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To cite this article: Christian Nicholas Edwards & Robyn L. Jones (2022): Humour, agency and the [re]negotiation of social order within workplace settings, Sports Coaching Review, DOI: [10.1080/21640629.2022.2074246](https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2022.2074246)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2022.2074246>



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Published online: 19 May 2022.



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Humour, agency and the [re]negotiation of social order within workplace settings

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to explore the role and function of humour within sports coaching from a symbolic interactionist perspective. This was particularly in light of the structure of humour and how its resulting [inter]actions prevented as well as facilitated the advancement of individual agency. Data were gathered from a ten-month ethnographic study that traced the players and coaches of Senghenydd City Football Club (pseudonym) over the course of a competitive season). Exact methods of data collection included participant observation, reflective field notes, and ethnographic film. The results describe the presence of humour's idiosyncratic nature (e.g., soft, hard, and aberrant), particularly in relation to how coaches and players influenced the negotiated order to which others had, to greater or lesser extents, comply. a reflective conclusion illustrates how concepts such as humour are entwined in everyday life, and thus contribute to the construction and negotiation of contexts, like coaching, .

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 November 2021
Accepted 3 May 2022

KEYWORDS

Sports coaching; humour; ethnography; agency

Introduction

The significance of humour within social life has been increasingly realised (e.g., Billig, 2005; Fine & de Soucey, 2005). This is not only in terms of being a symbolic resource that defines personal beliefs, values and behaviours (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), but also as being crucial for interpersonal dynamics and relationships (Cooper, 2005). As opposed to a marginal or frivolous undertaking, humour has thus become viewed as decisive in the shaping of professional as well as personal meanings, situations, and interactions (Kuipers, 2008). Similarly, it has come to be perceived as an interlinking thread of group life, allowing collective as well as individual meaning making in light of past, and anticipated future, occurrences (e.g., Baid & Lambert, 2010; Charman, 2013; Franzen & Aronsson, 2013). In this regard, humour possesses what Goffman (1981)

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termed a “referential afterlife”, where “insider” group identity and associated relationships are created and maintained through the [re]production of joking repertoires.

The social nature of humour within coaching was recently brought to life by Edwards and Jones (2018) who highlighted its complex paradoxical nature through what they termed “inclusionary putdowns”. Through such and similar work (e.g., Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2013), as opposed to only presenting it as uni-functional with a particular goal in mind (e.g., Scott, 2009), humour has been alternatively portrayed as comprising elements of compliance, compromise, and resistance against contextual rules (Edwards & Jones, 2018). Hence, it has been claimed as a vital ingredient in what actually “makes coaching work”. Despite such notable exceptions, humour’s recognition within the sports coaching workplace continues to be limited. This is particularly in terms of understanding how and why humour creates and maintains the “working order” of coaching, and to the subsequent consensual meanings individuals construct from their daily humour-laden relations. This neglect appears unwarranted, seeing that social interaction, inclusive of often joking-infused power relations, appear inherent features of the coaching process (see Cushion & Jones, 2006; Edwards & Jones, 2018; Jones, 2019; Jones & Thomas, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role and function of humour within sports coaching from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Within it we argue that the structure of humour and its resulting [inter]actions can prevent as well as facilitate the advancement of agency. Consequently, far from being the gateway to witty personal action, humour is considered a structure where individuals (be they coaches or athletes) are often denied the ability to define themselves (as they have to laugh at, and with, the collective tendency) in relation to others. This is not to say that such actors are particularly excluded or isolated from a given setting; rather, that certain group members manipulate their symbolic, “humorous” capital and status to usurp and influence the negotiated order to which others must, to greater or lesser extents, comply. Here then, the case is made for the idiosyncratic nature of humour to be deconstructed so that individuals can better understand and manage the contingent reality of the activity.

Drawing on symbolic interactionist theory, the principal significance of the paper lies in moving beyond the taken-for-granted rhetoric of coaching, to delve deeper into the everyday reality that makes up the constitutive fabric of group “order”. In addition to a description of often unconscious action, a purpose here is to help investigate and organise the rules of social interaction as manifest (and perceived) through humour; that is, how these rules are affirmed, re-created and progressed. In contrast to much

descriptive work then (e.g., Duda, 2013; Sarkar & Hilton, 2020), the current paper seeks to critically deconstruct the coaching context thus better highlighting the “connective tissue” which sustains it.

In addition, the value of the work extends to exploring the developed meanings relied upon within social interaction that allow a personal sense-making of “self” in relation to others (Scott, 2015). In this respect, the work is less of a story about a particular person or persons, and their use(s) of humour, and more an illustration of several micro processes within social relations. Indeed, it examines how related rules are performed in the coaching workplace, providing actors with an understanding of how to act “appropriately” within context. In building on the earlier work of Edwards and Jones (2018), the emphasis here is placed on the network of relations and interactions, and the meanings drawn from them, that exists between actors (Crossely, 2011).

The paper also goes further than much of the related literature in characterising humour as an inclusive or exclusive social strategy (Hewer et al., 2019). Rather, it positions humour within a group’s unfolding cultural-historical context; as a potential structural oppressor as well as a seeming enabler of personal agency. The norms referred to here are best understood as a “bundle of rules and resources” (Gardiner, 2000, p.134) used by actors, sometimes to comply with other times to resist, in the course of their everyday working lives. In doing so, a progressive deconstruction of intra-group relations within sport is undertaken, thus shedding light on the collective “goings on” when coaching takes place. Finally, the paper holds value for coaches’ professional development. In further positioning coaching as an interactive phenomenon, educational courses should integrate consciousness concerning related social hierarchies and the strategies used to reinforce or challenge them, such as humour, into their content. In turn, this would allow coaches to not only better consider their relations with athletes (and others), but also how to build the environments and cultures they desire.

In terms of structure, we begin by outlining the theoretical foundations of symbolic interactionism (SI) as a lens through which to explore the topic under investigation. SI was considered particularly pertinent for use due to its emphasis on individual meaning making within a collective. This was not so much in terms of agential, creative practice, but of having the ability to “read” and, hence, make sense of the micro-political language of group life. Following an outline of the methods used throughout the 10 months of fieldwork undertaken, we subsequently offer insight into how individual actors entered into, developed, and withdrew from joint action (Blumer, 1969) as a consequence of their personal meaning making. Both the enabling and, more specifically, the restricting nature of humour within the work of sports coaching thus comes to the fore. Finally, a concluding commentary summarises the main points made.

The framing lens of symbolic interactionism (SI)

According to the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969), the principal theme of symbolic interactionism (SI) is that human life is lived in the symbolic domain; where distinctive and personal meanings are created, adapted and interpreted through social practice. In doing so, SI provides insight into everyday life by [de]constructing personal agency within the cultural and material conditions (e.g., the language and symbols) in which it presides (Fields, Copp, & Klienman, 2006). An important facet here is to understand individuals' "stream(s) of consciousness" (Gardiner, 2000) in terms of their contribution to, and alignment with, the surrounding collective. Similarly, according to Mead (1934), as opposed to being individualistic in nature, social life can only be made sense of through shared meanings, social constraints, and context. Such meaning making is not considered static, but an evolving and problematic entity that finds expression within social negotiations.

Blumer's work, in terms of his theoretical orientation, possessed three basic premises. First, that "human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that (such) things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p.2). For example, although two individuals could share the same [physical] object (e.g., a car), for one it is a means to get from one place to another, while for the other it is a way of enhancing social capital. This leads to the second of Blumer's (1969) premises, and the claim that any "meaning is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows" (Nelson, Groom, & Potrac). Meanings then, are positioned as social products created in, and through, interaction [with others and/or context]; that is, things do not have meaning until someone develops one for them (Douglas, 2005). For example, although an individual could have a perception of an object (e.g., a ball), meaning is only created when he or she sees how that object can be used. Language was similarly considered, with words deemed symbols to which meanings are fixed. Here, through engaging in "speech acts" with others, individuals can create meaning from the interaction while actively constructing discourse.

Blumer's third premise was that interaction comprises an interpretative thought making process (1969). All meanings then, were considered as handled in, and modified through, interpretative practices (Blumer, 1969). Here, it was considered that individuals internalise their own role(s) from the perspective of another, a practice which allows "actors" to become reflexive, thus seeing themselves in a different form. It is an idea of "self" developed through the notion of "other", whereby people indicate who they are through the sense making capabilities of others as well as their own. In addition, the self is considered through the perspective of both the significant and generalised other. The former relates

to people considered important, hence, whose thoughts and opinions matter. The latter, meanwhile, refers to a group, culture or any particular system of roles that can be used as a point of reference (Fields et al., 2006). Subsequently, according to Cooley (1902), the symbols through which sense is made and meanings are drawn are culturally derived, created and maintained through social, as opposed to individual, actions.

Central to Blumer's canonical premises was his notion of "root images" or sign posts that help construct sense about: (1) the nature of society or group life: (2) of social action: (3) of objects: (4) of human beings as acting organisms: (5) of human action, and (6) of the interlinkage(s) of action (Halas, 2012). Such images position society as an accumulation of individual performances, that social interaction is central to any definition of society, that objects are products of interpretation, and that social life is purposeful, interpretive and interlinked (Manning, 2005). Similar "sensitising concepts" (Blumer, 1969), such as the "looking glass self", suggested that, to a considerable extent, social actors see themselves as they think others see them. In this respect, it can be argued that individuals, within a group setting, commit to a particular role according to a perception of their contextual identity (Stryker, 1980).

Methodological notes

Context and setting

This paper emanated from a ten-month ethnographic project within an elite sporting sub-culture. The coaches and players of Senghenydd FC (a pseudonym) formed part of a semi-professional football club that operated at the highest level within its national league structure. The setting contained a squad of forty players and seven coaches (for which I [the first author] was one) and three support staff (i.e., a secretary, an analyst and a conditioning coach). All staff were aged between 22–61, while the players varied in age between 18–25 years old. Three training sessions and two matches per week were observed over the course of the competitive programme (10 months), meaning a minimum of 17 hours per week were spent within the Club context (in total, circa 750 hours of field work were undertaken). This extensive observation period was predominantly spent in, but was not exclusive to, the team's training ground and match day facilities.

Method[s] and procedure

Methodologically, the work was grounded in an interpretivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. In this respect, it required a reflexive interpretation and meaning making on behalf of us as authors, both in terms of the

data gathered and the subsequent sense made of them. The data were, in turn, collected through the methods of participant observation, a reflective field note diary, and ethnographic film. A primary focus of the sense making process was to identify and deconstruct how individuals within the group asserted, contested, delivered and, at times, seized humorous power to suppress or deny the agency of other[s]. Whilst being reflexive in terms of not allowing existing frames of reference to dictate the data collected, I, as first author was mindful of the scope and guiding boundaries of the research project, particularly in terms of what to notice, what to focus on, and how to record it as an observer (Wolfinger, 2002). Consequently, a “salience hierarchy” (Wolfinger, 2002) in terms of what to record was decided upon; that is, a process of notetaking which began by describing what was the most notable, significant or most telling in relation to the stated objectives of the work. Although, naturally, these notes were personally recorded by myself, they were the subsequent topic of considerable critical introspection and discussion (as elaborated upon later).

To complement the observations, a reflective diary was kept throughout the fieldwork. Rather than being a primary research tool, the diary offered an opportunity for reflective thinking that required the questioning and interpretation of the field notes and events that occurred. In this respect, rather than limit myself to a mere description of the culture that I presided in, the diary presented ways in which I could develop the “loose” field notes into more in-depth “accounts” of the micro-process involved in the [re]construction and [re]stabilisation of the social order evident. What is more, the reflective diary allowed for a process of “introspection” that facilitated reflexivity to “unpick” and examine personal assumptions, goals and [inter]subjectivities regarding the research context (Russell & Kelly, 2002). The intention here was to further scrutinise the analysis through constantly (re) considering thoughts and questions as they arose; a process which led to a continuous recycling of concepts and perspectives (Edwards & Jones, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

A third research method used was that of ethnographic film. Such a method was chosen not to confirm the “truthfulness” of events that occurred, but as an opportunity to critically revisit interpretations of episodes as part of an on-going reflective discussion (Smith, 2017). Specifically, the purpose of using the camera was two-fold; to provide a “richer” account of individual[s] and group life in terms of picking something that was missed in the moment; whilst also providing a way of re-affirming the already written field notes (Kawulich, 2004). The general principle for using a variety of methods was to provide differing layers of collaborative testimony, thus better building evidence for key claims. (Edwards & Jones, 2018).

Reflexive relationship between researcher and context

Due to my unconventional role[s] within the field, I initially struggled to “make sense” of and interpret what I saw. This was due to my position as part of the context I was studying as much as other actors or the physical parameters evident (Edwards & Jones, 2018). Here then, I was a coach, a researcher, and subject. Although to a degree problematic in terms of the influence I had over the environment (particular in terms of my status as Head Coach with a final say in team selection), it nevertheless gave me an “indwelling” status; that is, as very much an insider in context. Such a position gave me an enabling stance, able to better see, hear and feel the interactive context under study. However, to move beyond an uncritical functionalism and/or a simple role dichotomy, I learnt that a careful and thorough reflexive stance was required in terms of the data collected and the interpretations made. As such, to [re]negotiate my position[s], I did not conceal my (researcher) identity with all data being gathered in an overt manner. Neither did I take a “back seat” to observe the everyday nuances of action that became apparent. Relatedly, to maintain integrity as coach, participant, and researcher within the research setting, I became an active member in all roles, so that “rich” exchanges could be fashioned, observed and gathered (Purdy & Jones, 2013). This made me, to a certain degree, both object and subject of the project; something I became increasingly comfortable with (although never totally so) as the work unfolded. Although such a position allowed an acute tuning-in to the characteristics and social practices of the culture, it also led to further critical self dialogue, reflexive introspection and, importantly, intersubjective reflection (Findlay, 2002) with others, concerning the multiple roles held, and the subsequent data generated.

In ensuring, as best I could, a reflexive stance, I was careful not to draw upon traditional research assumptions that can be analysed through logic and theory (Alvesson & Skoldburg, 2000). Rather, I engaged in an interpretive process that required critical questioning to highlight the subjective, multiple constructed realities of context (Cunliffe, 2004). Here then, I began reading and re-reading the extensive field notes to gain further familiarity with the data collected. This self-focussed and recursive approach enabled me to challenge basic assumptions, values and my position (and that of others) in [re]constructing part of the context under study. Through such a temporal process, I was able to provide multiple layers and levels of reflection that led me to repeatedly question my epistemological position. Thus, in scrutinising knowledge claims and enhancing my understanding of the preconceptions that I brought to the context (Gummerson, 1991), I learnt to [re]examine both self and knowledge so that I became comfortable with my place, as it allowed me to be part of the contextual “fabric” whilst granting space for the required criticality (Edwards & Jones, 2018).

Data analysis and [re]presentation of data

In order to make sense of the data, a constant comparative method was adopted (Charmaz, 2003). This iterative approach allowed for a continual revisiting of the data to generate both familiarity with, and interpretation of, the everyday occurrences captured. Here, “episodes” or “incidents” were compared with others through a process of coding, allowing for elicitation from the “large” to the “small” (Charmaz, 2006). Through such a procedure, initial thoughts and hunches were reflected upon, interpreted and conceptualised, before being developed into identified themes (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, through this inductive process, I began to notice that individuals (e.g., coaches or players) would use humour as way of controlling the behaviour of others. As such, I began to deconstruct such accounts in relation to the aims and objectives of the work. This mode of analysis moved away from the traditional inductive theorising from small units, to intermediate categorisation, to overarching themes. Finally, to give further clarity and nuance to the context, the ethnographic film provided an opportunity for added reflection on the contextual essence of what was taking place (Edwards & Jones, 2018)

To assist in the process of critical analysis, several significant others from both within and without the research setting were asked to look at the unfolding analysis. Accepting that the written text was open to further interpretation, the intention here was not an attempt to check and correct facts but rather to engage with the participants collaboratively in order that they could help “see” beyond any interpreted limitations (Livari, 2018; McFee, 2014). Doing so, further increased critical scrutiny of the data and the derived concepts whilst also assisting interpretations of the unfolding general narrative (Schultze, 2000). This discussion and dialogue with others, allowed for collaborative meaning making to take place, thus providing further layers of “thick description” to the already written text.

Acknowledging the interpretive research engaged in, we were aware, as ethnographic researchers, of how to [re]present the data. Subsequently, a creative non-fictional genre was adopted which allowed for a representation of the research findings in a way that captured how humour was used, challenged and resisted in the complex coaching context. Whilst paying heed to claims of “being there” as the contextual events unfolded, what is emphasised here is a fashioning of the storied narrative to emphasise salient points at the expense of others (Sparkes, 2002). In acknowledging that issues exist when researchers strive to “paint a picture” of the individuals and context under study, as previously touched upon, we considered the value of interpretation and sociological insight (Hastrup, 1992). As such, the stories told are reflexive “vignettes” that elaborate on the field notes and ethnographic film footage taken.

Ethical considerations

With the very nature of the critical ethnographic research undertaken, it was inevitable that there would be concerns over the ethics of the project's research practice. Due to the prolonged research context, all individuals were reminded that it would be difficult to disguise their identity without introducing an unacceptably large measure of distortion into the data, and their representation. Having said that, the participants were nevertheless informed that, where appropriate, characters within the text would be given pseudonyms to protect their identity and maintain their anonymity as much as possible (Jones, Potrac, Hussain, & Cushion, 2006), whilst also omitting personal or compromising features and findings of those being studied (Adler & Adler, 1993). This led to individuals confirming that although anonymity could not be guaranteed *per se*, they were comfortable to take part in the study. In addition to adhering to the formalised and required ethical protocols, as authors, we consistently discussed the tenets of ensuring ethically appropriate behaviour within the project. This was not only in terms of participant anonymity and confidentiality, but also reflecting upon if ethical obligations to the work itself was adequately respected (Jones et al., 2006). In many ways then, I strove to live McFee's (2010) maxim of treating the participants, and the research project itself, "like a friend".

Discussion of results

The pervasiveness of humour in the sporting context offers ways in which the micro-rituals of action can be better understood. Seen in this way, the following "episodes" were not contextually bound situations "tested" or "hypothesised" in light of the theory, but rather provide the connection between theory and practice. In doing so, they "raise questions, suggesting things to look at, and point to what we don't yet know" (Becker, 2008, p. xi). The ensuing accounts then, are inherent features of everyday utterances that fill the gap[s] between common stocks of background knowledge and the normative expectations of individual understanding.

"Soft" Humour

Field note extract

Tonight's session had more significance than any other of the season so far. We were one match from the cup final. The players were nervous. Our usual sharpness was not apparent, the ball wasn't sticking. The normal, sleek, passing game was missing. I let Him take charge of the structured part of the session. He reminded the players of their roles, the messages we propose, *"You happy with that Dan? Remember, start high and*

wide and then come in and find the pocket [technical football term]. Aaron will keep shape on the other wing". "Yes, got it", came Dan's reply. Jim carried on instructing the players. They seemed to get it, but Jim wasn't convinced. He brought the players together. They huddled in a circle around us, the vapour and sweat from their bodies invaded the tiny, cramped circle. There was a seriousness to Jim's tone. He began with kind words before he began to challenge the players by asking them what did they want from this (our) season. Knowing Jim, I could see where this was heading. "Football is a thinking man's game. Ya must think, we don't play in straight lines, ya must move, side on, always thinking. Think, think and think again. Believe me, I know". Jim points to his receding hairline "Trust me fella's . . . (long pause) grass doesn't grow on a busy street". While the players knowingly accepted Jim's sentiments, he offered some final thoughts. A lasting comment, a wry smile, "Before you leave . . . [long pause] winning anything is hard, but to win this [the cup] it takes special people, special coaches . . . and I should know [he raises his eye to me with a smirk knowing I've not won this cup before whilst, as a coach, he has] . . . so please make sure I win this again".

In adopting some guiding principles of symbolic interactionism, Jim gave thought to his own behaviours through creating a particular impression for his audience (Goffman, 1959) so that the interaction met a desired end. To this extent, there was a strong realisation that although Jim was dissatisfied with the witnessed performance so far, he was also conscious that he needed the players in good spirits in the immediate future; he needed to express dissatisfaction without creating umbrage or resentment. As such, humour was not used as an inclusive or exclusive strategy. Rather, the figurative use of language was utilised in a manner that enabled the paradoxical work of being "hard" (e.g., delivering uncompromising messages) and "soft" (e.g., needing to keep the players "on-board" to perform again) to be done simultaneously, rendering such messages as unambiguous yet palatable. Indeed, "strong" messages and the way that they are delivered often have consequences (e.g., a legacy of poor relationships; resistance; a sulking from others). Consequently, rather than venting anger and frustration with little thought for such considerations, Jim (seemingly) took them (and others) into account in formulating his interaction with the group (e.g., such considerations also included previous interactions with players, player[s] personalities, in addition to his own athletic experience[s] and identity). This resulted in a humorous anecdote (heavily alluding to the Club's philosophy of play) as a sense making "episode" to make his point, thus giving the players a perception of coach dissatisfaction *and* care (for them) at the same time.

Within this episode of practice, Jim demonstrated a varying degree of humorous undertones to manipulate the players' insecurities, within a framework of reassurance. Much like Goffman's (1959) writing on dramaturgy, where individuals are constantly playing their part or role in the "drama" of each circumstance, Jim's skilful use of his humorous

script provided a credible and idealised performance for his audience i.e., [the players]. Knowing that the players had failed to adhere to the principles of play he required, Jim selected an appropriate role for the situation. This wasn't, however, a case of merely following a normative script

(Birrell & Donnelly, 2004), but agential action considered of contextual pressures and needs. Jim's performance or act in this instance reflects the work of Scott (2015), who argued that individuals must think, feel and behave not as isolated individuals, but as social actors with relational consciousness [to others and context].

In this way, the words and gestures used can be seen as reflections of a shared set of understanding(s). This figurative use of language is indicative of what Garfinkel (1967) identified as indexicality; that is, individuals recognise that in everyday encounters they rely on specific features (e.g., shared, tacit knowledge) to make sense of a situation and generate order (Scott, 2015). It can be argued then, that Jim's implicit acting abilities allowed him to script in advance ways in which to orchestrate expressive behaviours that the players saw as innately fluid, and outwardly directed to maximise his impact on the situation (Brown, 2020). The fact that it was delivered in a way which allowed no obvious right of reply was indicative both of the soft message which spoke of "I have your best interests at heart" and of Jim's position in the group; that is, as a senior coach worthy of respect through his perceived past record of success and, more importantly, from his treatment of the players through his coaching.

Consequently, although the players were allowed an opportunity to listen and take in information, they were, to all intents and purposes, denied a degree of agency through Jim's witty/sarcastic comment. This "doing of power" (Holmes, 2000) allowed Jim to achieve his instrumental goal and de-emphasise the power differential in order to gain the players compliance to his agenda. With such an approach, there is an argument that humour can be considered a *structured process* in the sense of being organised in and through social structures (i.e., according to cultural expectations, customs, traditions and norms), and *performed* (in day-to-day practices, routines and social interactions) on a daily basis to control the actions of others (Crawley, 2004).

Further evidence of such "soft" humorous interactions was evidenced through the coaches' subtle actions when interacting with the players. For example, it was well known that the players despised the early morning gym sessions, and that certain individuals would often be absent. Rather than tackling these issues head on, I would often use less confrontational means of making a point to the players. For instance, it wasn't unusual for Rob to miss a Monday morning session. At training one evening, however, he was "muscled" off the ball by another player; "*Fucking hell, that's a foul, c'mon*"

Rob shouted. I let the play go, but he carried on “*Are we gonna do this properly, or what?*” I couldn’t help but chuckle and told him to get on with it. “*This is a joke*” came his angry reply. He continued to protest before (eventually) I shouted to all and sundry; “*I’d give free kicks as long as he went to gym sessions*”.

This led to raucous laughter from the other players, leaving Rob red faced and embarrassed. Such humour denied the player a right to reply, serving as a “corrective” agent, thus drawing Rob into line through complicity to “do things right”. There was nowhere further for him to go with this interaction, without inviting a “harder” line from me on him missing obligatory strength sessions. Such interactions served as a reminder that humour (within this context) was a mechanism that went far beyond amusement or derision. So much so, that the occurring exchanges provided an insight into the balancing act between ridicule and teasing which ensured compliance to the existing social order (Billig, 2001).

“Hard” humour

In recognising humour’s general paradoxical nature, there are times when it can be used to suppress the resistance from rebellious behaviour. Indeed, humour can create space for the fragmentation of [inter]actions due to its ability to connect and [dis]organise relations (Douglas, 2005). Such was the case with Sam, an aspiring coach, who without intentionally being threatening, attempted to play with (i.e., change) the social order. For example;

Field note extract

Having recently taken his first game as a coach, Sam was quick to try to remind everybody of his coaching abilities. So, as Jim was away, Sam delivered part of a first team coaching session. To begin, it went well, but it soon became obvious that Sam was struggling with keeping the engagement with some of the senior players. This led to Sam becoming frustrated and question the players aggressively. I decided to step in. As such, the players understood what was needed from the drill. Sam, however, began to criticise the players saying that they were not able to perform the skill. This discussion continued when we were in the bar after training. Sam argued, “*They don’t respect me Swan, none of the lads do. They gotta realise I’m a coach now*”. It was difficult to remonstrate, as Sam was adamant in his views. I reminded him that it would be difficult to make the step and he must be patient. His egotistical manner continued which required me to cut him short. “*You may have your Billy ‘B’ badge (i.e., somewhat denigrating his ‘official’ coaching licence) mate, but Sam, ya gotta listen. Until you do, and really earn your stripes, you’re going to find it hard as the lads couldn’t give a fucking shit if you had your TV Licence let alone your coaching B licence*”.

In this instance, the precarious nature of the social order was disrupted due to Sam's personal ambitions and self-interested goals. In this respect, he felt that he was free to act as he chose in order to "play out" his own coaching agenda. In recognising that the routines, rituals and habits of the usual coaching practice had not been upheld, my resulting conscious strategy was to utilise humour and (to an extent) ridicule as a corrective to [re]establish the status quo. The coercive power of the social norms and rules that are expected (Scott, 2009), led Sam to firstly act angrily then be embarrassed by the senior players' lack of respect and my subsequent uncomfortable words. Indeed, the rupturing of the social bonds at this point with the continued prospect of being embarrassed (further) or losing "face" (Goffman, 1959) prevented any real breakdown of the given order, thus ensuring that Sam complied with the routine demands of the interaction. Having said that, by couching the response in humour, the message was delivered with a relative lightness that included Sam in the joke; although much "harder" in terms of providing a sharper cutting edge than in the previous examples, it nevertheless provided us with an opportunity to somewhat laugh together at the situation.

Such sense making aligns to the notion of joint-action as suggested by Blumer (1969). This is the result of self-interested negotiations between two or more parties. Within the example above, contextual discourse (e.g., humorous remarks) from myself was exercised upon Sam with his complicity. This was not particularly in terms of arriving at a consensus, but that Sam complied with the dominant values and opinions adopted within the context. The structural norms were too strong to take further issue with here, whilst a degree of self-respect was offered, and taken. In this respect, my humorous comment no doubt limited Sam's agency to reply, thus holding him within a realm of obedience; that, although delivered with an "inclusive" smile, it enforced the adoption of a "correct way" at the expense of limitless others (Schubert, 2002). It can be argued then, that this ensured the construction and reproduction of the social order by reasserting authority, while simultaneously "repairing" or protecting against any (further) fragmentation of the relational dynamics of the group.

Further examples of how seemingly "hard" humour was apparent within the group is evidenced in the following interaction. Tim, one of the more senior players, was asked by the Club secretary (Mike) to bring money for a fundraising event. As usual, he had forgotten, and when asked by Mike, stated rather flippantly that it was inconvenient to go to the bank on the way. The players found this amusing, leaving Mike to give a thunderous response. *"I'll tell you what's inconvenient shall I?" "Yes, what's that Mike?"* laughed Tim in a cocky, confident manner[long pause, Mike was raging]. *"When I have to pay to watch you play like a fucking knob every*

week; that's what bloody inconvenient!" The group hushed immediately, suppressing their sniggering. They had never seen Mike like that before. Tim, meanwhile, was left a bit shocked to ponder on his cheeky attitude.

The above example highlights how the interaction that takes place does so with a shared understanding of the existing order. This "remedial interchange" (Goffman, 1971) was a social action performed (by Mike [staff member]) in response to the perceived deviant conduct of Tim, a player. Following Mike's remark, and in the interests of both himself and the group, rather than disagree and further "rupture" the social "rules" of the interaction, Tim remained silent (Scott, 2015). Such a viewpoint is reflective of the work of Goffman (1959), where the situation is reduced to a simple "thin party line" (p. 91) to which individuals are expected to adhere to irrespective of their own misgivings given the status hierarchy of the interchange.

Although aware that such comments as delivered could overstep the mark, this "sharp" or "hard" use of humour served as a means to navigate the coaching context; both in terms of its use and acceptance of its use. In this respect, it illustrates how humour's equivocal nature allowed the utilisation of individuals' "social competencies" (Lemert, 1997) to exploit its subtle undertones so that the social order was (relatively) maintained by keeping people (i.e., the players in this instance) "in their place".

"Aberrant" humour

While such interactions used humour's opaque characteristics to maintain the said order, there were instances where some individuals used self-deprecating humour as means of promoting their own modesty, while others did so to hide their humility. Jamie, for example, was someone who never took himself seriously. Much of his behaviour had neutralising tendencies where often difficult, sensitive or controversial topics were defused through his inclusive, yet, self-deprecating displays. Although he was an influential player within the team, he often engaged in strange and peculiar activities. For example, he often "shinned" the ball (i.e., bounced the ball off his shin), thus highlighting his unique ability to juggle the football (almost everybody else would juggle the ball with their feet, thighs or head). This incongruity between what was *expected* and what was *witnessed* allowed him to mock his own ability, consequently setting him apart from the rest of the group. It was here that humour's double-edged nature could be seen as an act of disparagement on the one hand (allowing the ball to hit one's shin is usually considered as a "bad touch"), while on the other served as a demonstration of a unique ability. In this case, through an element of self-ridicule, Jaime was able to establish and/or reaffirm status differences and internal hierarchies within group structure.

Field note extract

We have just arrived at St. Martins F.C. The dressing rooms are dark and cramped. The players busy themselves, filling up water bottles for the game ahead. It's not long before Jim tells the boys to "go smell the grass". The kit is neatly laid out under the respective pegs. I ask Sam to call the players in. One by one they trudge back, eagerly scanning the room to see their number. Dan is playing the fool; he continues to tease Karl about his new haircut. *Why don't you just 'do one' knob head*" Karl retorts. *"Shut it dickhead, you seen your shlid, [slang for hairstyle], someone just lowered your ears Karly boy"*. Dan is enjoying his moment, he is holding the centre of the room, adoring the adulation from his younger team-mates. Suddenly, the toilet door swings open. It's Jamie, who immediately drags his hands down the back of Bill's shirt to dry them. *"Erh, get off ya dirty fucker"*. screams Bill. Jamie ignores him, and excitedly high five's others as he circles the room. He nods at me and shouts *"alright gaffa"*. [knowing that I hate to be called this]. With Jamie now 'holding court', Dan is nowhere to be seen; a mere onlooker to the unfolding performance. Jamie continues his comedic act, and can't resist his final 'party trick'. His 'shinning' of the ball has the room in hysterics *"look at me dickheads, not bad for a fat lad!"*

Although Jamie's continued performance strengthened the social fabric of the group, through it, he also restricted others from developing their own personalities. Whilst such a comment is contradictory to suggestions regarding self-deprecation and its ability to minimise the hierarchical differences between leaders and followers (McCreaddie & Wiggins, 2008), it is a useful signpost to consider. Although seemingly not deviously intentional, the legacy of his actions and the impression[s] that he portrayed inhibited the agency of others as he manipulated the rules of social interaction. In this respect, he disarmed others to a degree that they feared they would not be considered as funny as him; he simply had more (humorous) capital than anyone which he was fully prepared to use to re-establish relations. With this in mind, echoing Goffman's (1959) work on impression management, Jaime managed his own performance so that he maintained an air of legitimacy about his leading role in context (Goffman, 1959). Dan, meanwhile, self-consciously retreated into the background, albeit remaining an obvious (over) "enthusiast" of Jaime's routine. He remained there for the duration of the pre-match build up. Indeed, Jaime would regularly adopt the role of the "fool" or "class clown" within the group culture as a means of reaffirming his status; actions which although on one level increased group camaraderie simultaneously limited agential opportunities for others (e.g., Dan).

Conclusion

Acknowledging that previous research (e.g., Franzen & Aronsson, 2013) has argued that humour can be used as a strategy for maintaining or imposing order, this paper provides an account of how humour's

paradoxical nature allows individuals to manipulate their symbolic, humorous capital to facilitate as well as thwart others' agency. Whilst not suggesting that individuals are cultural dupes (e.g., Edwards & Jones, 2018), the work presented offers a narrative of how humour was used as a social practice to both unsettle and reinforce entrenched power relations in workplace (e.g., coaching) settings. Indeed, humour, as well as being pleasurable *in* and *of* itself (Grugulis, 2002), helped those in positions of power (e.g., the coaches) to negotiate the contested boundaries of the said order in a manner that avoided recrimination from subordinates (e.g., the players). Such an appreciation further recognises humour's complex functions within group dynamics, as opposed to its earlier conceptualisation as frivolous or monofunctional.

In building on previous work (e.g., Edwards & Jones, 2018), the findings further our understanding into how humour and its resulting function[s] act as means towards asserting conformity within intra group relations. Indeed, in adopting "face work" (Goffman, 1959) individuals were able to use humour's "softer" side to impose messages that demanded complicity from others. Such skilful application of humour allowed those in positions of power to oppress others in a seemingly reassuring way. For example, the relational work of Jim, manipulated group taken-for-granted power dynamics so that the players were not allowed into a debate about their performance; rather, through the subtleties of speech he "seduced" the players to conform to his way of thinking about their obligation to perform. Therefore, the message portrayed was more palatable and acceptable.

Meanwhile, humour's more abrasive nature was also evident in some of the accounts featured. In many cases, humour's "harder" edge was utilised as a repressive mechanism for those that had moved away from the unwritten rules of the group culture or those that dared challenge the status order. Indeed, the interaction with Sam, highlighted how humour's ambiguous and paradoxical nature helped quash resistance and rebelliousness, albeit not in an overly destructive way. The intention of the remark in question was to magnify the meaning of the message without engaging in conflict. The key point to consider here is that although humour has a dark side, and that ridicule and mockery can alienate group members, used in a less confrontational manner, it can also ensure individual compliance to customs and habits. Thus, social discipline and social order can be maintained without recourse to open power plays and subsequent alienation (Billig, 2005).

Due to understanding the historical nature of humour and the language used, "aberrant" humour also allowed certain individuals to establish status within the group at the expense of others. In the example provided, Jamie adopted the role of the "class clown" to use humour in a light-

hearted manner to de-stabilise others' standing within the said order. This deliberate use of humour in specific situations is, according to Ronglan and Aggerholm (2013), a guise that allows individuals to increase their influence over people and processes. Relatedly, to have the desired effect over others, Jamie was adept in appropriately timing such humour so that a degree of respect was maintained by all within the given social interaction.

From a wider sports coaching perspective, this study contributes to the development of coaching as an area worthy of further sociological analysis. Having said that, we were aware of the dangers of over claiming on the basis of a single case; qualitative shortcomings well document elsewhere often related to “subjective” interpretation and a focus on the local (Flybjerg, 2006; Myers, 2000). Taking such considerations into account, we nevertheless hope (as detailed in the methodology section) to have produced and presented a credible, relatable, and critical account of events at Senghenydd FC, particularly in terms of how and why humour emerged as it did within the coaching that took place. Indeed, throughout the work, humour's innate feature as a constitutive fabric in helping make sense of and interpreting the social sensitivities of individual and collective [inter]action was evident. In this respect, the study brings to the fore the contextual considerations of action previously ignored in much coaching related literature. This we consider to be important given the extensive evidence that points to coaching as a social act within occupational practice (e.g., Jones, 2019). Finally, as previously stated, recourse to the socio-cultural role of humour could or perhaps should be contained within coaches' educational and developmental programmes. This is because through better deconstructing and appreciating such social strategies, a more refined negotiation of crucial relationships within coaching can be achieved.

Disclosure statement

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

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