sporting contexts. *Sport, Education and Society, 24*(3), 283—297.

Mean, L. (2001). Identity and discursive practice: Doing gender on the football pitch. *Discourse & Society, 12*(6), 789—815.

Miller, J. M., & Tewksbury, R. (2010). The case for edge ethnography. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 21*(4), 488—502.

Parker, A. (1996). *Chasing the big time: Football apprenticeship in the 1990s.* University of Warwick: Unpublished PhD thesis.

Parker, A. (2001). Soccer, servitude and sub-cultural identity: Football traineeship and masculine construction. *Soccer and Society, 2*(1), 59—80.

Parker, A. (2006). Lifelong learning to labour: Apprenticeship masculinity and communities of practice. *British Educational Research Journal, 32*(5), 687—701.

Parker, A., & Manley, A. (2017). Goffman, identity and organizational control: elite sports academies and social theory. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 34*, 211—222.

Partington, M., & Cushion, C.J. (2012) Performance during performance: using Goffman to understand the behaviours of elite youth football coaches during games. *Sports Coaching Review, 1*(2), 93—105.

Potrac, P., & Jones, R. L. (2009). Micropolitical workings in semi-professional football. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 26*(4), 557—577.

Potrac, P., Jones, R. L., Gilbourne, D., & Nelson, L. (2012). 'Handshakes, BBQs, and bullets': Self-interest, shame and regret in football coaching. *Sports Coaching Review, 1*(2), 79—92.

Roderick, M. (2006). *The work of professional football: A labour of love?* London: Routledge.

Rogerson-Revell, P. (2007) Humour in business: A double-edged sword. A study of humour and

style shifting in intercultural meetings. *Journal of Pragmatics, 39*, 4—28.

Romero, E., & Pescosolido, A. (2008). Humor and group effectiveness. *Human Relations, 61*(3), 395—418.

Ronglan, L. T. & Aggerholm, K. (2014). 'Humour helps': Elite sports coaching as a balancing act. *Sports Coaching Review*, *3*(1), 33—45.

Skelton, C. (1997). Primary boys and hegemonic masculinities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 18*(3), 349—369.

Skelton, C. (2002). Constructing dominant masculinity and negotiating the 'male gaze'. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *6*(1), 17-31.

Smith, B., McGannon, K. R., & Williams, T. L. (2015). Chapter 5: Ethnographic creative nonfiction: Exploring the whats whys and hows. In G. Molnar G. & L. G. Purdy (Eds.), *Ethnographies in sport and exercise research* (pp. 59—73). Abingdon: Routledge.

Spicker, P. (2011). Ethical covert research. *Sociology*, *45*(1), 118—133.

Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 17*(1), 21—43.

Tolich, M. (2010). A critique of current practice: Ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers. *Qualitative Health Research, 20*(12), 1599—1610.

Thompson, A., Potrac, P., & Jones, R. (2015). 'I found out the hard way': Micro-political workings in professional football. *Sport, Education and Society*, *20*(8), 976—994.

Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *7*(1), 38-53.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society, 1*(2), 125—151.

Wilson, J. (2018). Arsenal suspend two academy coaches over bullying accusations. *Telegraph,*

11 May 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2018/05/11/arsenal-suspend-two-academy-coaches-bullying-accusations/