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‘I found out the hard way’: Micro-political workings in professional football

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Abstract

This paper examines the micro-political experiences of Adam (a pseudonym), a newly appointed fitness coach at a Football Association Premier League Club, in his search for acceptance by senior colleagues. Data were collected through a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, before being subject to a process of inductive analysis. Goffman's (1959, 1963) writings on impression management and stigma, Ball's (1987) micro-political perspective, and Garfinkel's (1967) notion of status degradation are primarily utilised to make sense of Adam's perceptions and actions. The findings point to the value of developing coaches' micro-political understandings, and of including their formal facilitation within given professional preparation programmes. Doing so, it is argued, would better equip coaches for the problematic realities of their practice.

Key words: Impression management; micro-politics; sports coaching; stigma

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Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognised the need to better understand how organisational cultures are practiced, experienced and understood (e.g., Kempster & Stewart, 2010; Edwards, Elliot, Iszatt-White & Schedlitzki, 2013). Boyle and Parry (2007) have argued that such work develops “a deeper verstehen of organisational life”, inclusive of individual “sensemaking”, the “evaluation of leadership” and “the construction of a myriad of moral/emotional narratives, such as fear or organisational failure, jouissance, sadness and anger” (p. 187). Similarly, in the context of sports coaching, the need to better understand coaches’ behaviour in relation to the socio-cultural contexts of practice has also arisen (Jones, Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2011). This is because the traditional didactic conceptualisation of coaching has failed to take account of the dynamic and nuanced nature of the activity (Jones et al., 2011).

In particular, the continuing rather rationalistic portrayal of coaching has ignored the possibility that organisational contexts are vulnerable to the frequently conflicting motivations, ideologies and goals of the individuals that comprise them (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2013a; Purdy & Jones, 2011). Correspondingly, while organisational life has been recognised as an inherently affecting and emotive affair elsewhere (e.g., Bloch, 2002; Hochschild, 1983), sports coaching research has largely ignored the emotional aspects of practice (Jones et al., 2011; Potrac, Jones, Purdy, Nelson & Marshall, 2013b). The purpose of this paper is to somewhat address this neglect. It does so by utilising a micro-political perspective to focus on the problematic experiences of Adam (all name used are pseudonyms), a newly appointed coach at a Football Association Premier League club. Through the adoption of an interpretive perspective, the study seeks not only to chronicle Adam’s understandings of the

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1 strategies he used in his quest to develop positive working relationships with key
2 contextual figures (e.g., the head coach, the assistant coaches, and the players), but
3 also the problems he encountered in his ultimately futile attempts to do so. In
4 particular, the study focuses on how Adam's understandings of events and
5 interactions at the football club contributed to the development and modification of
6 his personal interpretative framework; the set of cognitions and representations that
7 operated as the lens through which he made sense of what he did (Jones, Armour, &
8 Potrac, 2003; cf. Kelchtermans, 2009; Partington & Cushion, 2013). By locating
9 Adam's thoughts and perceived actions within an occupational setting that has long
10 been characterised by authoritarianism, deference, uncertainty and masculinity
11 (Cushion & Jones, 2006), the work seeks to build on the limited literature addressing
12 the interface between personal and social practice within professional football (Carter,
13 2006; Parker, 2006; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b).

14 The significance of the paper also lies in illuminating the strategic actions of
15 coaches and others within the sporting environment; a feature of coaching that has
16 been left largely ignored and undisturbed (Jones, 2009). Indeed, to date, there has
17 been little consideration in coach education provision of the possibility that neophyte
18 practitioners have to contend with organizational contexts vulnerable to the frequently
19 conflicting motivations, ideologies and goals of the individuals that comprise them
20 (cf. Ball, 1987; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Potrac et al., 2013a). Consequently, by
21 "breaking the silence that seems to exist regarding issues of conflict and its
22 manipulation", micro-political inquiry can help us to better recognise and theorise the
23 largely clandestine aspects of coaching contexts (Potrac & Jones, 2009b, p. 224).

24 Similar to Gardiner's (2000) work addressing mundane daily action then, the
25 value of the work rests in exploring the 'fine grain' and 'connective tissue' of sports

1 coaching, thus raising “our understanding of the prosaic to critical knowledge” (ibid.
2 p.6). Indeed, by focusing on the ‘politics of the small’ (Goldfarb, 2008), it becomes
3 possible for us to not only examine how individuals engage in “strategies of
4 domination and tactics of subversion”, but also how “conflicting interests are
5 articulated, and [how] consensus may or may not be reached” (p. 1816). In drawing
6 upon the work of Lemert (1997), we believe that such inquiry can not only inform
7 academic debate in coaching by providing a more nuanced understanding of given
8 social terrain, but can also help practitioners understand why they behave as they do
9 and to consider possible alternatives.

10 Finally, the rationale for the work lies in encouraging coaching policy makers
11 and coach educators to reverse the trend of prescribing action before developing a
12 detailed understanding of the ambiguities of practice itself (Jones & Wallace, 2005).
13 The case is made that coaching could be better served through more ‘reality-
14 grounded’ projects; where an attempt to grasp the nuanced uncertainties, dilemmas
15 and micro-political actualities that coaches deal with is undertaken (Jones & Wallace,
16 2005). Such knowledge could provide a better foundation upon which to build more
17 credible professional preparation programmes, inclusive of the many tensions and
18 agential strategies that comprise coaching itself.

19 **Methodology**

20 The interpretive paradigm is utilised to address research questions where the
21 emphasis is on exploring individuals’ motives and understandings of social life, and
22 the meanings that that they subsequently attach to their own and others’ behaviours
23 (Crotty, 1998). It is a perspective particularly well suited for gaining rich insights into
24 issues about which very little is known, such as the often chaotic, political working
25 lives of coaches (Jones, 2006; Potrac & Jones, 2009a). It is also a paradigm which

1 recognises that people understand their experiences through the meanings found in the
2 symbols, actions and language of the social. Within this study then, an interpretive
3 approach was used to focus on Adam's experiences as a newly appointed member to
4 the coaching staff at Hollington Football Club (F.C.). This was especially in relation
5 to gaining the acceptance and respect of more senior coaching colleagues, and the
6 problems he faced in doing so.

7 In order to achieve this end, biographic-narrative interviews (Kelchtermans,
8 2002b) were adopted as the chosen method of data collection. According to
9 Kelchtermans (1993; 2002b; 2009) such interviews combine the traditions of life
10 history and biographical research (e.g., Goodson, 1992) with narrative approaches to
11 professional practice (e.g., Carter & Doyle, 1996), and primarily seek to explore
12 individuals' the meanings that individuals' career experiences have for them
13 (Kelchtermans, 2009). Through such interviews, Adam's experiences as a coach in
14 relation to a 'politics of identity' are examined (Kelchtermans, 2002a, p. 766). That is,
15 how he sought to establish, safeguard, and restore his professional identity within the
16 working context at Hollington F.C. (Kelchtermans, 2002a). In this way, the
17 narrative-biographical approach is committed to exploring the "continuity between
18 the past, present, and as yet unrealised future" and "the transforming of human
19 experience into meaning" (Berger & Quinney, 2005, p. 4).

20 *The participant*

21 The principal author first met Adam 5 years ago through a mutual friend. At
22 that time, Adam had been actively involved in coaching for eight years. A graduate in
23 sport sciences, Adam had coached in the UK and abroad, and had developed a
24 specialisation in the physical conditioning of players as well as the technical and
25 tactical aspects of the game itself. Not long after meeting the principal author, Adam

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1 landed his ‘dream job’ of Assistant Coach (of undisclosed rank) with added
2 responsibility over the physiological conditioning and testing of the players in the first
3 team squad. It soon became apparent, however, that Adam’s acceptance into, and
4 subsequent experience within, the context was not straightforward; something he was
5 totally unprepared for. Subsequently, with Adam’s informed consent, we decided to
6 formally document his story in relation to the constant problematic issues he
7 experienced whilst at Hollington. Adam was, therefore, selected for a purpose, as
8 someone who was knowledgeable about the “cultural arena or experience” to be
9 studied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 66). The ethical implications of involvement in the
10 project were discussed with Adam at a preliminary meeting. In line with the host
11 university’s ethical guidelines, Adam agreed to the interviews being audio-taped, was
12 assured that his identity would remain only known to the authors, that access to the
13 interview tapes would be restricted to him and the research team, and that he was free
14 to withdraw from the study at any time.

15 *Procedure and method*

16 Adam’s experiences at Hollington F.C. were subsequently explored by the
17 first author in five formal interviews conducted over a 4-month period. Each
18 interview lasted approximately 90-120 minutes. The first interview began with
19 general information about the purpose of the project and proceeded to focus on
20 Adam’s sporting background (Freebody, 2004). Attention then shifted to exploring
21 Adam’s understandings of the micro-political nature of his interactions and
22 relationships with key figures at Hollington. The interviews were progressive in
23 nature, with the findings from one guiding the questions asked in the next (Freebody,
24 2004). Hence, while a list of topics for discussion was prepared in advance, any new
25 issues that emerged during the course of the interviews were further explored

1 (Freebody, 2004). The resulting interaction also developed into more of a
2 conversation between partners embarked on a joint venture, as an effort was made to
3 probe understandings from Adam's words. We were, nevertheless, aware that such
4 'partnerships' are never equal, as a quest existed to gain certain information (Kvale,
5 1996). In this respect, the interviews were somewhat Socratic in character, in that we
6 were trying to uncover assumptions and make explicit what Adam perhaps would
7 sometimes have left (or rather left) implicit (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, &
8 Tipton, 1985). The interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to ensure a complete
9 record of the data. The transcripts were then returned to Adam for confirmation of
10 their accuracy, not only in terms of the words spoken, but also of the meaning
11 expressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

12 *Data analysis*

13 The data were analysed in keeping with the tenets of the narrative-biographical
14 approach outlined by Kelchtermans (1993a, 1993b, 2009, 2012). During the
15 interviewing process the authors adopted what Maykut and Morehouse (1994)
16 described as a process of 'indwelling'. This involved immersing ourselves in the data
17 in order to understand Adam's point of view from an empathetic perspective; that is,
18 to apprehend and appreciate Adam's actions in terms of his motives, beliefs, desires
19 and thoughts. In this regard, specific attention was given to distinguishing units of
20 data related to phases of time, incidents and people which were considered crucial to
21 understanding Adam's time at the club (Kelchtermans, 1993a, 1993b). These were
22 identified both by Adam as being personally meaningful (e.g., "that had a huge impact
23 on me"), and by the research team's interpretations of their criticality in terms of what
24 followed (Kelchtermans, 1993a, 1993b).

1 The process of interpretation also involved transcending the data to develop a
2 theoretical explanation of the phenomenon in question (Wolcott, 1995). This entailed
3 reconstructing Adam’s story and identifying the factors that shaped, influenced and
4 impacted upon his perceptions and behaviours. Here, ‘analytical memos’ were used to
5 make preliminary connections to various theoretical concepts that might explain the
6 key issues evident within the data (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). During this process,
7 various theories were considered and then selected or rejected based upon their
8 perceived utility to explain Adam’s story. While we came to the conclusion that, due
9 to their insightful examination of everyday social interactions, the writings of
10 Goffman, Garfinkel and Kelchtermans provided a robust analytical framework, we
11 recognise that other researchers could well interpret Adam’s story from alternative
12 theoretical standpoints. Indeed, we appreciate that the process of interpretation is
13 naturally influenced by the epistemological and theoretical values and beliefs of the
14 researcher or research team. With such a consideration in mind, we shared the final
15 analysis with Adam and sought his feedback as part of the reflexive nature of the
16 general research process.

17 *The storied representation of the data*

18 A storied approach was used to present the data, as it is capable of shedding
19 light upon the complex and often ambiguous nature of social interaction (Jones,
20 2009). We believe that stories provide a valuable tool for describing and interpreting
21 Adam’s lifeworld, as they enable us to ‘see’ and ‘feel’ how he understood his own
22 motivations and behaviours, as well as the actions of others at Hollington F.C.
23 (Sparkes, 2002). They can do so, as their purpose is to both to explore and explain;
24 exploratory into questions of human agency, and explanatory into the social structures
25 that shape context and lives (Sandelowski, 1991). Relatedly, such stories can also be

1 deemed political in terms of connecting personal issues with public concern, thus
2 having the power to draw readers into a vicarious personal experience that have
3 collective meaning (Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, 1997).

4 However, we recognise that the process of constructing stories from interview
5 transcripts is fraught with opportunities for researchers' voices to dominate (Sparkes,
6 2002). Consequently, a number of approaches were utilised to present a narrative that
7 had a greater feel for the issues and events that Adam considered to be important.
8 Hence, Adam was given numerous opportunities to read drafts of the article and was
9 invited to comment on them, not only in terms of the accuracy of the data presented
10 but also of the theoretical interpretations. Taking the findings and theoretical
11 explanation back to Adam was not considered a test of truth but an opportunity for
12 reflexive elaboration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

13 **Results**

14 *Joining the 'team'? First impressions at Hollington F.C.*

15 From the outset, Adam openly admitted that he was unprepared for the micro-
16 political realities he was to experience at Hollington F.C. When he took up his
17 position at the Club he was excited at the prospect of working with a high profile
18 Manager and a well established coaching staff. Adam noted how he was "absolutely
19 elated" at his appointment; "it was a total dream come true, something that I wanted
20 to do ever since I started coaching". Although working at such a high level made him
21 a little anxious, Adam anticipated being welcomed and accepted by his new
22 colleagues, especially given the Manager's apparent open mindedness to the potential
23 role of sports science at the club. He based this perception on the seemingly positive
24 interactions experienced during the selection process; "I thought I had won the
25 coaching team over...after all they gave me the job". This assessment was soon to be

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1 challenged, as Adam was unaware of the reality that he was considered to be a
2 financially expedient appointment, and not the Manager's 'first choice' for the role;
3 something that he would not come to learn until some time later.

4 Adam's first day at work began during the team's participation in an overseas
5 pre-season tournament. Here, Adam was reacquainted with the coaching team, which
6 consisted of the Manager, two assistant coaches, a goal-keeping coach, three
7 physiotherapists, and a sports science consultant. Adam knew that most of the
8 coaching staff and one of the physiotherapists had been working together for over 15
9 years. It soon became clear that they formed a 'close knit' group, linked by a strong
10 social bond. Adam recounted one of his first meetings with this group, where he learnt
11 that his integration into the coaching 'team' would not be as straightforward as he had
12 initially imagined:

13 The coaching group (the Manager, assistant coaches, goal-keeping coach and
14 physio) were standing around recounting old stories and having a laugh. I
15 walked up to them to ask a question and to generally mix. No one in the group
16 acknowledged me for about a minute. When at last the Manager did turn
17 round, he said, 'What's up?' I asked my question and the Manager just said,
18 'I'm not sure, can you come back later, we're discussing something
19 important'.
20

21 It was an obvious 'brush off', and presented Adam with an immediate dilemma; how
22 to best portray himself to his colleagues to gain their acceptance; how to break into
23 the group. In response, Adam chose to present a "formal" and "professional" face,
24 whereby he limited his interactions and utterances to the performance of individual
25 players and the team. Although he thought he made positive early impressions, within
26 a couple of weeks this perception was to change. For example, at one training session,
27 he asked the goal-keeping coach and senior physiotherapist some questions about the
28 players' training programme. The former turned sharply and challenged Adam; "how
29 many years coaching experience have you got? We've been working in this game a

1 long time; maybe you should learn a bit more before you start questioning our
2 judgment”. The hostility shocked him. His projection of a ‘professional’ front had
3 obviously not had the desired impact. Rather than helping to build relationships with
4 colleagues, it had created a barrier between them. In his own words:

5 I probably pushed too hard in the beginning. I tried to engage with them on
6 purely work matters. Maybe I should have tried to talk to them more
7 informally, even socially, just get on with them, then let the rest build from
8 there. But I went in like a total steam train. I really bowled in there like ‘come
9 on let’s work together’; you know, adopting the ‘we are going to build this and
10 approach that’ kind of way. Those guys had been in the professional game for
11 15 to 20 years, and obviously looked at me and thought ‘Who’s this? Who
12 does he think he is?’ ...Obviously, I had not done enough at that point in my
13 career to have earned their trust, respect, and co-operation. It was direct
14 animosity towards me almost from that point onwards.
15

16 This realisation, so early in his tenure, had a significant impact upon Adam’s
17 confidence levels and subsequent interactions with his colleagues. He came to feel
18 very insecure in his new role; a reaction he described as one of “pure unadulterated
19 fear”. The fear came from that of failure, and the overwhelming desire to “survive and
20 thrive at that level of football”. The fear, however, also bred in him a determination to
21 “make this work...to survive this”. It was on such a foundation that Adam’s stay at
22 the club was built.

23 *First game of the season: Still learning the rules of engagement*

24 During the course of the next four weeks, Adam continued to work with all the
25 members of the coaching staff, trying to engage them in a more social, “down-to-
26 earth” manner. While his relationship with the goal-keeping coach and
27 physiotherapist remained “frosty”, his dealings with the Manager and the two
28 assistant coaches appeared to be developing positively. Adam thus, felt that he was
29 beginning to rebuild his position after his unsteady start.

30 Hollington F.C. began their competitive fixtures with an away game. Adam
31 travelled with the team to the hotel the evening before the match. Once at the hotel,

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1 Adam busied himself preparing some match-day equipment in the communal area.
2 Suddenly, the goalkeeping coach burst into the room, shouting “Where the hell is
3 everything? Why has there been no evening food prepared for the players?” Adam
4 had no answer; he didn’t even know why he was being asked such questions. In his
5 own words:

6 I presumed that logistics, such as food and snacks, would have been taken care
7 of by someone else. I didn’t realise it was my role. No-one had told me until
8 the goal-keeping coach let me know in no uncertain terms. It turned out it was
9 my job, but no one had actually told me. I really could have done with
10 someone saying ‘look these are your roles’. I just didn’t know.
11

12 The public humiliation filled Adam with feelings of anger and anxiety. He felt that
13 blame was being attributed directly to him, rather than to a simple breakdown in
14 communication; “I literally wanted the floor to open up beneath me. I really wanted
15 that to happen, just so I could escape”. Adam, in retrospect, attributed the coach’s
16 actions to the “cut-throat” nature of professional football; a “dog-eat-dog” world in
17 which he was still learning the ‘rules’:

18 Maybe it’s cynical, but I really think he was trying to assert his authority over
19 me and to publicly undermine me. At that level of football, everyone is
20 fighting to keep their jobs and get their contracts renewed. I suppose that if I
21 look incompetent and cuts have to be made, I’ll get axed before he does.
22

23 *Enter the sport science consultant: Friend or foe?*

24 As the season progressed, the sports science consultant appeared to be
25 spending more and more time at the Club. Adam had met the consultant during his
26 interview and had some contact with him during the early stages of his work at
27 Hollington. Adam considered the consultant to have been a supportive figure;
28 “honestly, he was very good. He really backed me to get the position”. Given Adam’s
29 experiences with the goal-keeping coach and his rapidly growing understanding of the
30 contextual political terrain, he identified the consultant as a potential ally. He,
31 therefore, turned to him for advice on professional and non-professional matters, and

1 appreciated the guidance given. Adam was happy that he had, at least, one relatively
2 constructive relationship with another member of the coaching team.

3 However, Adam soon became aware of a subtle but significant alteration in
4 the consultant's relationship both with him and with the rest of the coaching team.
5 Rather than providing advice and suggestions to Adam, the consultant was now
6 engaging directly with the Manager and the coaches. Suddenly, decisions about
7 conditioning work and training loads, what Adam perceived as being 'his' area, were
8 being taken without his input or involvement. Adam was "cut out of the loop"; his
9 role being relegated to one of technician, of simply putting another's training plans
10 into action. He noted that "it was weird. Suddenly he was not there to help or to talk
11 to. Rather, I was now his mouth piece, somebody he could use". Not surprisingly,
12 Adam felt confused and bewildered; that he had been "stabbed in the back". Although
13 his initial reaction was one of anger, he came to believe that he "was simply
14 politically outmanoeuvred". A subsequent meeting between the Manager and the
15 consultant led him to see just how much of a peripheral and potentially expendable
16 figure he had become. Here, Adam not only became painfully aware of the fact that
17 he was not the first choice for the role, but he also began to question if there had ever
18 been any sense of permanency in his appointment. In his own words:

19 The sports science consultant came in for one of the games. He only came in
20 for the big games. The Manager introduced him to the Chairman and I was
21 behind him filling the fridge with energy drinks. The Manager didn't realise I
22 was there. The consultant is in a suit and looking 'the business'. The Manager
23 says, still not realising I am behind him, "this is so and so.... we wanted to
24 bring him in but we could not afford him, so we brought Adam in instead". It
25 was then I realised how low (in the pecking order) I was; how unsafe I was.
26

27 *Approaching the final whistle: The last ditch effort*

28 With each passing week, Adam believed he was becoming more politically
29 attuned to how "life worked at the club". His experiences had taught him that he not

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1 only needed to develop his relationships with key individuals, but also to demonstrate
2 he had the knowledge and skills to make a significant contribution to the team's
3 efforts. With regard to the former, he noted that, "I needed to spend more time with
4 the important people...to gain entry to the inner sanctum. That was the key. The more
5 I could get into that, the more chance I had of surviving at the club". Adam outlined
6 how he "targeted" the three individuals whom he perceived to be the crucial figures in
7 the contextual hierarchy; the Manager, the senior physiotherapist, and the goal-
8 keeping coach. Here, he stated that, "I just wanted to give them time to get to know
9 me and vice-versa. I felt like I had missed out on that from the start. I would just stand
10 around with them and have a bit of a joke and some banter". He started to play some
11 pick-up football with the staff after training sessions, using self-deprecating humour
12 in the process. During these interactions, Adam found that some of the coaching team
13 had a common 'enemy' in a newly appointed assistant sports science consultant.
14 Interestingly, while he "never really had a problem with the guy", Adam put on a
15 public display of not liking the newcomer so as to try to gain acceptance into the 'in-
16 group' of senior coaches. Here, in openly following his own interests, Adam believed
17 that:

18 It was important finding a common enemy. You know, someone you can bitch
19 and joke about. It also allowed me to find allies in other people that also had
20 bad relationships with this person.
21

22 While Adam considered such strategies were helping him become increasingly
23 recognised, it was essential for him to also address his lack of professional standing in
24 the environment. Consequently, Adam changed the way he delivered material to the
25 coaches and players. He started to use learning aids to boost his professional
26 credibility. In his own words:

27 I started to make a few formal presentations. For example, with the goal-
28 keeping coach, I would make a presentation very goal-keeping specific. The

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1 data, information, practical examples were all directly related to goal-keeping.
2 At the time, I thought that worked really well, as he seemed to be very
3 impressed by what I was doing.
4

5 *The full-time whistle blows: Nowhere to turn*

6 Despite Adam's best efforts to build relationships and gain acceptance, others'
7 input and opinions were increasingly being drawn upon by the Manager. Adam had
8 busied himself putting together a series of ideas for the next pre-season training
9 programme, whilst having had a number of what he considered to be productive
10 meetings with the sport science consultant. Despite these apparently positive
11 overtures, Adam found himself excluded from the pre-season planning meeting. This
12 was tantamount to the end of his time at the club.

13 This was when I knew I was totally on the periphery, and I was going to
14 struggle to keep my job. Pre-season was not formally planned until the week
15 before it began; the coaches all planned it without me. I just sat in the office
16 and waited for them to come out and say 'right, this is what you are going to
17 be doing'. I felt really ostracised, I had no part at all in the decision making
18 process...If you are not involved in these integral meetings, it means that they
19 don't value your opinion and they don't want to involve you in the
20 discussions. All you are going to be is a 'gofer', a 'yes man', and that's what I
21 had become.
22

23 Adam subsequently went into what he described as "survival mode": "I started to
24 protect my position; I followed the plan I was given to the letter. I was like, this is not
25 my plan I am just delivering it. I tried to turn the political tide that seemed to have
26 turned against me". Adam thus, detached himself from any responsibility, hoping that,
27 if something went wrong, he would not be held accountable for it. Unfortunately, such
28 actions only served to further undermine his credibility within the coaching team, as it
29 did little more than reinforce others' perceptions that he was "just a mouthpiece, just
30 there to relay another's message".

31 It was at this time that Adam also started to notice some understated resistance
32 towards him from other members of the coaching staff. The senior physiotherapist

1 and goal-keeping coach once again became much less willing to engage with him. For
2 example,

3 I just couldn't pin them down for any type of meeting. I would basically have
4 to drag them into a meeting. It was the same for the other coaches and the
5 Manager as well. I would have to pin them down and shove something under
6 their nose and then they would say 'What does this mean?' Unless the
7 Manager called the meeting, they wouldn't even bother to show up a lot of the
8 time.
9

10 Adam also believed he was the target of more overt acts to publicly undermine him.
11 He recounted how the senior physiotherapist and the goal-keeping coach "started to
12 ask me for the reasoning and rationale for doing things in front of the players". They
13 would also tell the players that "you don't need to do that stuff he's saying. If you
14 don't like what he's doing, just ignore it". Adam thought about discussing this with
15 the Manager but chose not to do so. He believed that the potential "fallout" from
16 making a complaint would only make his situation worse. He also seriously doubted if
17 the Manager would act in his favour. This sentiment was reinforced when Adam
18 "caught wind from one of the players that in a conversation with the consultant, the
19 Manager had referred to me as a rookie.....and that I was still finding my feet". Adam
20 was totally exasperated by his circumstances, and felt that there was little do but wait
21 for his inevitable fate. In his own words:

22 At this point, I was totally resigned to the fact that my time was over, I was
23 not going to keep pushing. To be honest, I was looking for other jobs when I
24 got the inevitable call from the Manager. In some ways, it was relief.
25

26 While Adam's experiences at Hollington F.C. were not as he imagined or
27 hoped that they would be, he believed that his time at the Club was a valuable form of
28 professional development. In particular, he highlighted how it made him consider the
29 importance of the 'political landscape', and the relationship building that takes place
30 within it. He noted that:

1 I've learnt that how you deal with the political side of the job can really
2 impact upon how successful you can be as a coach. At Hollington, I never
3 managed to achieve the backing and support of key people to implement my
4 ideas. You can't do it without support. You need to recognise what
5 relationships and interactions you have with people. The more you know about
6 that side of things the more you can do with your coaching knowledge and
7 practical skills. It has certainly made me more thoughtful about how and why I
8 engage with the people that I work with.
9

10 **Discussion**

11 We believe that Adam's story sheds valuable light on the complex nature of social
12 interaction within coaching. In particular, Adam's experiences cast further doubt on
13 the functionalistic portrayals of coaching that have dominated much of the coaching
14 literature to date (e.g., Abraham & Collins, 2011; Grecic & Collins, 2013). Rather,
15 Adam came to view the environment at Hollington F.C. as "an arena for struggle"; a
16 place "riven with actual or potential conflict" (Ball, 1987, p. 19). The findings
17 reinforce those obtained in more general micro-political inquiry, which recognises
18 that individuals must work with a diverse range of others, who may not only bring a
19 multiplicity of different motivations, traditions and goals to the work place but,
20 importantly, will act upon them if given the opportunity to do so (e.g., Ball, 1987;
21 Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). While Adam willingly subscribed to the shared
22 organisational goal of improving the abilities and competitive performances of
23 players, he was initially naive to the reality that other individuals may pursue courses
24 of action that could reinforce or advance their own positions within the setting (Ball,
25 1987; Jones & Wallace, 2005).

26 This was perhaps best illustrated by the fluid nature of his relationships with
27 the goal-keeping coach and the sports science consultant. Here, Adam's experiences
28 mirror the negative patterns of social interaction found among some school teachers,
29 including the use of aggressive and manipulative tactics to attain individual ends

1 (Blase & Anderson, 1995). This certainly seemed to be the case with the sport science
2 consultant, who changed from someone Adam believed to be a confidant to someone
3 who outmanoeuvred him to progress his own standing. Similarly, Adam considered
4 the goal-keeping coach and senior physiotherapist to, at various times, engage with
5 him, ignore him and sabotage his credibility, as they deemed necessary.

6 According to Roderick (2006a), uncertainty and ambiguity form central
7 features of professional football; a competitive labour market characterised by a
8 constant surplus of talent often employed on limited tenure. To deal with such
9 insecurities, actors invariably engage in numerous coping strategies to advance their
10 respective causes. These include cultivating allies to whom they can turn if they
11 perceive their status to be under threat, and dramaturgical selves in order to maintain
12 stable, masculine workplace identities. Although Roderick's (2006b) work was
13 principally carried out from the perspectives of players, it throws light on a more
14 general world of fragility, constant scrutiny and uncertainty. Within it, both players
15 and staff were found to be continually navigating their way around the contextual
16 social network in which they were bound, in order to maintain or improve their
17 standing. Such a description resonates with Cushion and Jones's (2006, p. 148)
18 depiction of professional football as a context typified by a dominating 'legitimised'
19 authority which was used "to reproduce existing configurations of privilege". Similar
20 to the recent work of Potrac et al. (2013a), it was this problematic workplace that
21 Adam entered, largely ignorant of its contested, power-ridden nature.

22 The dilemmas Adam faced in terms of how to best present himself to his new
23 colleagues illustrates the value of using Goffman's (1959) social thought to examine
24 coaching practice. To date, the direct application of Goffman's work to sports
25 coaching has revealed that, in their efforts to obtain the 'respect' of key contextual

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1 stakeholders, coaches frequently engage in ‘face work’ (e.g., Jones, 2006). This
2 includes the telling of white lies, projecting a friendly image and using (self-
3 depreciating) humour (Jones et al., 2010). In relation to Adam’s choice to initially
4 engage with his colleagues in a very confident ‘professional’ manner, the ‘front’
5 presented failed to live up to the behavioural expectations of his role set, leading to
6 inter-personal tension (Rodham, 2000). This situation was further exacerbated by
7 Adam’s unawareness of the fact that he was not the ‘first choice’ candidate for the
8 role until later on in his tenure. It could be suggested that Adam failed to properly
9 observe the rituals of deference (respect for others) and demeanour (respect for the
10 role) required to maintain the interactional order within the Club setting (Goffman,
11 1967). In this respect, Goffman (1959) has suggested that first impressions, which are
12 based upon perceptions of the observed’s reputation, knowledge and skills, are
13 significant in terms of their potential for putting human interaction on the wrong or
14 right track. The power of first impressions (and their legacy) looms large in Adam’s
15 story especially with regard to how the ‘front’ he initially presented was sceptically
16 treated by the senior physiotherapist and goal-keeping coach. The tense nature of
17 Adam’s relationships with these senior staff may have been intensified by their
18 perceptions of him as lacking the experience needed to act in the ‘professional’,
19 confident way he did. In this regard, his behaviour, arguably, did not meet the
20 normative expectations of his senior colleagues (Goffman, 1963).

21 Adam’s experiences could also be considered symptomatic of the anti-
22 intellectual culture that has traditionally permeated football in the United Kingdom
23 (Gearing, 1999; Kelly, 2008; Parker, 2000). Here, playing experience has historically
24 been regarded as the essential criterion for coaching and management at the elite
25 level, with formal qualifications or an academic background being largely treated with

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1 suspicion and distrust (Kelly, 2008). As such, Adam perceived that his status as a
2 sport science graduate failed to make up for his lack of a professional playing career
3 or proven experience in professional football in the eyes of his more ‘traditional’
4 colleagues (Kelly, 2008). Adam’s experiences reflect the need to consider the
5 importance of first impressions and appropriate situated identities in order to proceed
6 with interaction in a sub-cultural (coaching) context. Unfortunately, Adam never
7 recovered from the way in which he and his behaviours were initially perceived by the
8 significant others at Hollington F.C.

9 According to Garfinkel (1967), the culture witnessed at Hollington F.C., far
10 from being rationally conceived, was a local accomplishment rooted in socially
11 crafted interaction. Hence, any social setting can be taken as a self-organizing entity
12 produced through the moment-to-moment work of society’s members (ibid.). In this
13 respect, context is not just a passive backdrop to action. Rather, action both shapes
14 and is shaped by context, making both mutually determinative (Garfinkel, 1967;
15 Miller & Cronin, 2013). Taken as such, the censorious, paranoid sub-culture of
16 professional football impacted heavily on Adam, not only in terms of his view of self
17 as a contextual stranger but also his decision (in an effort to counter that perception)
18 to adopt an initial overly-assured social performance. Adam’s marginal position can
19 also be somewhat explained by Garfinkel’s notions of shame and status degradation.
20 Shame in this context referred to an act that brings a lack of respect from others, while
21 degradation focused on the shared point of view of those who degrade. As a
22 consequence of his initially perceived supercilious behaviour then, Adam was subject
23 to a ‘degradation ceremony’; a “communicative action where the identity of an actor is
24 transferred into something that is looked on as lower in the local scheme of social
25 types” (Garfinkel, 1956, p.420). For the group, shame is the ‘individuator’ (Garfinkel,

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1 1956); a mechanism of exclusion. In this respect, it was a contextual or social reaction
2 to a perceived threat or ‘deviance’, with Adam being further denounced as an outsider
3 (Garfinkel, 1967).

4 As Adam reflected upon his working relationships, he considered himself to
5 have been stigmatised by his peers. Not only was this rooted in his negative first
6 impressions, but also in the widespread knowledge that he was not ‘first choice’ for
7 the position; an awareness which made his tenure even more insecure. His narrative
8 highlights several examples where he was “disqualified from full social acceptance”
9 (Goffman, 1963, preface) as a consequence of how his actions and position were
10 understood by others. These included being excluded from meetings and related
11 decision making activity, and being treated as little more than a general “messenger
12 boy”. Adam’s thoughts here are in keeping with Goffman’s notion of ‘conduct’
13 stigma, where the reactions of others led him to consider himself as a distained and
14 discounted individual. Such a situation echoes the work of Leary and Schreindorfer
15 (1998), who suggested that the “essence of stigmatisation [is] interpersonal
16 disassociation”, a process where “individuals are stigmatized to the extent that others
17 shun, reject or ostracize them” (p. 15).

18 Adam’s stigmatisation appeared to partly result from his inability to read the
19 social frames within which action occurs. Goffman (1974) referred to such
20 behavioural frames as definitions of a situation which are built up in accordance with
21 certain event-governing principles; in other words, frames are the often unconscious
22 structures which guide the perception of reality. Adam then, appeared to misconstrue
23 or ignore the regularities and rules that guided contextual practice, and the meanings
24 such rules held for the staff at Hollington F.C. In Garfinkel’s (1967) terms, he had not
25 understood or correctly read the implicit, taken-for-granted forms of knowledge that

1 give order to everyday interactions. This proved to be a costly error in light of the
2 pressurized, unstable and often paranoid world of professional football (Cushion &
3 Jones, 2006; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b).

4 Despite his ultimate dismissal, Adam's account also draws attention to his
5 increasing 'micro-political literacy' during his time at Hollington (Kelchtermans &
6 Ballet, 2002a); the process by which he learnt to read the micro-political landscape of
7 the football Club and write himself into it (Ball, 1987). While Adam was clearly
8 influenced by context, he nevertheless consciously attempted to influence the
9 structures in which he operated (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). In order to deal with
10 his vulnerability and to protect his professional interests, Adam sought to create
11 working conditions where the quality of his collegial and professional interactions
12 would allow him to fulfil his role in an effective and meaningful manner
13 (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a; Potrac & Jones, 2009b). Hence, he tried to develop
14 functional relationships with the Manager, the senior physiotherapist and the goal-
15 keeping coach; those he identified as the critical reality makers within the
16 environment (Ball, 1987). For example, he began to participate in the post-training
17 football games, and in the 'banter' which occupied a central position within the
18 Club's culture. He also did so through self-depreciating humour. Rather like the
19 surgeon in Goffman's (1969) classic text '*Where the action is*', Adam hoped to
20 improve his working relations by presenting his 'human side'. While he perceived this
21 to be successful in the short-term, the strategy ultimately failed. It failed because he
22 did not receive the professional recognition necessary to survive in the context.

23 To repair his identity and subsequently improve his professional standing and
24 deal with the uncertainty of his position, Adam also sought opportunities to have his
25 competencies recognised by colleagues (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). In particular,

1 he used various learning materials to present a capable and knowledgeable ‘front’
2 (Goffman, 1959). This was not simply a pedagogical choice, but also a strategic
3 action aimed at advertising his ‘self’ as a hardworking and creative professional
4 (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Similar to his efforts to spend more social time in the
5 company of key figures, Adam’s actions here could be understood as a further attempt
6 of a stigmatised individual to enhance his desirability to the other members of the
7 coaching group (Goffman, 1963).

8 It is important to recognise that we are not condemning Adam’s actions or
9 suggesting that his strategic choices were somehow ‘wrong’ as, in another setting,
10 they may have proved successful. Such is the indeterminacy of practice. Instead, his
11 experiences highlight the complexity, ambiguity and pathos that coaches frequently
12 face in attempts to integrate themselves into the given socio-pedagogical landscape
13 (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Rather than sliding passively and seamlessly into the
14 coaching setting (which he initially expected to do), Adam was immediately engaged
15 in a challenging, negotiatory and interpretive process (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a).
16 Hence, Adam experienced some uncomfortable, anxious, and, at times, humiliating
17 moments that led him to recognise coaching to “be as much about careful personal
18 negotiation, orchestration, and manipulation, as about improving the performance of
19 individuals or the team” (Potrac & Jones, 2009a, p. 566).

20 **Conclusion**

21 While we recognise the limitations of the single-case design utilised in this
22 study, our intention was not to provide formulaic generalisations about the nature of
23 coaching or the best ways to deal with the issues presented (Yin, 2009). Similarly, as
24 with interpretive work, we claim no universal generalizability from an individual
25 context. We also acknowledge that Adam’s story is written from a single perspective;

1 no doubt the other actors who feature within it would have different versions. Such
2 inquiry, however, is concerned with discerning how individuals make sense of their
3 encounters and actions (Kelchtermans, 2009; Bryman, 2012); in this case, the ways in
4 which Adam understood and gave meaning to his experiences as a neophyte coach.
5 This is not say that the work is only interested in explaining isolated personal agency,
6 as it was undertaken with reference to understanding collective cultural action
7 (Bryman, 2012). As such, we hope that recounting Adam's story at Hollington, and
8 our subsequent analysis of it, can stimulate wider research and critical discussion in
9 terms of how we think about the early career experiences and learning of neophyte
10 coaches specifically, and those of sporting practitioners more broadly (e.g., head
11 coaches, assistant coaches, performance analysts, physiotherapists). In this regard, the
12 findings and analysis presented should be considered as suggestive as opposed to
13 conclusive in nature (Crotty, 1998).

14 Although Adam's actions undoubtedly contained elements of agency, they
15 were also the product of context. For example, structural constraints as related to
16 status degradation loomed large in Adam's story. According to Garfinkel (1967), the
17 social effects of such degradation are found in individual withdrawal; a desire to
18 remove one self from public view. This paradigm of shame was apparent in Adam's
19 recollection that "I literally wanted the floor to open up beneath me...so I could
20 escape". In this and other respects, Adam was subject to particular social and
21 symbolic relations that were woven into the professional coaching context in which he
22 found himself. Indeed, Adam's story took place within a tacit understanding of
23 controlled insecurity, where alliances and personal relations were constantly built and
24 rebuilt. As in Wacquant's (2004) ethnographic account of a Chicago boxing gym, a
25 strict pecking order existed at Hollington F.C. which governed who could speak to

1 whom, when and where; a structure which signified the unwritten rules of social
2 context, imperatives which Adam had to learn the hard way. It is a depiction of
3 professional football as a cronied, power-driven, insecure context (Roderick, 2006a;
4 Cushion and Jones, 2006), which yields considerable influence over human agency.
5 Consequently, Adam's tale can be seen as the product of both individual and
6 collective practical reasonings (Wacquant, 2004).

7 Adam's story also gives further credence to the need to engage with a critical
8 sociology of sports coaching. Hence, it supports the call to engage with coaching
9 away from its common portrayal of 'heroic' ascent and achievement. Rather,
10 coaching should also be examined through its least known and spectacular side,
11 through its minute and mundane actions that produce and reproduce its reality (Potrac
12 & Jones, 2009b). Such work would further the portrayal of coaching as the
13 problematic institution it is; one that is overloaded with functions and relationships
14 that do not reveal themselves easily (Wacquant, 2004). A continued failure to do so
15 will only result in a distorted utopian view of a very complex activity (Potrac & Jones,
16 2009b; Potrac et al., 2013a). We believe coach educators should pay increasingly
17 heed to this everyday 'grit'. Not doing so deprives coaches of their reality; of their
18 inter-personal connections as responsive and diverse people who interpret and feel in
19 very different ways (Lefebvre, 1991). Such a perspective could easily be integrated
20 into professional preparation programmes (e.g., Jones, Morgan & Harris, 2012); a
21 necessary step if we are to better theorise coaching and provide meaningful
22 suggestions for coaches and coach educators to deal with the ambiguity and political
23 complexity inherent within it (Potrac et al., 2013a).

24 In conclusion then, we urge scholars and coach educators to give serious
25 consideration to how coaches understand the micro-political nature of their work and

1 the strategies they use to deal with it (Potrac & Jones, 2009a). Doing so, would allow
2 a deeper understanding of the interactions that take place between coach and context,
3 in addition to better illustrating what is at stake for coaches when they practice (Potrac
4 & Jones, 2009a; Potrac et al., 2013a).

5

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