Humour in sports coaching: 'It's a funny old game'

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper was to investigate the use and manifestation of humour within sports coaching. This was particularly in light of the social significance of humour as a critical component in cultural creation and negotiation. Data were gathered from a ten-month ethnographic study that tracked the players and coaches of Senghenydd City Football Club (a pseudonym) over the course of a full season. Precise methods of data collection included participant observation, reflective personal field notes, and ethnographic film. The results demonstrated the dominating presence of both 'inclusionary putdowns' and 'disciplinary humour', particularly in relation to how they contributed to the production and maintenance of the social order. Finally, a reflective conclusion discusses the temporal nature of the collective understanding evident amongst the group at Senghenydd, and its effect on the humour evident. In doing so, the work contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the social role of humour within sports coaching.

Key words: Sports coaching; humour; ethnography, putdowns.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a growing interest in the role that humour plays in occupational settings. Examples here include Crawley's (2004) study of prison life, Bolton's (2001) work on nursing, Godfrey's (2016) exploration of the military, Sanders's (2004) research into sex workers' practices, and Scott's (2007) analysis of emergency personnel, to name but a few. The principal focus has been on humour's role as a coping or 'stress reduction' strategy (Scott, 2007), thus emphasising its function as a mechanism to retain a stable emotional climate. Such inquiry has developed the thesis that individuals involved in so-called extreme professions perform considerable 'emotion work' (Sanders, 2004), thus positioning humour as a resource used by occupational groups to define beliefs, actions and values.

Marking its prevalence in everyday life, humour's role in other professions has also been investigated in terms of negotiating difficult relationships and conditions (see Fine & De Soucey [2005] for a fuller discussion). Despite such growth, a profession which has yet to be engaged with in this way is that of sports coaching. This would seem an unwarranted neglect for three principal reasons. The first relates to the widespread role that organised sports and, hence, coaching currently play in social life (for example, a recent study found there were over 1.3. million registered coaches delivering to over 7 million participants in the UK [Sports Coach UK, 2016]). The second concerns the inherent pathos, insecurity and ambiguity involved in what coaches actually do (e.g., AUTHOR, 2015, 2016), hence, positioning coaching as an activity at or near the 'edge of chaos' (AUTHOR, 2006). The third point is the now widespread belief that coaching is a negotiated and problematic social practice; an activity that is both situationally and consensually constructed, whilst comprising interactions between a myriad of actors in context (AUTHOR *et al.* 2013; Denison *et al.* 2015; AUTHOR 2014).

In developing this final point further, acknowledgment of coaching's collective nature has allowed sociological investigation into how coaches use their 'social competencies' to maintain and improve desired relationships (AUTHOR *et al*. 2011). It is an agenda aimed at 'shining a torch' on the 'darker' aspects of working practices, thus providing a critical understanding of the power dynamics that underpin the activity. In doing so, an appreciation for the practical wisdom of contextual interactions has been stimulated (AUTHOR 2010). It has also drawn attention to the mundane, taken-for-granted nature of coaching, and the 'play of powers' evident within the social order (Westwood 2002; Purdy *et al*. 2008). Such interpretive thought has encouraged a deconstruction of seemingly ordinary practices related to what Stones (1998) referred to as the ways we manage the pressures, constraints and possibilities of action.

Humour's exclusion from the unfolding sociological deconstruction of coaching (or coaching from that of humour) would appear a serious omission, as, if social interaction is considered crucial to coaching, then humour, as an embedded element within it is a vital ingredient in the successful workings of the process (Snyder 1991; AUTHOR et al. 2004; Ronglan & Aggerholm 2013). This was a point made by AUTHOR *et al.* (2011: 185), who suggested that, due to its vibrant sociality and its insidious characteristic within social relations, an exploration of humour's "intent, manifestation and effect within the often emotionally charged world of coaching, holds very interesting possibilities". Such a view built on earlier work (e.g., Kehily & Nayak 1997; Terrion & Ashworth 2002) which positioned humour as a regulatory agent of both identity and culture. Joking, in this respect, in addition to possessing a historical character, is considered able to "smooth group interaction, [to] separate the group from outsiders, and secure the compliance of members through social control" (Fine & de Soucey 2005: 1).

The primary purpose of this paper is to investigate the use and manifestation of humour within sports coaching. This is particularly in light of the social significance of humour as a critical component in relationship negotiation and development. The focus of the study lies in examining the 'power exchanges' between and among coaches and athletes as expressed through humour and, in particular, how humour contributes to the contextual hierarchies. This is not so much in terms of superiority, integration, coping or disparagement functions which have been done elsewhere (e.g., Ronglan & Aggerholm [2013]; Aggerholm, & Ronglan [2012]), but rather how humour and its paradoxical nature enables both the evolution and reproduction of coaching's social order.

The principal value of the study lies in further uncovering the relational nature of coaching and how it is enacted (AUTHOR 2016; AUTHOR 2017); an investigation of the 'social beyond the interactional' (Crossley 2011). In this respect, greater appreciation of the multiple dyadic [humorous] relations often witnessed within coaching can help unveil the 'constitutive everyday rules' that govern the activity, particularly in terms of how such rules influence the actions and actors that comprise it (AUTHOR *et al.* 2011; Thompson *et al.* 2015). A critical deconstruction of humour can, therefore, serve as a means to better understand the micro strategies adopted by coaches to guide and respond to the people they work with, thus putting interactive relations back into this most social of jobs.

A further rationale for the study lies in exploring the possibility of humour's location within the broader sociology of emotions. Here, although humour is rarely considered an emotion per se, it is often felt and used in relation to other emotional processes, such as shame, embarrassment and joy. Here, it has not only been associated with emotional regulation (Scott et al., 2014; Samson and Gross, 2012), but forceful 'emotion work' (Sanders, 2004). The purpose here would be to further probe this connection, not only in terms of humour's position as a conscious constructed strategy, but also its involuntary

effects. Such a perspective brings together the current, rather disparate, accounts of both 'humour' (Ronglan and Aggerholm, 2013) and 'emotions' (Potrac et al., 2017) within coaching' through presenting a more integrated account of social practice. Doing so, also holds the potential to highlight how coaches engage in emotion work through humour to manage their daily dilemmas particularly in terms both breaking down and re-establishing contextual power structures.

We additionally believe the paper can contribute to the growing debate about the professionalization of sports coaching (e.g., Taylor and Garratt, 2010a, 2010b; AUTHOR et al., 2016). Building on the critique of managerialist tendencies which fail to "question the relationship between education, socialization and practice" (AUTHOR et al., 2016: 65), the work is positioned to further the temporal case for 'occupational value' as a criteria for professionalism; a value which considers coaching as a relationally caring act, dependent on the 'practical wisdom' (Flyvbjerg, 2001) of coaches. It is a perspective which lends further credence to professional practice comprising notions such as craft knowledge (Day 2014), an appreciation of the historically configured 'setting of development' (Daniels 2010), and 'tending' (Davies 1985) as opposed to the commodification of given competencies.

Finally, the study can also be seen as building upon the pioneering work of Snyder (1991) who argued that humour as manifest in social interaction is an essential ingredient in the commutative activity used by actors to deal with, and expose, the latent dimensions of any given culture. This was a point recently reiterated by Ronglan and Aggerholm (2013; 2014; Aggerholm and Ronglan 2012) who argued that humour can act as a valuable component in balancing the dogmatic structures within sport. In this sense, they proposed that humour can act as a coping mechanism to deal the pressures, tensions and anxieties within ever changing contexts (Ronglan & Aggerholm 2012); particularly those, like competitive sport, characterised by constant contestation and negotiation. Although some ground clearing

work has, therefore, been done, what is less clear are both the precise mechanisms through which such regulation is enacted, and the particular role of humour in realising such action (Terrion & Ashworth 2002).

Context and method

Setting and participants

This paper draws on a ten-month ethnographic study that tracked the players and coaches of Senghenydd City Football Club (a pseudonym); a semi-professional club based in a provincial UK city, over a full season. The Club supported a squad of 40 players, 7 coaches (of which I [the first author] was one) and 3 support staff (i.e., a strength and conditioning coach, a performance analyst, and the Club secretary). All the players were aged between 18-25 with the coaches and support staff being aged between 22 and 61.

Methods

Drawing upon interpretive ontological and epistemological assumptions, the work was situated within an ethnographic framework. In particular, three methods of data collection were used; participant observation, reflective personal field notes, and ethnographic film. Such an approach held the potential to provide a multi-layered account of the humorous world of coaching.

Ethnography places much discretion in the hands of the researcher (Wolfinger 2002); particularly in terms of what to notice, what to focus attention on, and how to record it. Consequently, an initial strategy comprised describing whatever observations were considered most noteworthy, or the most telling in relation to the aims of the work; what Wolfinger (2002) referred to as adherence to a 'salience hierarchy'. It is a strategy connected to having tacit knowledge of the subject (which, as a coach in the context, I believed I possessed) and is entwined with a recognition of the unusual. What also guided action here was Geertz's (1973) notion of 'thick description'; to study actors in their natural settings

whilst seeking to "document the world in terms of meanings" (Walsh 1998: 220). Consequently, the subsequent ethnography sought to capture interactions, language, and beliefs in relation to the abovementioned salience hierarchy (Angrosino 2007). To supplement the observations, I maintained a reflective field diary throughout the research period. The purpose here was to facilitate the research process through constantly (re) considering observations, thoughts and questions as they arose; a process of stimulated reflections leading to an extensive recycling of concepts and perspectives (Marshall & Rossman 1995). Such means allowed reflection on data already collected, and further consideration of the nature and 'accuracy' of their interpretations (Kawulich 2004).

A third research method used was that of ethnographic film. My intention for the camera was two-fold. Firstly, to secure as complete a record as possible of contextual goings on, and secondly, to act as a support mechanism or 'refresher' when I revisited my notes for analytical purposes (Harris 2010). In doing so, the camera allowed me to move freely around the Club to interact with players, coaches and support staff without fearing for the credibility of my observations. The film also allowed for a better understanding of situational complexity or the sequencing of events (Aull Davis 2008). However, being aware of the danger of falling into a two-dimensional analysis of socially bound experiences, the classical purpose of ethnographic film, was kept to the fore; that is elicitation; elicitation as related to the ability to both frame and deconstruct multi-layered meanings (Phoenix 2010: 94). In total, approximately 750 hours of field work were undertaken.

An aspect to further consider was my multiple role[s] within the study, which necessitated the constant conscious renegotiation of position (Kanuha 2000). Switching positions between being the head coach, a researcher, and a participant, proved problematic. For instance, seldom did I get the opportunity to 'work' the relational demands of the [coaching] job without questioning my ability to carry out the adopted unconventional insider

research function. My struggle principally related to adequately seeing and interpreting the context whilst coaching. Through a considerable degree of critical reflexivity, I learnt to accept my 'place' within the field through what Goffman (1963) described as realising my 'self-in-role'. Here, role identities overlapped, thus lessening the transition between *who* I was and *how* I interpreted and expressed myself as a coach, participant and researcher (AUTHOR 2013).

In line with AUTHOR (2013), I was aware of my part in constructing the context under study as much as other actors or the physical parameters evident. This was an issue of acute significance, specifically in terms of my role as a coach (i.e., as one in power) as well as a researcher in the context under study. Although it could be argued I was too close to the culture to be critical (Naples 1997), I was nonetheless, comfortable with my reflexive position as it allowed me to be part of the contextual 'fabric' whilst granting space for required criticality. Here, I constantly challenged the authority of my epistemological lens, my position as a coach, and the subsequent inquiry, so that my way of knowing and interpreting would not overly influence the findings and conclusions in a damaging way (Dwyer & Corbin, 2009). Doing so, offered me a means of writing myself into the text and, more importantly, to consider how I spoke *of* and ***for*** others within the description presented. This made me, to a certain degree, both object and subject of the work; something I became increasingly comfortable with (although never totally so) as the work unfolded.

Data analysis

The data were analysed as part of an on-going process; of constantly returning to the field notes as a whole corpus to generate a developing familiarity and interpretation (Rubin & Rubin 1995). Here, threads of commonality were searched for that laced together a tale of the sporting sub-culture observed (Emerson *et al.* 1995). In doing so, initial thoughts and considerations were refined, amended and enriched. The ethnographic film both expanded

upon and supported my original 'hunches' through allowing further reflection on the nuances of context. This process of analysis, allowed a greater engagement with reflexivity and interpretation so that more carefully crafted themes became more apparent. In this way, a move away from the more commonly used line by line inductive analysis was undertaken, to firstly identify and then deconstruct larger episodes of humorous interaction. Here, the coding undertaken was more akin to incident by incident, a scrutiny from the 'large' to the 'small' (Charmaz 2006) allowing the properties of such events to be identified and clarified (Charmaz & Mitchell 2001). In adopting this procedure, re-occurring 'humorous' episodes within the text were recognised and characterised without fracturing the data and losing the contextual essence of what was taking place. In this respect, the familiar routine and the mundane were made unfamiliar and new. Such a procedure also ensured engagement with the principles of the constant comparative method advocated by many qualitative researchers (Charmaz 2003), where existing constructions were constantly revisited in light of new data.

To further ensure rigour within the analysis, certain key characters from within the context were invited to view the work. Whilst not a total or classic 'member checking' procedure where all the participants are invited to view all the data, the intention nevertheless was similar; that is, for the principal participants to comment on the representativeness of the descriptions and interpretations of the unfolding narrative (Schultze, 2000). Adopting such a protocol allowed central individuals the opportunity to examine and [dis]agree whether an authentic representation of the views, feelings, actions and experiences of those within the context studied was forthcoming (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, two colleagues served as 'critical friends' within this phase of data gathering and interpretation. The subsequent provoking conversations often triggered further reflexive considerations not only in relation to the trustworthiness of the findings but to my role as a person in power (i.e., a coach) in

their construction Through such a process, a constant monitoring and questioning of developing interpretations was undertaken (Shenton, 2004).

As others have pointed out (e.g., AUTHOR 2018), engaging in ethnographic field work places much discretion in the hands of the researcher (Wolfinger 2002). This not only concerns what to document and how those notes should be interpreted, but also the ethics of the research practice, particularly when the researcher occupies multiple roles as was the case here. Although informed consent was obtained from all involved (as per the host university's given procedures), complete with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, this was not assumed as a once-and-for-all event. Rather, it was considered a process of constant re-negotiation as the project unfolded (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). What further guided action in terms of approximating to 'ethically appropriate' behaviour was McFee's (2010, p.157) notion of treating 'like a friend'. The sentiment is to do with acting in the best interests and well-being of participants, in addition to that of the work itself (AUTHOR, 2018).

Discussion of results

Inclusionary 'put downs'

Putdown humour has tended to be portrayed as that which derives amusement at the expense of another (see Terrion & Ashworth 2002). In contrast, the putdown related humour witnessed in this study was predominantly inclusionary in nature. Indeed, from the onset of the field work, the emergence of humour as a form of inclusion dominated interactions, suggesting the inherent teasing was a part of a caring and friendly strategy. This was somewhat in contrast to Terrion and Ashworth's (2002) work, whose putdown humour was interpreted as only demonstrating a 'veneer of consensus' (Goffman 1959). Alternatively, much of the humour witnessed in the current study was used in a genuinely affiliative manner, whereby funny, non-threating comments were used to facilitate group interaction. Crucially, however, such humour was located within an historical context. Here, the meaning

of the teasing and sarcastic remarks only had value or impact within a shared (cultural) understanding. It was this commonality that bought the intersubjective nature of humour to the fore and allowed for a joking culture through which individuals shared and developed 'funny' interactions.

Such was the case with the players on the opening day of pre-season. Here, returning players traded verbal banter, re-igniting relationships. The friendly rivalry was played out through 'ritualised' games which consisted of quick non-exclusionary put-downs. These interactions were also common between the players and the coaches. A particular example here related to Ewan, widely recognised as the team's best player. Being an ex-professional, he would be constantly challenged (physically) by his team mates. Similarly, I would often try to target a response; that is, to elicit a 'bite' *[football slang for a response]* by questioning his ability.

> *[Field Note Extract; 16th October]*
>
> *Ewan has just given the ball away, so it's his turn [to chase a ball] in the circle. As he walks in, I angle my 'putdown'.*
>
> Me: *"Bloody hell, the pro's aren't what they used to be are they lads…should have seen it in my day."*
>
> Harry: *"You going to let him say that to you?...he's done ya mate!"*
>
> Ewan: *Yes, but he's a fucking old man now";* The response is met by comedic mimicry from the group.

Having both been professional players, the putdown, while based in a degree of ridicule, simultaneously reaffirmed his status as someone 'special'. This clear 'play frame' (Gruner 1997) demonstrated the apparent paradoxical nature of the putdown; a concurrent ridiculing and reaffirmation of ability. According to Ronglan and Aggerholm (2013), such humorous performance are integral to how power relations are established and contested within existing

social structures. In the current example, this was not done to reassert authority per se (although as discussed later, this could be interpreted as a secondary function), but to allow coaches and athletes to laugh as a group so that solidarity was reinforced (Terrion & Ashforth 2002). The performance given allowed a bridging of the hierarchical social space, making interpersonal relationships somewhat equal. Such and similar interactions can also be understood in light of the classic anthropological work of Radcliffe-Brown (1940), who suggested that if humour is consistent within certain boundaries, and is defined by context, then such interpersonal relations can (and usually do) facilitate integration. This is not to say that the power between myself and the group was diminished; it was just framed through non-threatening humour.

Further evidence of such interactions were witnessed on the team bus. Here, certain players began gently ridiculing Mike, the Club President, for his slow driving;

[Field Note Extract: September 16th]

We're just about to leave. I sit in the front with Mike; Radio 2 is playing. *"Turn that off old men"* comes the shout from the back. I do one last check. *"Is everybody on?"* Ben chirps back…."I'm not". Mike smiles wryly as he changes the channels. The back of the bus is in fits of laughter. I chuckle as I open my sandwich. We start, and Mike begins to talk *"It will be tough today, decent this lot, caused us problems at home"*. I nod, wiping mayonnaise from my cheek. I catch a conversation behind me. *"Do ya think he drives this slow all the time?' 'He's h*aving *a laugh"*. *"I'm busting for a piss. Wish he'd hurry up"*.

Dan*: "Oww, Mike, you ok?"*

Mike*: "Yep…you son? Why d'ya ask? You nervous?…your arse twitching?"*

Dan: *"Na, but I just looked out the window. There's a dog pissing on the front wheel ya going that slow"*

Mike: *"Piss off you, ya cheeky little shit".*

The bus erupts. I take a gulp of drink, hiding my smile. The rest of the players join in.

"It's alright Mike, Kick off aint till 7. We got plenty of time"

"C'mon old fella, you'll be late for ya own funeral"

"It's alright mate, I didn't want pre match [meal] anyway. Cheers Mike"

Mike [following a slight pause]: *"You lot keep taking the piss why don't ya. You forget, I'll be watching you play in a few hours."*

Dan: *"Few hours?...better put ya foot down then Mike"*

Through such interaction the players used sophomoric humour to both criticise and praise Mike. If however, the seemingly critical comments were not understood in context, the unfolding interaction could have led to a 'rupturing' of the social bonds between Mike and the group. Such humour, then, was indicative of a 'joshing' (Goffman 1967) or mocking, grounded in a temporal process. In this context, the already established relationships built over time between Mike and the players enabled such acts to be understood by all so that no offence was taken. Here, the inclusionary putdowns played a part in the contestation or the 'play of powers' within the existing order, whilst never truly threatening it.

Likewise, the players used retaliatory 'put downs' as a way to establish and navigate their own relationships within the Club; but hardly ever at the expense of each other. For example, Club captain Jamie regularly used humour to construct and shape the social norms and expectation of the group. His non-hostile, funny behaviour allowed laughter with no ill intent (or apparent consequence). For instance;

[Field Note Extract: November 19th]

The players are restless as the bus is late. It's cold and wet. While the others huddle in the door way, Jamie is in the open, away from the group. He starts to dance, clapping and blowing kisses to himself while smiling and laughing out loud. He's having fun.

The others notice, and start laughing. Jamie doesn't care. He cuddles himself and smooches alone in the rain. Dan and Karl egg him on *"B (Jamie's nick name) you're an idiot. Go on B, give it some, ya clown"*. Jamie begins singing. The more the group laughs, the more Jamie 'plays up'.

Although not obviously inclusionary, the neutrality of the humour displayed allowed others to be included within the exchange. According to Volosinov (1973), Jamie manipulated the interplay of the waiting 'audience' to become the 'class clown'; the humour displayed allowed his identity formation which was, in turn, one the group expected, shared and understood. Having said that, it could be argued that the collaborative features of Jamie's performance differentiated the group from outsiders. Hence, it unintentionally contained a degree of exclusivity, as an understanding of his rather wayward behaviour could necessarily not be shared or understood by all. Nevertheless, Jamie's actions both secured the agreement of other players through shared association (Fine & de Soucey 2005), whilst (rather paradoxically perhaps) contributing to the production of social hierarchies (i.e., in positioning himself as separate). Nevertheless, the surreptitious understanding of the humorous interactions (Kamler 1999) were reflective of the 'social glue' of the group; actions that created and recreated a collective common ground. Doing so, allowed the group to be [re]produced through its members' everyday usage of humour (Shardakova 2013). On the other hand, it also reinforced Jamie as one of the 'group leaders', thus highlighting such actions' multifarious effects.

Such discursive, humorous practices (as outlined) allowed individuals not only to see humour beyond its amusing tendencies, but also to how they could negotiate and construct the structural borders of any given context (Hobday-Kusch & McVittie 2002). The point made relates to how 'significant' individuals take on and play 'roles' in order to reify or challenge power relations. In this respect, Jamie's behaviour outwardly played with humour's

ambiguous nature in a manner that was unthreatening in its playfulness, yet, probed (and re-created) the underlying socio-cultural norms of the group (Duggan 2002). A point of interest here related to how 'others' within the group acknowledged and partook in such humorous practices so that the pattern of interaction[s] became a valued form of play; acts that served to strengthen the identity of the collective (Terrion & Ashforth 2002). That such practice was generally understood as 'the way things were' gave members the confidence to engage in further interpersonal putdowns; a practice not limited to being just among the players, as the following interaction between Andy, the physio, Mark and Steve, two senior players indicates;

> *[Field Note Extract: 19ᵗʰ July]*
>
> *[Mark is lying on the physio's table having his ankle strapped, when Steve walks in].*
>
> Steve *"Hi mate, good summer?"*
>
> Mark *"Yes, went away with the missus….. A week in Turkey"*
>
> Steve *"You still with her?....Thought she pied you off ages ago!"*
>
> Andy *(the Physio) "You tell him Marco pal, she's a proper WAG, only sleeps with the best".*

Such exchanges echo the work of Smith and Berg (1987), where a 'paradox of identity' was reported, as individuals displayed a desire for both a group and an individual identity. Nevertheless, the historical nature of such joking relations allowed individuals to share an 'unspoken' understanding of the egalitarian interactions that shaped the group's culture.

This playful teasing was a regular occurrence within Senghenydd, which, if taken literally, could be interpreted as demeaning. In practice, however, it was anything but. Having said that, the humour evident was often used as a way of playing on individual insecurities, particularly among the coaches. Here, typical interactions were characterised by light, non-threatening putdowns which allowed the coaches to gloss over and laugh together at

simultaneously negotiated challenges and experiences. Such exchanges regulated the implicit rules and the mutual understanding of what it was like to be a coach at the Club. They were means of 'social survival' for the coaches, of expressing and drawing solidarity in this most anxious of jobs. This was evident during a telephone conversation between myself and other staff members.

[Field Note Extract: October 1st]- In the car on the way to training.

I'm stuck in traffic. *Shit,* I'm late for training. I call John. *"Hello, John?"*

"Na, its Mike"

Me: *"Hi mate, it's me. All ok today... John about?"*

Mike: *"Yeah, all good... He's still out there, I'll get him now."*

I can hear John in the back ground. *"Tell him two minutes"*

The lights turn green. I quickly change gear so I can talk to John.

Me: *"John, you ok? "Sorry I missed today. Fucking doctors was a nightmare".*

John: (in a friendly tone) *"No worries....It's fine. Session was decent. Chaz looked good this morning, he really pushed the pace".*

Me: *"Yeah, his touch is quality. What about the rest?"*

John: *"They did well. (He giggles) always seem to train well when you're not here"*

Mike chips in: *"Tell him, I've noticed that too... funny that."*

Me: *"Alright, I get the message. Stop pissing about"*

John (in a more stern, yet smug voice) *"Na serious, even the Chairman thought so. He popped his head in about 11. Asked where ya were. Said he aint seen you in a while....like trying to find rocking horse shit"*

Me: *"Shut up knob head, he never".*

John: *"He did...Honest, on me dog's life"*

Me: *"Now I know ya taking the piss"*

Mike (again in the background): *"He mentioned something about you might as well resign. Results not the best, missing training"*

Me: (raising the tone) *"I, I bet he did. If anyone's off then it's you.*

Mike (to John and Gaz): *"He's biting fella's, he must be hungry"*

Laughter breaks out in the background. I lose signal. The welcoming committee waits for me in the car park. John smiles. *"Bit touchy then Boss weren't ya? Chairman said he'll catch you later"*.

Here, the power dynamics changed as I became the derided one. Without the shared, historical context of the humorous anecdotes, such public criticism could have been deemed rebellious. Yet, the nature of the joke telling allowed the other coaches to 'invert' the power relations without fearing any severe or lasting consequences (Crawford 2003). Here exchanges were 'framed' and 'shaped' by the acceptance of a given humorous past. This links to the notion of indexicallity as prescribed by Garfinkel (1967); that is, for the humorous exchanges to make appropriate sense there must be some kind of contextual, shared knowledge. Such indexicality was engineered through prior (sedimented) interactions (Crossley 2011), the nature of the resultant relationships, and the biographies of those that operated in the culture. It was this sense-making and the grasping of a joint understanding (of the joke) that allowed the players and coaches of Senghenydd a primordial reasoning of the social rules that helped inform and govern the context (Heritage 2008).

At Senghenydd City FC then, interaction through humour was considered a vital communicative strategy that gave individuals a sense of belonging and meaning. Additionally, the humorous anecdotes and banter simultaneously reinforced and challenged the status quo, where group members would 'playfully' test and express the latent tensions in a relatively non-threatening manner (Hatch 1997). Such acts were used as a way of reaffirming or renegotiating individuals' social positions within the said order. The nature of

the humour employed also allowed the coaches to frame, reframe and generally defuse delicate situations. This was the case when the coaches used inclusionary remarks to lighten the mood. Knowing how to interpret the witty comments and practices the players engaged in, the coaches readily used mild sarcastic banter to mollify potentially sensitive encounters. In doing so, humour was utilised to facilitate a group 'togetherness'. Such an understanding of humour allowed for critique as witnessed in the following interaction; one that the players both dreaded and felt was warranted:

[Field Note Extract: December 6th, 2012]

The damp, cold air matches the training. Yesterday's poor performance has affected the group. Max, in particular, is suffering. He stands alone stretching. He knows he cost us. As the session unfolds the obvious spark is missing. I call the group in.

Me: "*Ok, I know the problem. Yesterday has gone. If we carry on like this, forget Saturday, we can just give 'em three points"…(long pause) is that what you want?* There's a shaking of heads…"*I didn't think so…Let's sort this out, there wasn't too much wrong, defensively we looked strong, good shape, the line was nice and high. Midfield moved the ball quickly and we had decent movement up top…(another long pause). Just a shame Max had a shitter in goal*". The players' heads turn quickly. Max looks up, smiles nervously, hopefully. I look at him; he's unsure whether to hold the stare. I wink, "*Don't worry mate, even the best have a bad day*"

The playful antagonism was non-threating, and allowed Max to regain recognition from the group. The point made is that while my comment could have been considered derogatory, it was rooted in the locally constructed discourse; one collectively created, sustained and understood. In using language that was 'sanctioned' and acknowledged as a cultural 'code', the group's identity was thus facilitated, further embedding the players' understanding of contextual unspoken rules (Terrion & Ashworth 2002). Humour then, was used as a cultural

'lubricant' (Trice & Beyer 1993) to maintain a common identity, and a balance where aspects such as confidence, vulnerability and trust were continually reaffirmed (and sometimes challenged). This collective function of humour signalled a friendship amongst the group, whereby everyday interactions were played out in an inclusive manner that was symbolic of the beliefs, behaviours and culture under study (Zijderveld 1968).

Disciplinary humour

In addition to the presence of 'inclusionary putdowns', disciplinary humour was also evident within the study, as a communicative act to gain and-regain control; that is, to [re]affirm social boundaries and shape existing relations. Such humour was an authoritative maxim for those in power to influence the context. Here, much like the work of Lockyer and Pickering (2008), group members used light-hearted, disciplinary banter to 'de-stabilise' others' standing within the order. For instance, Ben's (a young trialist) rather arrogant nature and poor punctuality had become an issue. Consequently, on returning from an early morning swimming session, he found his clothes taped together and a large clock [from the dressing room wall] hung over his peg. He subsequently became known as 'Big Time' Ben; a tag of warning disdain against those who dared abuse established norms. In this way, humour was used to as a means of social discipline to ensure cultural adherence (Billig 2005). The players would thus often use humour, through culturally specific language (e.g., quirky comments related to poor performance or appearance) to berate others who challenged the status quo.

Defiance of expected behaviour was also countered by staff. For example, on one occasion, Ewan was unable to attend a particular training session due to a previously arranged golf event. On his return to training, and cautious not to fuel further tension amongst the group, he was reminded of his recent absence.

Field note extract [March 1ˢᵗ]

[It's been a good session, the players have trained well].

"Dan, can you pull it back? Recycle possession through Ewan. That's a great ball lad...Ewan, get side on, two touch.....two touch I said, c'mon!! You gotta move it quicker son. Ok, yellows in [middle of possession square]. Ewan, you go floater. Right, let's get this going. [Ewan hits a long, diagonal pass which goes out of play*]. "Jesus Ewan, I hope you don't hit your 3 iron like that...[long pause]. Leave the golf to Sevvy mate!"*

Considerate use of such disciplinary humour is, according to Ronglan and Aggerholm (2013), a guise that allows individuals to increase influence over people and processes. Here, through humour's disciplinary tendencies, Ewan was both reminded of the standards expected while his insecurities to achieve them was provoked. Similarly, humour was used to counter and quash the discourse of those rebelling, thus reinforcing existing power relations. For example;

Field note extract [March 31ˢᵗ]

[It's half time, we sit in a cramped dressing room. Rob, the striker, has had a frustrating 45 minutes]

"Rob, ya gotta stay in between the lines of the 18 yard box, ya killing us son". He shakes his head, unrepentant. Somewhat aggrieved, I asked him about his role in the team. *"To score goals"* came his cocky reply. It drew a few chuckles from team mates. As was leaving the dressing room, I reminded him within earshot of all, to *"work the line, play on the shoulder...coz first half you looked as if you were born offside".*

Here, the disciplinary function of humour was used to deliver a message in language all could understand. The intention was to magnify the meaning of the message without engaging in conflict. Disciplinary practices in this sense resonate with the work of Zelizer (2010), who argued that it is the underlying tone and delivery of such utterances that hold the power in terms how a particular message is given and understood within context. At Senghenydd, the

discipline was often encased in wit, simultaneously giving credence to light heartedness and an unequivocal message of discontent.

Having said that, as opposed to subtle employment, disciplinary humour was sometimes used in more direct and explicit ways. In such instances, it was often the shock value of what was uttered that had effect. John [the 1st team coach] for example, vented his anger through the deliberate use of such repressive wit.

Field note extract [April 5th]

The players sit, cold and wet, the game has finished. We've won, but the performance was poor. I've spoken with the team; the rest is left to John.

"This is about attitude, just attitude. I don't doubt we can play, I know you can play. But gentleman, [John raises his glasses onto his forehead]…the want, the desire to win? Ok, so you have won today but my question then is…can you get the ball down on the floor and fuckin' play? It takes more arsehole sometimes to get it down and play. More than winning headers or running the extra five yards. The game is analysed fellas, you saw the cameras. Today, the space was there, it was out wide but we didn't exploit that. The performance wasn't right because some of you had your heads up your arses…and let me ask the question…[long pause] Did you enjoy the view? Cos, from where I was standing it was shit; just shit in every way!

John's personal castigation served as a timely reminder that such play or performance would not be tolerated. The point relates to the way that individuals use humorous metaphors to express annoyance and discipline. Seen in this way, the paradoxical nature of humour allowed those in control (e.g., coaches) means to [re]inforce dominant values and maintain power relationships over the group culture, whilst not destroying the inclusionary, supportive element previously alluded to (Holmes 2000).

Disciplinary humour then certainly existed within the context under study, particularly as related to the cultural issues of regulation, power and control. Such a thread, highlights how culture, and the individuals within it, can use (degrees of) ridicule to uphold the social norms of conduct and the conventions of meaning embedded within the group (Billig 2005). Such was the case when Alan (a player) decided to mock me after a game.

Field note extract [April 2nd]

[I'm in the front of the mini bus, Jamie, the team captain, is driving. I can see Alan through the driver's mirror; he is in full flow, mimicking the coaches to the amusement of the other players. I shout to the back of the bus]

"Oi, Alan, Big man, I know it's tough when you play badly...but just accept it. It's tough for me too. Coaching you makes me a better coach though, coz I have to work harder...[pause] Take that caravan off your back and maybe we might start winning things!"

Due to his enigmatic character, Alan would often use humour in what I perceived to be quite disruptive ways. He challenged the status quo by crossing the communicative boundary that defined the inherent power relations of the group. My response (above) was calculated to quasi-alienate him, with the disparaging comment meant to go beyond amusement to both re-establish hierarchy and deter further challenge. Humour in this instance, served as a timely reminder to the group that contesting unwritten rules afforded those in power ways to respond with their own gestures. In doing so, others' status in the hierarchy was (re)confirmed and compliance over subordination re-established.

Conclusion

No doubt, some of the findings from the study echo those from previous work (e.g., Kehily & Nayak's [1997] related to humour as an organising principle; Terrion & Ashworth's [2002] in terms of temporary group identity development). Similarly, we are mindful of what can be

claimed from a single case. However, the results also build on such writings; for example, in highlighting the manifestation and development of inclusionary humour over time. In this regards, the paper goes further than the illusionary or veneer consensus forged through 'putdown' humour as reported by Terrion and Ashworth (2002), to articulating how such initial accord can look in nurtured maturity. Within this longitudinal study then, humour primarily appeared as a unifying force amongst 'friends', where 'inclusionary putdowns' loomed large. Through its affiliative nature, and the group's shared, historical understanding, individuals were comfortable and 'genuine' in terms of their use and acceptance of 'disparaging' comments. This is not to present the players at Senghenydd as cultural dupes, devoid of agency. Indeed, proof existed of personal trajectories, with a certain dissonance sometimes evidenced between external structures and private dispositions (witness the case of 'Big Time Ben' cited earlier). The point made, however, is that the humour embedded in the culture prompted individual reflexivity upon contextual behaviour, through which the players evolved their subjectivities to engage in the desired collective work. As such, those on the receiving end of verbal 'barbs' understood them as a part of the group narrative, thus allowing a reaffirming of communal values to take place. In this inclusionary sense, group members were seen to accept the 'rules' of their culturally defined 'joke book', so that social bonds were maintained (Charman 2013). It could, thus, be argued that humour acted as a mode to conformity. This use of humour, however, also sanctioned members to challenge the complexities associated with intra group relationships, whilst simultaneously allowing means to defuse such challenges. In many ways then, humour was a social lubricant for the developed and developing cultural identity of Senghenydd FC

To paint a purely functional picture of humour's role at the Club, however, would be somewhat misleading, as an associated darker, discipline-related side was also evident. Such a deployment reflects the work of Franzen and Aronsson (2013) who claimed humour as a

central strategy in maintaining or imposing order. However, even when appearing as discipline, the humour used at Senghenydd was neither particularly sinister nor aimed to humiliate per se (e.g., Billig 2005). Rather, and in building on existing work, the chastising remarks tended to serve a dual purpose of sustaining the 'jokey' nature of the context whilst at the same time reaffirming power structures and expectations. In addition, such behaviour at the Club wasn't limited to the coaches, as instances occurred where the players themselves used oppressive humour to regulate other team members; albeit often delivered through more subtle idiosyncratic measures (Holmes 2000).

Furthermore, the coaches utilised disciplinary humour as a corrective function amongst themselves. Here, the 'seriousness' of humour was used to address delicate topics so that no offense would be taken. Such a ploy resonates with the work of Crawford (2003) who suggested that the constructs of humour offer ways in which complaints or other sensitive matters can be discussed in a disguised and deniable form, ensuring that social expectancies are [re]established in an appropriate manner. Through such means, the coaches at Senghenydd used humour as a performance (Ronglan & Aggerholm 2014), with an inherent teasing being inherent within the artfulness of the act (Drew 1987).

Acknowledging the recent interest in the subject, this paper furthers the scrutiny and critique of humour and its role in the dynamic, relational coaching environment. Such work allows for further engagement with the collective nature of coaching, where multiple stakeholders (e.g., coaches, players, support staff) use various social practices, like humour, to preserve their shared dignity, purpose and ways of working. The findings also provide further insight into how coaching cultures are actively both constructed and enacted (AUTHOR 2015). Consequently, through a detailed articulation of practice, the study contributes not only to a deconstruction but also a reconstruction of coaching practice. This is

particularly in terms of re-orientating our views of humour as an active, conscious means through which developmental issues are resolved, and sporting cultures are maintained.

In a broader context, the study also contributes to the examination of humour, not just as a coping or regulatory strategy but as cultural fabric. Here, and borrowing from Fine and De Soucey (2005), joking and humour come to exemplify the life or case being investigated. Although an interesting beginning, such analysis requires additional work from a variety of contexts before more concrete conclusions can be drawn. The findings from the current study also further the case for sports coaching as fertile terrain for sociologists of the work place to explore. In this respect, the time may well be ripe for coaching to enter the mainstream sociological consciousness as a place where power, interaction, and work-related 'social things' are both embodied and embedded. Similarly, the paper points a way forward in the challenging task of creating and introducing novel concepts from data, such as that of inclusionary putdowns, thus making a valued contribution to the sociological understanding of humour in occupational settings.

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