Locker Rooms, Laughter & Lads: Exploring the Inner Sanctums of Professional Football in the UK

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Abstract
This paper offers a rare insight into the closed and insular workplace of professional football in the UK. Drawing on ethnographic data from professional football players, managers and coaches we explore the work-based practices of football culture and within the locker room environment in particular. The findings explore how workplace humor expressions and laughter reveal players’ identities and reflect hierarchies of power and dominance. Moreover, we explore how players cope with expressions of humor comprising of racist and sexual explicit connotations.

Introduction
Because humor is a common element of human interaction and impacts on work groups and organizations, the subject has attracted considerable academic attention within organization studies. Much of the early organization studies research drew from the work of Collinson (1988) and his examination of humour and joking as a form of resistance, conformity and control and his subsequent work on gender, identity, resistance and the relationship between humor, power and management. Research has also examined how humor can enhance workplace fun, engagement and satisfaction (Plester & Hutchinson, 2014), yet workplace fun can also be ignored or tolerated (Collinson, 1988). Workplace humor can also create resistance (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995) distraction, disharmony and dissonance (Plester & Hutchinson, 2014) and in some cases, is utilised to objectify, humiliate or ridicule individuals. While the topics of workplace humor, joking and fun have been examined in a variety of industry settings and in shopfloor workplaces in particular (Collinson, 1992), one unique industry lacking empirical research is the professional football industry.

Methodology
This paper utilises qualitative data collected over ten years in three distinct stages. Stage one of the data collection occurred between 2004 and 2006 and involved semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with twenty-five players, five agents and twenty managers. In 2015, stage two of the data collection involved semi-structured interviews with four players with experience of the academy structure at English Premier League and Championship teams. Stage three of the data collection occurred between 2012 and 2015 and involved two participatory action research workshops. The first workshop involved current and former English Premier League players (n=12) while the second workshop involved participants who were coaches, managers and player development officers (n=40) employed at an English Premier League Club. The data analysis procedures adopted were drawn from guidelines developed for inductively analysing semi-structured interviews and open-ended unstructured questionnaire data (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Findings & Discussion
First, the findings identify how humor can be deployed as a mechanism for releasing work-related tension and enables employees to create a shared group identity without challenging either power structures or inequalities that may have led to frustration (Collinson, 1988). Moreover, we identify how humor may raise morale, create a sense of community (Collinson, 2002) and is central to the construction of cohesive team cultures. Consequently, for young aspirant professional players who progress to the first team, the locker room is viewed as a sacred place of privilege which confirms, in part, their professional footballing identity and fuels their visions of celebrity, wealth, glory and immortality. However, the results also identify how workplace identities are constructed through hostile, intimidating and derogatory jokes and humor ‘is also frequently highly sexual and explicit’ (Collinson, 2002: 280). In this regard, many young players take offence and have considerable difficulty in coping with banter, racist connotations and with the more crude and uncouth dressing room practices in particular. Consequently, for many players, failure to
conform, or the appearance of conformity, to such practices within the confines of the locker room may demonstrate to others a lack of commitment or engagement within the group which may not only impact on peer-group identity but also lead to their rejection or exclusion.

Conclusion
Despite creating shared group membership and facilitating camaraderie, it is difficult to imagine any other modern western industry in which such sexually explicit and racist humor would be deemed acceptable. In the UK, Anti-racist campaigns, like Kick-it-out, are designed to educate players about the unacceptability of racial comments. In 2010, Adams et al., argued that, in relation to the professional football industry in the UK, ‘there is an increasing truth to the commonplace notion that the use of violent, homophobic, and sexist language really is just part of the game’ (293). More recent developments within the professional football industry in the UK have raised important governance and educational implications that warrant addressing.