

Thompson, A., Potrac, P., Jones, R. L. (2013). 'I found out the hard way': micro-political workings in professional football. *Sport, Education and Society*, under utgivelse. doi: 10.1080/13573322.2013.862786

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# **‘Learning the hard way’: A neophyte coach’s micro-political interactions in professional football**

Running header: Micro-political workings in professional football

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the micro-political experiences of Adam (a pseudonym), a newly appointed fitness coach at a high level professional football 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 within given contexts, thus better equipping them for the problematic realities of their practice.

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

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognised the need to better understand how organisational cultures are practiced, experienced and understood (Parry & Boyle, 2007). 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’ and athletes’ behaviour in relation to the socio-cultural contexts of practice has also arisen (Author B & Author C, 2009a). This is because the traditional didactic conceptualisation of coaching has failed to take account of the dynamic and nuanced nature of the activity (Author B & Author C, 2009a).

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 (Ball, 1987; Author A & Author B, 2009a). Similarly, while organisational life has been recognised as an inherently affecting and emotive affair elsewhere (e.g., Bloch, 2002; Hochschild, 1983), sports coaching research has remained largely ‘emotionally anorexic’ (Hargreaves, 2005; Author C, Author B, Cushion & Ronglan, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to somewhat address this neglect, by shedding light on the micro-political nature of coaching, through focusing on the problematic experiences of Adam (a pseudonym), a newly appointed coach at a Football Association Premier League club. Through the adoption of a broadly interpretive perspective, the study seeks not only to chart Adam’s understandings of the strategies he used in his quest to develop positive working relationships with key contextual figures (e.g., the head coach, the assistant coaches, and the players), but also the problems he encountered in his ultimately futile attempts to achieve this outcome. In particular, the study focuses on how Adam’s understandings of events and interactions at the football club contributed to the development and modification of his personal interpretative framework; the set of cognitions and representations that operated as the lens through which he perceived his practice, made sense of it, and, ultimately acted (Author C et al., 2003; cf. Kelchtermans, 2009). By locating Adam’s thoughts and actions within an occupational setting that has long been characterised by authoritarianism, deference, uncertainty, and masculinity, the work seeks to build on the limited literature addressing the interface between personal and social practice within professional football (Carter, 2006; Parker, 2006; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b).

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

Similar to Gardiner’s (2000) work addressing mundane daily action then, the value of the work additionally rests in exploring the ‘fine grain’ and ‘connective tissue’ of sports coaching, thus raising “our understanding of the prosaic to critical knowledge” (ibid. p.6). Indeed, by focusing on the ‘politics of the small’ (Goldfarb,

2008), it becomes possible for us to not only examine how individuals engage in “strategies of domination and tactics of subversion”, but also how “conflicting interests are articulated, and [how] consensus may or may not be reached” (p. 1816). In drawing upon the work of Lemert (1997), we believe that such inquiry can not only inform academic debate in coaching by providing a more nuanced understanding of the social terrain of practice, but can also help practitioners understand why they behave as they do and to consider possible alternatives.

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

### **Methodology**

The interpretive paradigm is predominantly utilised to address research questions where the emphasis is on exploring individuals’ motives and understandings of social life, and the meanings that they subsequently attach to their own and others’ behaviours (Crotty, 1998). It is a perspective particularly well suited for gaining rich insights into issues about which very little is known, such as the often chaotic, political working lives of coaches (Author B & Author C, 2009a). It is also a paradigm which recognises that people understand their experiences through the meanings found in the symbols, actions and language of the social. Within this study, an interpretive approach was used to focus on how Adam (a pseudonym) experienced and constructed his reality when appointed to a new position at Hollington Football Club (F.C.) (a pseudonym). This was especially in relation to his desire to be accepted by, and to develop positive working relationships with, senior coaching colleagues.

In order to achieve this end, biographic-narrative interviews (Kelchtermans, 2002b) were adopted as the chosen method of data collection. According to Kelchtermans (1993; 2002b; 2009) such interviews combine the traditions of life history and biographical research (e.g., Goodson, 1992) with narrative approaches to professional practice (e.g., Carter & Doyle, 1996), and primarily seek to explore individuals’ career experiences and the meanings that these experiences have for the persons concerned (Kelchtermans, 2009). Through them, Adam’s experiences as a coach in relation to a ‘politics of identity’ are examined (Kelchtermans, 2002a, p. 766). That is, how he sought to establish, safeguard, and restore his professional identity within the working context at Hollington F.C. (Kelchtermans, 2002a).

#### *The participant*

The principal author first met Adam 5 years ago through a mutual friend. At that time, Adam had been actively involved in coaching for eight years. He had coached in the UK and abroad, and had developed a specialisation in the physical conditioning of players as well as the technical and tactical aspects of the game itself. Not long after meeting the principal author, Adam landed his ‘dream job’ of Assistant Coach (of undisclosed rank) with added responsibility over the physiological conditioning and testing of the players in the first team squad. It soon became apparent, however, that Adam’s acceptance into and subsequent experience within the context was not straightforward; something he was totally unprepared for.

Subsequently, with Adam's informed consent, we decided to formally document his story in relation to the constant problematic issues he experienced whilst at Hollington. Adam was, therefore, selected for a purpose, as someone who was knowledgeable about the "cultural arena or experience" to be studied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 66). The ethical implications of involvement in the project were discussed with Adam at a preliminary meeting. In line with the host university's ethical guidelines, Adam agreed to the interviews being audio-taped, was assured that his identity would remain only known to the authors, that access to the interview tapes would be restricted to him and the research team, and that he was free to withdraw from the study at any time.

### *Procedure and method*

Adam's experiences at Hollington F.C. were explored in five formal interviews conducted over a 4 month period. Each interview lasted approximately 90-120 minutes. The first interview began with general information about the purpose of the project and proceeded to focus on Adam's sporting background (Freebody, 2004). Attention then shifted to exploring Adam's understandings of the micro-political nature of his interactions and relationships with key figures at Hollington. The interviews were progressive in nature, with the findings from one guiding the questions asked in the next (Freebody, 2004). The interviews were also broadly semi-structured. Hence, while a list of topics for discussion was prepared in advance, any new issues that emerged during the course of the interviews were further explored (Freebody, 2004). The resulting interaction also developed into more of a conversation between partners embarked on a joint venture, as an effort was made to probe understandings from Adam's words. We were, nevertheless, aware that such 'partnerships' are never equal, as a quest existed to gain certain information (Kvale, 1996). In this respect, the interviews were somewhat Socratic in character, in that we were trying to uncover assumptions and make explicit what Adam perhaps would sometimes have left (or rather left) implicit (Bellah et al., 1985). The interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to ensure a complete record of the data obtained. The transcripts were then returned to Adam for confirmation of their accuracy, not only in terms of the words spoken, but also the meaning expressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### *Data analysis*

The data were analysed using a variant of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this regard, Charmaz and Mitchell (2001, p. 161) argued that the application of such methods "can sharpen the analytic edge and theoretical sophistication" of qualitative research, contributing to a more insightful understanding of social phenomena. In order to achieve this outcome, the analysis aimed at identifying the micro-political processes apparent within Adam's story and the development of a theoretical framework that specified the "the causes, conditions, and consequences" of such processes (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 160).

Towards this end, the authors adopted what Maykut and Morehouse (1994) described as a process of 'indwelling'. This involved immersing ourselves in the data in order to understand Adam's point of view from an empathetic perspective. The process also involved dividing the transcripts into appropriate pieces of information, known as meaning units. These units were related to Adam's understandings of his behaviour and that of others within the coaching environment at Hollington F.C. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The meaning units were then organised into distinct groupings known as properties according to the common features that were apparent between them. Finally, the analysis proceeded to a higher level of abstraction, which involved comparing properties so organising them into larger and more embracing

categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process of interpretation also involved transcending the factual data to develop a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon in question (Wolcott, 1995). This entailed reconstructing Adam's story and identifying the factors that shaped, influenced and impacted upon his perceptions and behaviours. Here, 'analytical memos' were used to make preliminary connections to various theoretical concepts that might explain the key issues evident within the data (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

### *Narrative presentation of the data*

A narrative approach was used to present the data, as it is capable of shedding light upon the complex and often ambiguous nature of social interaction (Author C, 2009). We believe that narrative provides a valuable tool for describing and interpreting Adam's lifeworld, as it enables us to 'see' and 'feel' how he understood his own motivations and behaviours, as well as the actions of others at Hollington F.C. However, we recognise that the process of constructing written stories from interview transcripts is fraught with opportunities for the researchers' voice(s) to dominate (Sparkes, 2002). Consequently, a number of approaches were utilised to present a narrative that had a greater feel for the issues and events that Adam considered to be important. Hence, Adam was given numerous opportunities to read drafts of the article and was invited to comment on them, not only in terms of the accuracy of the data presented but also of the theoretical interpretations. Taking the findings and theoretical explanation back to Adam was not considered a test of truth but an opportunity for reflexive elaboration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, a brief reflective log was kept by the principal researcher (to be later discussed by the research team) and updated at the end of each interview. These journal entries served both as a means of concept clarification and as a reflexive vehicle through which Adam's evolving story was constantly revisited and progressively structured (Author A & Author B, 2009).

## **Results**

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

From the outset, Adam openly admitted that he was unprepared for the micro-political realities he was to experience at Hollington F.C. When he took up his position at the Club he was excited at the prospect of working with a high profile Manager and a well established coaching staff. Adam noted how he was "absolutely elated" at his appointment; "it was a total dream come true, something that I wanted to do ever since I started coaching". Although working at such a high level made Adam a little anxious, he anticipated being welcomed and accepted by his new colleagues, especially given the Manager's apparent open mindedness to the potential role of sports science at the club. He based this perception on the seemingly positive interactions experienced during the selection process; "I thought I had won the coaching team over...after all they gave me the job". This assessment was soon to be challenged, as Adam was unaware of the reality that he was considered to be a financially expedient appointment, and not the Manager's 'first choice' for the role; something that he would not come to learn until some time later.

Adam's first day at work began during the team's participation in an overseas pre-season tournament. Here, Adam was reacquainted with the coaching team, which consisted of the Manager, two assistant coaches, a goal-keeping coach, three physiotherapists, and a sports science consultant. Adam knew that most of the coaching staff and one of the physiotherapists had been working together for over 15 years. It soon became clear that they formed a 'close knit' group, linked by a strong

social bond. Adam recounted one of his first meetings with this group, where he learnt that his integration into the coaching 'team' would not be as straightforward as he had initially imagined:

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

It was an obvious 'brush off', and presented Adam with an immediate dilemma; how to best portray himself to his colleagues to gain their acceptance; how to break into the group. In response, Adam chose to present a "formal" and "professional" face, whereby he limited his interactions and utterances to the performance of individual players and the team. Although he thought he made positive early impressions, this perception was soon to change. For example, at one training session, he asked the goal-keeping coach and senior physiotherapist some questions about the players' training programme. The former turned sharply and challenged Adam; "how many years coaching experience have you got? We've been working in this game a long time; maybe you should learn a bit more before you start questioning our judgment". The hostility shocked him. His projection of a 'professional' front had obviously not had the desired impact. Rather than helping to build relationships with colleagues, it had created a barrier between them. In his own words:

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

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

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

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

Hollington F.C. began their competitive fixtures with an away game. Adam travelled with the team to the hotel the evening before the match. Once at the hotel, Adam busied himself preparing some match-day equipment in the communal area. Suddenly, the goalkeeping coach burst into the room, shouting “Where the hell is everything? Why has there been no evening food prepared for the players?” Adam had no answer; he didn’t even know why he was being asked such questions. In his own words:

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

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

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

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

As the season progressed, the sports science consultant appeared to be spending more and more time at the Club. Adam had met the consultant during his interview and had some contact with him during the early stages of his work at Hollington. Adam considered the consultant to have been a supportive figure; “honestly, he was very good. He really backed me to get the position”. Given Adam’s experiences with the goal-keeping coach and his rapidly growing understanding of the contextual political terrain, he identified the consultant as a potential ally. He, therefore, turned to him for advice on professional and non-professional matters, and appreciated the guidance given. Adam was happy that he had, at least, one relatively constructive relationship with another member of the coaching team.

However, Adam soon became aware of a subtle but significant alteration in the consultant’s relationship both with him and with the rest of the coaching team. Rather than providing advice and suggestions to Adam, the consultant was now engaging directly with the Manager and the coaches. Suddenly, decisions about conditioning work and training loads, what Adam perceived as being ‘his’ area, were being taken without his input or involvement. Adam was “cut out of the loop”; his role being relegated to one of technician, of simply putting another’s training plans into action. He noted that “it was weird. Suddenly he was not there to help or to talk to. Rather, I was now his mouth piece, somebody he could use”. Not surprisingly, Adam felt confused and bewildered; that he had been “stabbed in the back”. Although his initial reaction was one of anger, he came to believe that he “was simply politically outmanoeuvred”. A subsequent meeting between the Manager and the consultant led him to see just how much of a peripheral and potentially expendable figure he had become. Here, Adam not only became painfully aware of the fact that

he was not the first choice for the role, but he also began to question if there had ever been any sense of permanency in his appointment. In his own words:

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

*Approaching the final whistle: The last ditch effort*

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

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

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

I started to make a few formal presentations. For example, with the goal-keeping coach, I would make a presentation very goal-keeping specific. The data, information, practical examples were all directly related to goal-keeping. At the time, I thought that worked really well, as he seemed to be very impressed by what I was doing.

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

Despite Adam's best efforts to build relationships and gain acceptance, others' input and opinions were increasingly being drawn upon by the Manager. Adam had busied himself putting together a series of ideas for the next pre-season training programme, whilst having had a number of what he considered to be productive

meetings with the sport science consultant. Despite these apparently positive overtures, Adam found himself excluded from the pre-season planning meeting. This was tantamount to the end of his time at the club.

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

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

It was at this time that Adam also started to notice some understated resistance towards him from other members of the coaching staff. The senior physiotherapist and goal-keeping coach once again became much less willing to engage with him. For example,

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

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

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

While Adam's experiences at Hollington F.C. were not as he imagined or hoped that they would be, he believed that his time at the Club was a valuable form of

professional development. In particular, he highlighted how it made him consider the importance of the 'political landscape', and the relationship building that takes place within it. He noted that:

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

### Discussion

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

This was perhaps best illustrated by the fluid nature of his relationships with the goal-keeping coach and the sports science consultant. Here, Adam's experiences mirror the negative patterns of social interaction found among teachers, including the use of aggressive and manipulative tactics to attain individual ends at the expense of others (Blase & Anderson, 1995). This certainly seemed to be the case with the sport science consultant, who changed from someone Adam believed to be a confidant to someone who outmanoeuvred him to progress his own standing. Similarly, Adam considered the goal-keeping coach and senior physiotherapist to, at various times, engage with him, ignore him and sabotage his credibility, as they deemed necessary.

According to Roderick (2006a), uncertainty and ambiguity form central features of professional football; a competitive labour market characterised by a constant surplus of talent often employed on limited tenure. To deal with such insecurities, actors invariably engage in numerous coping strategies to advance their respective causes. These include cultivating allies to whom they can turn if they perceive their status to be under threat, and dramaturgical selves in order to maintain stable, masculine workplace identities. Although Roderick's (2006b) work was principally carried out from the perspectives of players, it throws light on a more general world of fragility, constant scrutiny and uncertainty. Within it, both players and staff were found to be continually navigating their way around the contextual social network in which they were bound, in order to maintain or improve their standing. Such a description resonates with Cushion and Author C's (2006, p. 148) depiction of professional football as a context typified by a dominating 'legitimised'

authority which was used “to reproduce existing configurations of privilege”. It was this problematic workplace that Adam entered, largely ignorant of its contested, power-ridden nature.

The dilemmas Adam faced in terms of how to best present himself to his new colleagues illustrates the value of using Goffman’s (1959) social thought to examine coaching practice. To date, the direct application of Goffman’s work to sports coaching has revealed that, in their efforts to obtain the ‘respect’ of key contextual stakeholders, coaches frequently engage in ‘face work’ (e.g., Author C, 2006). This includes the telling of white lies, projecting a friendly image and using (self-depreciating) humour (Author C et al., 2010). In relation to Adam’s choice to initially engage with his colleagues in a very confident ‘professional’ manner, the ‘front’ presented failed to live up to the behavioural expectations of his role set, leading to inter-personal tension (Rodham, 2000). This situation was further exacerbated by Adam’s unawareness of the fact that he was not the ‘first choice’ candidate for the role until later on in his tenure at the Club. It could be suggested that Adam failed to properly observe the rituals of deference (respect for others) and demeanour (respect for the role) required to maintain the interactional order within the Club setting (Goffman, 1967). In this respect, Goffman (1959) has suggested that first impressions, which are based upon perceptions of the observed’s reputation, knowledge and skills, are significant in terms of their potential for putting human interaction on the wrong or right track. The power of first impressions (and their legacy) looms large in Adam’s story especially with regard to how the ‘front’ he initially presented was sceptically treated by the senior physiotherapist and goal-keeping coach. The tense nature of Adam’s relationships with these senior staff may have been intensified by their perceptions of him as lacking the ‘cultural capital’ to act in the ‘professional’, confident way he did (Bourdieu, 1990).

Adam’s experiences could also be considered symptomatic of the anti-intellectual culture that has traditionally permeated football in the United Kingdom (Gearing, 1999; Kelly, 2008; Parker, 2000). Here, playing experience has historically been regarded as the essential criterion for coaching and management at the elite level, with formal qualifications or an academic background being largely treated with suspicion and distrust (Kelly, 2008). As such, Adam’s ‘valueless’ educational capital as a sport science graduate and his lack of a professional playing career or proven experience in professional football somewhat explain why he was marginalised by his more ‘traditional’ colleagues (Kelly, 2008). Adam’s experiences here then reflect the need to consider the importance of first impressions and appropriate situated identities in order to proceed with interaction in a sub-cultural (coaching) context. Unfortunately, Adam never recovered from the way in which he and his behaviours were initially perceived by the significant others at Hollington F.C.

According to Garfinkel (1967), the culture witnessed at Hollington far from being rationally conceived, was a local accomplishment rooted in socially crafted interaction. Hence, any social setting can be taken as a self-organizing entity produced through the moment-to-moment work of society’s members (ibid.). In this respect, context is not just a passive backdrop to action. Rather, action both shapes and is shaped by context, making both mutually determinative (Garfinkel, 1967). Taken as such, the censorious, paranoid sub-culture of professional football impacted heavily on Adam, not only in terms of his view of self as a contextual stranger but also his decision (in an effort to counter that perception) to adopt an initial overly-assured social performance. Adam’s marginal position can also be somewhat explained by Garfinkel’s notions of shame and status degradation. Shame in this context referred to

an act that brings a lack of respect from others, while degradation focused on the shared point of view of those who degrade. As a consequence of his initially perceived supercilious behaviour then, Adam was subject to a 'degradation ceremony'; a "communicative action where the identity of an actor is transferred into something that is looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types" (Garfinkel, 1956, p.420). For the group, shame is the 'individuator' (Garfinkel, 1956); a mechanism of exclusion. In this respect, it was a contextual or social reaction to a perceived threat or 'deviance', with Adam being further denounced as an outsider (Garfinkel, 1967).

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

Adam's stigmatisation appeared to partly result from his inability to read the social frames within which action occurs. Goffman (1974) referred to such behavioural frames as definitions of a situation which are built up in accordance with certain event-governing principles; in other words, frames are the often unconscious structures which guide the perception of reality. Adam then, appeared to misconstrue or ignore the regularities and rules that guided contextual practice, and the meanings such rules held for the staff at Hollington F.C.. In Garfinkel's (1967) terms, he had not understood or correctly read the implicit, taken-for-granted forms of knowledge that give order to everyday interactions. This proved to be a costly error in light of the pressurized, unstable and often paranoid world of professional football (Roderick, 2006a, 2006b).

Despite his ultimate dismissal, Adam's account also draws attention to his increasing 'micro-political literacy' during his time at Hollington (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a); the process by which he learnt to read the micro-political landscape of the football Club and write himself into it (Ball, 1987). While Adam was clearly influenced by context, he nevertheless consciously attempted to influence the structures in which he operated (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Here, in order to deal with his vulnerability and to protect his professional interests, Adam sought to create working conditions where the quality of his collegial and professional interactions would allow him to fulfil his role in an effective and meaningful manner (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Towards this end, Adam tried to develop functional relationships with the Manager, the senior physiotherapist and the goal-keeping coach; those he identified as the critical reality makers within the environment (Ball, 1987). For example, he began to participate in the post-training football games, and in the 'banter' which occupied a central position within the Club's culture. He did so principally through self-depreciating humour. Rather like the surgeon in Goffman's (1969) classic text *'Where the action is'*, Adam hoped to improve his working

relations by presenting his 'human side'. While he perceived this to be successful in the short-term, the strategy ultimately failed. It failed because he did not receive the professional recognition necessary to survive in the context; he simply hadn't the capital or the appropriate social performance in his repertoire (Boudieu, 1990).

To repair his identity and subsequently improve his professional standing and deal with the uncertainty of his position, Adam also sought opportunities to have his competencies recognised by colleagues (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). In particular, he used various learning materials to present a capable and knowledgeable 'front' (Goffman, 1959). This was not simply a pedagogical choice, but also a strategic action aimed at advertising his 'self' as a hardworking and creative professional (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Similar to his efforts to spend more social time in the company of key figures, Adam's actions here could be understood as a further attempt of a stigmatised individual to enhance his desirability to the other members of the coaching group (Goffman, 1963).

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

### Conclusion

While we recognise the limitations of the single-case design utilised in this study, our intention was not to provide formulaic generalisations about the nature of coaching or the best ways to deal with the issues presented (Yin, 2009). We also acknowledge that Adam's story is written from a single perspective; no doubt the other actors who feature within it would have different versions. This lack of triangulation can perhaps be considered a limitation. Nevertheless, we hope that recounting Adam's story, and our subsequent analysis of it, can be the subject of wider critical discussion in terms of how we think about the micro-political nature of sports coaching. The findings and analysis presented in this study then, should be considered as suggestive as opposed to conclusive in nature (Crotty, 1998).

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

strict pecking order existed at Hollington F.C. which governed who could speak to whom, when and where; a structure which signified the unwritten rules of social context, imperatives which Adam had to learn the hard way. It is a depiction of professional football as a cronied, power-driven, insecure context (Roderick, 2006a; Cushion and Author C, 2006), which yields considerable influence over human agency. Consequently, Adam's tale can be seen as the product of both individual and collective practical reasonings (Wacquant, 2004).

Adam's story also gives further credence to the need to engage with a critical sociology of sports coaching. Hence, it supports the call to engage with coaching away from its common portrayal of 'heroic' ascent and achievement. Rather, coaching should also be examined through its least known and spectacular side, through its minute and mundane actions that produce and reproduce its reality (Author B & Author C, 2009b). Such work would further the portrayal of coaching as the problematic institution it is; one that is overloaded with functions and relationships that do not reveal themselves easily (Wacquant, 2004). A continued failure to do so will only result in a distorted utopian view of a very complex activity (Author B & Author C, 2009b). In conclusion then, we urge scholars to give serious consideration to how coaches understand the micro-political nature of their work and the strategies they use to deal with it (Author B & Author C, 2009a). Doing so, would allow a deeper understanding of the interactions that take place between coach and context, in addition to better illustrating what is at stake for coaches when they practice (Author B & Author C, 2009).

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