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Conceptualizing bullying in adult professional football: A phenomenological exploration

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Abstract

Objectives: The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth insight into male professional footballers' perception of the concept of bullying and to explore the essences of this behavior within this context.

Design and Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 adult male professional football players in the UK. Data were analyzed in accordance with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results: Participants highlighted that key themes within Olewus' (1993) seminal definition of bullying are relevant to professional football such as repetition, power, abuse and harm doing. Notably, there were variations in footballers' views of the constituents of these themes which were explained by divergent perceptions of how the football context shaped these components of bullying. It was evident however, that certain common elements of the football environment, such as its inherent masculinity, identity conforming nature and authoritarianism helped to contextualize the players' conceptualizations of bullying.

Conclusions: While some of the identified themes mirrored classic definitions of bullying, this concept was articulated in an individually nuanced, context dependent fashion. These findings advance bullying literature by demonstrating how professional football shapes perceptions of this concept, while highlighting the importance of contextually tailored intervention program to address bullying.

Keywords: Abuse, Bullying, Conceptualization, Professional Football, IPA.

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1. Introduction

In recent years allegations of bullying in professional football have become widespread (BBC, 2016, 2019). Despite the prevalence of these allegations in professional football and elite sport more broadly, only limited research in sport psychology has sought to explore the nature of this behavior and athletes' experiences of this phenomenon (Evans et al., 2016; Jewett et al., 2019; Kerr et al., 2016). While these investigations have tended to focus on youth and intercollegiate sports, there is limited evidence concerning the experiences and perceptions of bullying among elite adult sporting participants. In this paper, we sought to address this understudied issue by exploring perceptions of bullying within the context of adult professional football. This insight may help to situate bullying as a context specific phenomenon that is informed by the day to day experiences of being a sportsperson.

1.1 Defining Bullying

The lack of focus on bullying in elite sport, may reflect both the difficulty in exploring this phenomenon within this context, as well as the lack of conceptual clarity about what bullying means to the adult population of professional footballers. To date, the broader developmental psychology literature has favored Olewus' (1993) classic definition of bullying, which asserts that it is "an intentional, negative action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another" (p.8). This could be through physical contact or intentional exclusion from a group, which can be classified as a form of relational bullying. Furthermore, there is usually an imbalance in power between the bully and victim, such that the victim is unable to defend themselves. Typically, this behavior is carried out "repeatedly and over time" (Volk et al., 2014, p. 328). Other authors have extended this definition whereby bullying is seen as an act involving a systematic abuse of power which includes physical, verbal, relational and cyber aggression (Cook et al., 2010).

While Olewus' (1993) bullying definition retains vast support having been cited in excess of 4900 times (Volk et al., 2014) and has guided recent sport psychology research (Jewett et al., 2019), it is important to highlight that it is not universally accepted in all contexts. Firstly, discrepancies around the intentionality and repetitive nature of this behavior as well as the concept of a power imbalance raised from self-report data reveal a potential myriad of problems with this definition (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). One of the few studies to focus on experiences of bullying within adult sporting participants questioned the importance of intent within conceptualizations of bullying, by highlighting how the "perceived less hostile intentions of entertainment and social control" drive bullying experiences within this context (Kerr et al., 2016, p.146). Overall this suggests that the concept of bullying may be contextually and culturally dependent. From an applied perspective, this is helpful since attempts to tackle bullying are likely to be facilitated by a clearer understanding of what constitutes bullying within specific contexts in order for delivery and implementation strategies to be most effective.

One context which might demonstrate a culturally dependent view of bullying is men's professional football. Football players are expected to raise their tolerance to more severe forms of verbal derogation and chastisement compared to other workplaces (Parker, 2006), suggesting this may be an ideal environment to explore how bullying is contextualized given it operates in its own 'bubble'(McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). To compound this, as in other domains, bullying in sport is often conflated with concepts such as abuse, harassment and maltreatment (Stirling, 2009) making it harder to untangle the specifics of what bullying is in any one context.

To ameliorate such definitional concerns across bullying research, a theoretical redefinition was proposed by Volk et al., (2014) to consider three of the contended components of Olewus' (1993) original definition of intentionality, power imbalance and harm. Volk and colleagues (2014) argued that intentionality was stronger when considered as goal-directedness and was key to defining bullying on psychological and evolutionary grounds. The psychological

argument proposed that bullying requires instrumental aggression which is goal-directed, whereas more accidental forms of aggression are non-intentional and lack the goal-directedness associated with this behavior. The evolutionary argument also supported this goal-directed notion, as bullying is required to assert social dominance; to claim resources and to aid reproduction (Volk et al., 2014). Although Volk et al. (2014) supported Olewus' assertion that a power imbalance is required in bullying, they argued that a power imbalance needs to be viewed in a cognitive, social-cognitive and social sense, in addition to the physical and verbal aspects originally proposed by Olewus. It was argued that this redefining of the bullying concept allows for a much broader understanding across the developmental lifespan.

The final component Volk et al. (2014) covered in relation to redefining bullying was harm. Harm is still central to a definition of bullying, but it needs to be detached from the notion of repetition, as one act of bullying can lead to negative outcomes and experiences (Volk et al., 2014). Their proposed model considered bullying as a multiple of the frequency and intensity of bullying behaviors. In a sporting context, this may be seen whereby bullying could take place on a frequent but low intensity level (e.g. persistent sledging) or alternatively during a single game but at a high intensity level (e.g. serious name calling) between two teams.

1.2. Bullying in Sport

Despite the attempts of Volk et al. (2014) to provide further clarity around bullying with populations other than children, questions remain around the applicability of this definition within sport. To date, research on bullying in sport has typically focused on two aspects, the experiences and subsequent outcomes of this behavior. In relation to experiences, these have been characterized in terms of the frequency of different types of aggressive acts, the amounts to which participants are perpetrators or victims and the types, timing and location of bullying behavior (Mishna et al., 2019). Regarding outcomes, bullying experiences in sport have been found to lead to poor self-esteem, reduced enjoyment, isolation from participants' teams,

negative feelings, poor performance and various other mental health issues (Evans et al., 2016; Jewett et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019). While these findings offer encouragement in terms of redressing the limited evidence in bullying research in sport, they fall short of exploring the constituents of this behavior and are often limited by a lack of depth to the meanings produced within the quantitative data presented (Evans et al., 2016; Nery et al., 2019). An alternative approach to address the issues of a lack of depth in bullying research in sport is to be guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith, 1996). IPA has the potential to provide a detailed, nuanced analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2017) of participants' lived experience of bullying within a range of contexts and is particularly helpful within elite sporting contexts. By using IPA the participant and researcher can make sense of the interdependent relationship between the 'person' and their 'world' (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), while challenging taken for granted assumptions (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). IPA has the capacity to enable more 'sense making' of experience as a valid way of knowing about an individual's world (Rajasinghe, 2019), even if that world is challenging. It has been a useful strategy to provide intimate portrayals of some more hidden areas of the life of athletes, such as disordered eating (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010), rather than as simple 'objective' measurements of an incidence based on survey data. Similarly, IPA has the opportunity to help uncover the lived experiences of the often hidden world of bullying and sporting environments such as professional football.

Contextualizing bullying to professional football may be particularly important as this specific environment permeates a culture of speculative 'banter' (Parker & Manley, 2016), which might otherwise be viewed as bullying if it took place in non-sport workplaces. Banter in sport is largely viewed as a prosocial form of teasing (Kerr et al., 2016) which has been found to facilitate performance, cohesion and bonding in professional sport (Wagstaff et al., 2017), yet it can be hurtful and mask homophobic and racist behavior (Hylton, 2018; Krane, 2016). Wider research has also demonstrated the deleterious impact of bullying within the sporting context in

terms of increased feelings of self-hatred, greater need to conform to masculine ideals especially for gay participants and homophobic abuse within male populations (Baiocco et al., 2018).

Therefore the environment of men's professional football, which places a large expectation on players demonstrating their masculine worth by giving and receiving insults, even to the point to which players might 'snap' (Parker, 2006), appears to provide an ideal context to explore perspectives of bullying. Moreover, researching bullying in this context answer calls from the literature to explore gender differences relevant to this topic (Jewett et al., 2019). By focusing on a 'hypermasculine' context such as professional football (Parker & Manley, 2016), where masculine norms are influential on bullying behavior, further evidence can be amassed for the pre-intervention stage of bullying prevention (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). This also potentially educates and sensitizes players to this problem (Nery et al., 2019) in football. Exploring bullying in professional football also offers a novel contribution to broader workplace bullying research given this context normalizes abusive and intimidatory practices in a way not seen in any other western industry (Kelly & Waddington, 2006).

1.3. The Present Study

Taking the conceptual and contextual concerns around what constitutes bullying behavior together, the present study sought to explore how adult male professional footballers conceptualize bullying within the sporting context. Adult male professional footballers were recruited, as this population could reveal unique insight into bullying behavior due to the hypermasculine nature of this group and the often abusive nature of this context. This study did not seek to establish a single definition of bullying, but instead through the use of IPA, aimed to gain a richer understanding of what adult male footballers perceive to be the contextual nuances of this term. This was with the aim of making intervention and prevention programs better informed about the constituents of bullying and more effective, through raising awareness among players about this concept, while extending current workplace bullying research (e.g. Sprigg et

al., 2019) within 'hypermasculine' contexts such as professional football.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Philosophical Underpinning

The methodology for the present study was guided by the principles of IPA (J. A. Smith, 1996). Given IPA offers a detailed exploration of subjective experiences and how participants make sense of this, it is regarded as being at the center-ground between experiential approaches such as descriptive phenomenology and discursive approaches such as discourse analysis (Shinebourne, 2011). This according to Shinebourne (2011) allows it to adopt a broadly social constructionist stance. As the study focused on the players' perceptions of bullying within the professional football context, IPA was deemed as the most appropriate approach given it aims to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social world (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). Through utilizing IPA the present study was able to offer a detailed exploration of the participants' experience and perceptions of bullying in situ. Furthermore, IPA was viewed as ideal in responding to the argument that professional footballers' conceptualization of concepts, such as bullying, can often take by place via 'situated learning' (Parker, 2006). As Larkin et al. (2011) argue, IPA was well suited to exploring the lived experience of bullying from the participants, within the embodied, situated world of professional football, by granting a personal and contextual worldliness to their accounts. Thus, by entering into a hermeneutic cycle, the participant and researcher were able to explicate idiographic descriptions of bullying in sport (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This idiographic commitment of IPA was favored as it allowed for both the convergent and divergent features of the participants' perceptions of bullying to be unearthed, both within and across accounts (Brown et al., 2018).

2.2. Participants

Male English professional football was selected as the context for the present study due to the prevalence of abusive, intimidatory behaviors within this environment (Parker & Manley,

2016) and the severity of high profile cases reported within the media (BBC, 2016, 2019). In addition, the authoritarian practices of football at the professional level often celebrate bullying behavior (Parker, 2006). Three professional clubs from the English Premier League and Championship were contacted and agreement given for their players to take part in the study. Eighteen male professional footballers (M = 19.83, SD = 2.96, range = 18-31 years) agreed to take part and were interviewed. Inclusion criteria dictated players having to be on a professional contract to be part of the study. In addition, there was no requirement on the players to have particular experiences of the bullying process in football, but they needed to be sufficiently experienced within the sport to discuss their perceptions of this behavior. The players' experience as professional footballers ranged from 2 to 14 years.

2.3. Procedure

After institutional ethical approval was granted the players' gatekeepers (sport science and sport psychology staff) were contacted at various clubs to ask permission to recruit players. After an initial briefing meeting, informed consent was then obtained from players who wished to take part. Consistent with the principles of IPA that research should be a dynamic process, the data collection involved an active role for the researcher in helping the participants make sense of their accounts (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). Prior to the commencement of the study a semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit information regarding perceptions of bullying and followed an approach of specifying the topics covered but without stipulating their sequencing (Patton, 2002). Questions were developed with a focus on what the participants perceived bullying to be, with a specific focus on the phenomenological commitment to meaning making (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2006) for example "Can you tell me what bullying in football means to you?" The participants were encouraged to think about their perceptions in football specifically but could discuss sport more broadly if they wished to. Alongside this, probing techniques (e.g. "Can you tell me more about that?") were

used to better understand the participants' understanding of bullying (Patton, 2002). The initial interview guide was piloted with the first three participants from the sample. These interviews were then fully transcribed and analyzed via IPA before the remaining participant interviews were completed. Interviews lasted for between 35-70 minutes (*MDuration* = 44.11, *SD* = 10.81) and were conducted at the home stadium or training ground of the participant to mirror the context of the study. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and to maintain confidentiality all participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms.

2.4. Data Analysis

Analysis of the transcripts followed amalgamated guidelines from the IPA and bullying literature (Hutchinson, 2012; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Firstly, this included looking for themes which involved repeatedly listening and reading of each audio recording and its transcript, to familiarize the researcher with the accounts (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006) before making a detailed set of notes on anything which appeared to be significant or of interest (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). These notes reflected the experiential nature of bullying, the language used by the participants (e.g. how they articulated banter in relation to bullying) and interpretations at the conceptual level which contextualized the data, moving beyond what was explicitly said to explore the deeper meaning of what was being said (Brown et al., 2018). The next step in the process involved returning to the transcripts to document emerging theme titles (e.g. ostracism) and involved the use of psychological concepts (e.g. abuse) to capture the essential meaning of the account (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). Following this, the analytical process involved some clustering of related emergent themes into more overarching "superordinate themes" (e.g. abuse and intimidation) and their constituent "subordinate themes" (e.g. ostracism) (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). QSR NVIVO 11 was used to assist with storage of the participants' quotes and the emerging themes as well as to continue the process of coding text into themes with common meanings (McDonough et al., 2011). In this study, the themes from the first participant (James)

provided a frame to scaffold the subsequent analysis (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). The process was then repeated for each participant demonstrating 'cross-case analysis' (Brown et al., 2018). Subsequently, once each transcript was analyzed a master table was created (Table 1) which linked across the participants (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). Through identifying superordinate themes across participants, it was possible to link the convergences in their accounts, while maintaining the idiographic commitment of IPA by conveying their individual divergence in perceptions (Brown et al., 2018).

2.5. Research Quality and Rigor

Given that there is no predefined 'checklist' that assesses the quality of all qualitative research, the present research adopted a flexible approach which repeatedly engaged with the principles of what constitutes good IPA research (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Thus the researchers adopted a relativist, rather than criteriologist positon to ensure sound qualitative practice and to maintain data trustworthiness (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019; B. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

To address research quality and methodological rigor Yardley's (2017) general procedures for demonstrating quality in qualitative research were considered. Given the contextual nature of the study, close attention was paid to 'sensitivity to context'. Significant efforts were made to understand the social-cultural environment of professional football (Brown et al., 2018) and how this shaped perceptions of bullying in this context. In line with IPA, bracketing was also employed in order for the researchers to consider how their own biases and assumptions may influence the research process and analysis (Yungblut et al., 2012). Structures of common experience were described from the participants' first-person viewpoint, rather than focusing on participants' behaviors and actions (Allen-Collinson, 2016; Martínková & Parry, 2013). Furthermore, this was aligned with a reflexive approach which allowed the first author to monitor and diarize their presuppositions around the concept of bullying and its nature in the

football context. This decision was taken based on the primary author's limited experience within professional football, their preconceived notions informed by prior research and media coverage about the culture of the sport and their personal experiences of bullying.

'Commitment and rigor' were demonstrated by the researchers spending significant time recruiting a hard to access sample (Kelly & Waddington, 2006) who were appropriate for the aims of the study undertaking pilot interviews and subsequently a thorough data collection and analysis (Yardley, 2017). While following the analytical procedures of IPA (e.g. J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006) an audit trail was documented and scrutinized at each step by the research team (Brown et al., 2018). The transcription and analysis of the interviews was conducted by the primary author with the other authors acting as critical friends to aid with the development of themes (Brown et al., 2018). Their role involved 'auditing' transcripts, reviewing quotes which supported the emergent themes as well as supporting the development and structure of the superordinate and subordinate themes cross-cases. It should be noted that this process was not driven by the need to agree, rather it provided a critical dialogue to challenge and develop the primary author's interpretations (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). By creating an audit trail, it was also possible to see how the interpretation was derived from the data (Yardley, 2017). This also allowed for a rigorous exploration of how any prior assumptions about bullying or the professional football context may have influenced the analysis (J. A. Smith., 2017). Furthermore, it allowed for an impactful and important research study with practical utility (Yardley, 2017) by generating knowledge around how participants perceived bullying in professional football, which may influence more contextualized education and intervention in the future.

3. Results

The conceptualization of the bullying act in professional football revolved around four key themes. These included repetition, power, emotional effects and abuse and intimidation. In line with enhancing the trustworthiness of the data analysis and themes reported, a selection of

convergences and divergences around participants' conceptualizations of bullying are presented.

3.1. Repetition

One of the most dominant themes emerging from the participants (18 out of 18) was that bullying was seen as a repetitive act. In an important extension of previous definitions of bullying, the participants highlighted how within the football context, this repetitive targeting needed to be directed at a specific individual. While some held the belief that 'one-off' occurrences could be viewed as bullying, significant divergence was found around what this repetitive element truly looks like. In general, the participants' accounts converged around the importance of frequency which contrasts existing definitions of bullying, which do not state the number of occasions needed to identify a bullying act. Indeed, for players, the quantification of bullying was critical in the formation of the theme of repetition.

Consistent with the most reported definition of bullying (Olewus, 1993), James revealed the importance of an act being carried out on multiple occasions in professional football to constitute bullying:

> I'd say it'd be the same person every day, if it was the same person getting it every single day, then I would say it was bullying. If it was just one day it was him, then one day the joke was on someone else, then it was more general and it is more banter so to speak.

The emphasis in players' language on bullying being every day or "10, 15 times each session" as Greg described, suggested that there needed to be an accumulation of actions to achieve the label of bullying, whereas occasional negative behavior was disregarded as something other than bullying. Nonetheless, Dave and Greg reflected concerns regarding consistency in terms of the amount of an act needed to constitute bullying. Dave stated, "you could say it once or twice, it's teasing, but then if it gets more repetitive it's classed as bullying." Whereas for Greg, he felt that a greater number of occurrences were required, "(doing it) repetitively 5,6,7 times that would be going too, too far. I think that would be going too far."

While on the surface these quotes appeared to be very similar, they demonstrated a variation and potential uncertainty in the participants' accounts, given the lack of a consistent number of occurrences, about when a behavior becomes excessive enough to cross the line into bullying. It also reveals a deeper issue, that the amount of an action needed to identify the repetitive element of bullying is dependent on the individual's perception. From a contextual viewpoint it may also be theorized that players have undergone a process of 'situated learning' within the established community of practice of professional football (Parker, 2006) whereby the incidence of banter is so commonplace, that the amount of bullying would have to be really high to be noticed.

Whilst agreement was largely found behind the notion that bullying in football was seen as a repetitive act, some occasional minor contradictions were expressed by participants such as Lenny, who showed how this act may be seen as a one-off:

> It's difficult because at times if you do it once, one person could see it as a laugh whereas the person who it's affecting…if it happens just once to them but it's happening once from other people and somebody else, they can see it as bullying.

This exposed a different view on frequency, in that bullying could be a series of one-off acts, though the accumulation Lenny referred to, reinforced a broader repetitive notion. Nonetheless one-off behaviors had the potential to still be bullying as Oli described, "obviously bullying can be a one-off where you say something...straight personal." Interestingly Oli did not elaborate on what this personal aspect was, suggesting an uncertainty in players' conceptualization around what is severe, as later Oli revealed that comments on body image were not viewed as being significant enough in isolation to be regarded as bullying. The language used by Oli which suggested that the victim may have to determine what is 'personal', raises concern that in football, bullying is shaped by the perception of the potential victim, rather than the perpetrators reflecting on the content of their actions. Seemingly, this context may legitimize individuals to act without responsibility and behave as they wish.

For players such as Mickey, the focus on a specific target separated bullying from other behaviors such as banter, in a way not seen in previous definitions of bullying. The language used in this extract characterized the continuous, repetitive nature of bullying with a specific focus on an individual or particular group. This was a further reminder of how for footballers, quantity is vital in shaping conceptualizations of bullying:

> It's all very well having banter…they can be ok once you're not stuck on an individual, once you're giving out to everyone, just a bit of craic [a joke] really but once you're stuck on a particular individual 24/7 and you're not giving someone a break you've definitely got bullying.

Mickey's focus on a single perpetrator and victim appears to reflect the direct nature of competition within elite sport, where players are vying for one starting place, which may facilitate this more dyadic form of negative interaction. It may also reflect that in football's 'community of practice' (Parker, 2006), these behaviors have previously been framed as acceptable under the guise of competition and thus gone unchallenged. Nevertheless, for Phil the view that bullying is focused on one specific individual in football was not completely accepted:

> Bullying in football to me would be someone or a group of people just going at the same one or maybe a couple of people constantly over weeks and a month period. Making them rethink their beliefs or…opinions about themselves and that belittling and aggressive behavior towards people to make them feel worthless or less than they are.

Paul, corroborated this, "you could bully, someone…not one person, someone could bully a group of people even if they're all together." These quotes suggest an alternative view of bullying in the professional football context, to those described in previous definitions of bullying (e.g. Olewus, 1993). In football it appears that subgroups appear within a team environment where some conform to the team's identity and others are targeted as a group rather than the traditional view of bullying which focuses on a single victim. This reinforces a message

that peer groups as well as individuals can be marginalized in football.

3.2. Power

Consistent with existing definitions of bullying, the participants' reported (17 of 18) the importance of power within their conceptualization of bullying (Olewus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014). Findings from the present study demonstrated that power is multi-faceted and contextually driven encompassing aspects such as financial status, longevity, competition and masculinity. Others talked about an inherent, contextual hierarchy which connects to these hallmarks of power.

In some cases, the hierarchical structure of professional football was seen to legitimize this act. For young professionals (please see supplementary Table 1), such as Kevin, there was a belief that this hierarchy triggers bullying,

> I think the plain reason for bullying in football is the hierarchy…that hierarchy causes bullying....it shows the coach they're more dominant and I think coaches like that more people have that character.

Kevin's quote can be usefully grounded in a Foucauldian perspective where power or the hierarchy to which he refers, functions not only from top to bottom (i.e. more senior players bully less experienced players) but also from bottom to top (Foucault, 1977). Here younger, less experienced players do not challenge bullying as a disciplinary mechanism to maintain power. The intimation from Kevin, is that bullying functions to demonstrate that players have the required characteristics to be successful in sport and that they conform to the norms and expectations of their coaches. Yet it also reveals a sense of helplessness and subservience to the operation of the football environment. It also raises questions about the degree to which players defer individual accountability for bullying behavior to those in seniority in football such as coaches, managers and governing bodies.

3.2.1. Masculine Identity

In line with research in professional football (Parker & Manley, 2016) the hierarchical nature of bullying was framed by conformity to a masculine ideal. For inexperienced players such as Rob (please see supplementary Table 1), it was emphasized in evolutionary terms:

> It could even be little things like trying to impress the group and boost yourself up as this alpha male in the team. Especially with men as footballers, they're trying to compete with each other (to show) who's the best at this, who's trying to do the most at that.

This was a further illustration of 'situated learning' (Parker, 2006) in the football environment which shapes players' need to display a certain form of masculinity, driving their need to bully. Interestingly the nature of demonstrating this prowess changed for more experienced professionals such as Ed (please see supplementary Table 1), as bullying provided a means of survival where players preserved their status:

> I think they might do it to…get a response from players in the team, so people might think "we can't say anything to him, cos obviously he's a bully, he says things." So it might be to try and show your superiority. Translate it to the pitch, they might not, say they want the ball or something, they might not say it, cos they might shout at them or something like that. It all comes down to things like that (for) people who bully.

In football, bullying allows players to perform their masculine role and appears to reflect that with experience they digest a message that bullying is a necessary process in this context to display their superiority and to command their position on the team. This masculine identity may also mask an insecurity about their position on the team and thus they legitimize bullying to exert some control.

3.2.2. Financial Status

While financial prowess could be seen as a contributor to masculine identity and survival, players such as Kevin talked about how money more specifically drove the enactment of power:

> The status in football's like that, the more you earn, the more up there you are going to be.

So, usually, if you earn the most, you can get on to anyone about anything cos you can say “I earn more money than you”.

Here we see that for Kevin, money was at the core of their belief around the drivers of bullying rather than a more evolutionary framed viewpoint on dominance. Despite this, James reflected further divergence within this theme:

I wouldn't say it'd be the finance, I'd say most clubs have the ring leader, most clubs have the main person who's been here the longest, the biggest name and people will try and impress.

Interestingly, James as the most experienced participant (please see supplementary Table 1) returned to the position that pleasing authority figures, even if unofficial through other players, is crucial in shaping the beliefs about power which may ultimately result in bullying. This further reinforces Foucault’s (1977) perspective where these hierarchies of power remain stratified where senior players maintain ‘discipline’ through bullying. Taken overall professional football prioritizes aspects such dominance, finance and longevity as well as a broader culture that players must conform to others’ expectations.

3.3. Emotional Effect

Another consistently reported bullying theme across most of the participants (16 of 18) was the emotional effect on the victim. This was framed in various ways including as a diagnostic approach to assess whether bullying had taken place, through to the emotional impact bullying in football has for the victims. For several participants a noticeable display of emotions (for example a change in their reactions or crying) was pivotal in identifying bullying, yet it belied the degree to which players feel they need to conceal these emotions. Others focused on these emotional effects more as outcomes such as a detrimental effect on the victim's personal life or their performance within the football context. This could lead to an impact on their home environment, obsessional thoughts and them being on the margins of the team.

3.3.1. Noticeable display of emotions

Despite previous definitions of bullying making a broad reference to harm (see Olewus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014), players such as Lenny and Jamal were more specific about conceptualizing emotional effects which might be used to determine bullying behavior. Lenny indicated:

> I think you can tell by their initial reaction, cos, if you do it the first time and they find it funny and they're having a laugh and enjoying it. Whereas, if you do it third or fourth time and their reaction's different to the first time, then you know that it's gone a step too far.

For Jamal, this emotional effect was even more profound, in that there may be little chance of bullying being noticed in the football context, unless the physical and emotional consequences of this behavior were graphically displayed:

> Yeah for someone to find out, it would've had to be a breakdown physically or crying, or it could be anger, start screaming sort of thing and then like it's a way for everyone to know.

While on one level this gave a reference point for establishing bullying, Jamal's vivid portrayal demonstrated the level of distress that players would need to experience in the football context, before bullying could be identified. This was also at odds with the expectations the football environment placed on players to avoid showing these signs of emotion, which might suggest why bullying remains underground in elite players. Dave verified this view:

> But behind the scenes and stuff it's not always like that but they try and put a brave face on things and it will affect them eventually, whether that's a year down the line, six months, two months it will affect them.

This extract highlighted pressures on footballers to mask the emotional impact of being bullied, because they feel the culture of football prevents them from doing so, particularly if they

fear it might impact on aspects such as selection. Dave's discourse around a 'brave face' also indicates the desire amongst footballers to avoid the negative connotation or stigma associated with whistleblowing around this behavior. It suggests that players learn to suppress emotions to navigate and survive in the professional football environment, while also preserving their masculine identity. This extends previous findings, where players were required to take insults in order to achieve peer group credibility (Parker, 2006), by demonstrating how players' level of subservience has to extend to accepting the severity of bullying despite future mental health consequences. Therefore, players appear to learn that the suppression of emotions is a price worth paying, to demonstrate the kind of acceptable masculine identity (Parker, 2006), that will allow them to succeed as a professional footballer.

The stigma with revealing these emotional effects may also be due to a perceived lack of support from authority figures such as coaches. As Kevin outlined it would be, "very hard for them (coaches) to…realize if someone's being bullied too much or the person's doing the bullying." This gave the sense that bullying is impossible for coaches to manage, a view Lenny reinforced "if they've not experienced (bullying) in their environment, then it can be difficult to…recognize when somebody is being bullied." Taken literally, these quotes suggest that there is very little coaches can do to manage the problem of bullying. Yet they also appear to protect coaches, abdicating their responsibility around managing bullying behaviors, given players appear to have accepted or are subservient to the view that it is too difficult a process to manage.

3.3.2. Personal and Performance Outcomes

The emotional effects of bullying result in clear personal and performance outcomes. James described how he observed a manager taking a dislike to a member of the support staff, which triggered the emotional effects of bullying. This ultimately ended up affecting the member of staff's home life: "I saw him crying and he would've gone home and I think it was his missus who would've encouraged him to say something because it's obviously affecting him." James'

account also started to intimate that it was difficult for this member of staff to speak out about bullying behavior without the help of his wife, with this level of emotional suppression having potentially damaging effects mental health effects. Oli depicts a scenario where these concerns can become obsessional:

> It could be like a little thing like “ah you're fat”, say you're fat and you think "oh shut up, it’s a laugh init" then you keep saying it and then you're like "hang on a minute" you look in a mirror and think "am I fat" probably you'd think you are and then obviously when it spirals and you do stupid things and it obviously gets to your head.

Oli's account serves as a further reminder of how the requirement to look a certain way in professional football may drive bullying and was indicative of the corrosive and obsessional impact it can have on a player's wellbeing. In a similar vein, Ricky highlighted a potential link between bullying and performance, "if it's every day and it's affecting the person and it's affecting the performance…they can't really trust anyone and it separates them from the group, then that's bullying." This finding potentially offered some explanation for the link between a perceived lack of social support, mental health problems and psychosocial difficulties amongst professional footballers, as the repetitive nature of bullying may be underpinning these issues.

3.4. Abuse and Intimidation

A strong theme across all the participants in relation to bullying was abuse and intimidation. Within this a myriad of different abusive behaviors were revealed, demonstrating convergences and divergences in the participants' accounts. Dominant areas of agreement surrounded verbal and relational forms of bullying. These were consistently and commonly reported across participants. In contrast to other areas of the bullying literature, evidence for the physical nature of intimidation was more equivocal, providing an interesting discussion around whether the football context buffers this type of behavior. Worryingly a small number of players, across different ethnicities, highlighted contextual concerns around the prevalence of racial

discrimination.

3.4.1. Verbal harm

An area of consensus surrounded verbal harm suggesting that football's culture of verbal chastisement, bred into the players from a young age, fosters a bullying environment. To some degree this type of bullying may be legitimized in this context, when it comes to potential performance related components such as a player's physical condition, as Charlie comments:

> I think in football it would be mainly verbal kind of stuff. I can't really think of much kind of mental or physical, I think mainly it would be verbal… Sometimes he can be on your case, if you're looking overweight, he can be "listen you're too fat, you need to lose weight."

The verbal aspect of Charlie's account was confirmed by various participants, including most explicitly and categorically by James, "Oh everything, you 'shithouse'… 'Weak as piss', 'fatty' all the words as yeah bullying words." Interestingly these accounts made much less reference to the positive use of verbal strategies as a form of banter and suggested something darker, which was more aimed at gaining a competitive advantage. They also indicated a further example of where this bullying becomes learned, normalized and then accepted. The severity of the language used also appeared to contradict that this behavior was not mentally abusive. This certainly appeared to be the case for Ed, "I think a lot of it is, the mental side of football, that's what bullying's aimed at, trying to get in people's heads." The salient point from this account was that the football context potentially permits this type of bullying, compared to physical types of harm. As such the professional football context may legitimize a broader conceptualization of bullying which is aimed to test the mental toughness of its players.

3.4.2. Physical intimidation

The physical intimidation subordinate theme exposed a range of participant views. For some, the professional football context provided a natural buffer against this due to the similar

prowess of its participants; while physical differences between players were present, there was at least a parity of physicality which protected players. Others described very deliberate forms of physical intimidation where football appears to have 'signed up' to the negative culture of initiation rites found across other sports (Diamond et al., 2016). For Lenny the specific nature of the football context, guarded against physical intimidation:

> Maybe related to being at a football club, it's banter going too far, there's no real physical bullying and stuff like that compared to other walks of life, cos you know you're in the spotlight. So it's mainly just banter going too far.

Lenny's phraseology of 'the spotlight' sounded almost positive, as it protected against bullying behavior, though it also suggested a hidden side to footballers' behavior, where bullies might retreat away from the media's gaze and use the segregated environment of professional football to bully. Other players such as James exposed this with vivid accounts from their time as a young first team player, "And I mean like boot polish, beat up, stuff thrown at, 'what the fuck are you doing in here you little, you're not meant to be in here'." Later, James furthered:

> If they were bored and nothing to do, they would go and kidnap one of the younger lads from the changing room and I don't know, tape them up, boot polish him, stick him in a wheelie bin, for their amusement. Because they thought it was funny.

As the oldest and most experienced participant these views may results from James being from a slightly different era, where players may have been more accepting of this physical initiation into the culture of professional football.

3.4.3. Ostracism

Consistent with previous conceptualizations of bullying, a number of players also discussed a relational form of ostracism (Cook et al., 2010). Ricky reveals a powerful account of the isolating nature of bullying behavior in football:

> So I think if there is a bit of bullying going on and they think no-one's here for them and

they go home at 2 o'clock and they just sit there 'cos they don't feel like they can just go on and chill with the boys.

This was furthered by James, who told the story of a player being forced to "stand in a shower, so he couldn't listen" to a team talk, which evoked a painful memory of a peer being frozen out from the group as part of the process of bullying, giving credence to the relational element of bullying. These views may also be framed from a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1977) where abusive and intimidatory bullying strategies are used in football as a disciplinary enactment of power, which maintains the hierarchy supported by both coaches and players.

3.4.4. Racial discrimination

Though the verbal, physical and relational aspects of bullying received far more discussion, it was noteworthy to point to worrying comments revealed by a select group of participants (5 of 18) around racial discrimination. In many ways Kevin's quote was the most concerning of all, in that it revealed educational policies around this type of bullying only had short-lived effects on people's behaviors and it implied that racially abusive bullying for some was "normal."

Like racism, Kick it Out[1] we have these presentations, one week, one day everyone's really aware to it and like, yeah, there's nothing racist happening in the environment and then like next week we're back to normal.

George's assertion added to this, "Like we said before, religion wise or anything, your race. Just anything, they'd be the stereotypical [things] what you'd be bullied for." Whilst not explicitly mentioned by the players, these findings may be explained by the typical predominance of White British/Irish players on English football teams, which creates a further power differential to drive bullying behavior. Given both players were two of the more inexperienced professionals, it also suggests a worrying theme that football as a context has not

[1] Kick it Out is English football's equality and inclusion organization

managed to address institutional racism and that current education programs are insufficient with younger players in this regard. Moreover, these findings highlighted an important extension on previous conceptualizations of bullying which includes a racially motivated form of discrimination which is shaped by the professional football context.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how adult male professional footballers conceptualize bullying within the sporting context. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis, male professional footballers' conceptualized bullying through a variety of psychological and contextual explanations. Consistent with the study's aim the participants did not provide an overall definition of bullying, instead the idiographic approach unearthed a variety of perceptions around the main components of this concept, which were shaped by the nature of the professional football context.

Interestingly players largely described a concept which was consistent with Olewus' (1993) classic definition, whereby bullying is a harm-doing act, carried out repeatedly and characterized by relationships with an imbalance of power. This contrasts research in sport and the wider developmental domain which has questioned components such as repetition (Kerr et al., 2016; Volk et al., 2014). One explanation for this, is that while Volk et al. (2014) sought to redefine bullying across the lifespan a large proportion of their work was still focused on child and adolescent populations, whereas the present study focused on adult participants. On the surface at least, professional footballers appear to largely reject Volk et al.'s (2014) challenge to the importance of repetition and reaffirm Olewus' (1993) need for an accumulation of acts for behavior to achieve the significance of bullying. This was a notable finding as preliminary investigations with young adult sport participants have rejected this notion (Kerr et al., 2016), suggesting that players becoming desensitized to single occurrences of bullying as they move into adulthood. The salience of the workplace context may also drive this desensitization, given

bullying in this environment is seen as a targeted person receiving consistent mistreatment over time (Sprigg et al., 2019). Equally, the encompassing tendencies of professional football may mean players become accustomed to abusive and intimidatory acts as part of their apprenticeship (Parker & Manley, 2016), long before adulthood. Subsequently concern must be raised that most players do not recognize that one serious act of harm (e.g. violent attacks in the changing room) could be classed as bullying.

In another important development, the players were much more specific about the repetitive aspect of bullying being focused on a single victim or group. The focus on one victim or group of victims also differed from Volk et al's (2014) redefinition of bullying. Within football this may be explained by players identifying repetitive victimization, with a clear focus on a specific target as part of the bullying process. Worryingly, this repetitive bullying may be driven by the professional football culture's demand for players to conform to a powerful set of cultural norms around workplace relations (Parker & Manley, 2016). As Parker (2006) theorized in football this may indicate the informal process of 'situated learning' where bullying becomes legitimized and normalized by players as one of the skills required to fit into the environment's established 'community of practice'. In line with recent research in sport (Kerr et al., 2016) the pursuit of success and masks a potentially dangerous undertone in football (and other workplaces), whereby isolated serious harm-doing acts are excused as banter. Despite repetition being a key theme, it was noteworthy that adult participants held varying views on the frequency required to define an act as bullying mirroring research with children and adolescents (Vaillancourt et al., 2008), providing a key finding in that this repetitive notion is ambiguous.

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Olewus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014) footballers highlighted the necessary ingredients of power, various forms of abuse and harm-doing through the emotional effects on the victim. It would appear that Foucauldian perspectives on power and discipline provide a useful framework for understanding bullying in professional football, as

bullying maintains a form of discipline which preserves the hierarchy of both managers and players alike (Foucault, 1977). In line with these propositions, players maintain this hierarchy not only from top to bottom (e.g. more senior players bully less experienced players) but also from bottom to top through unquestioning acts of subordination (Parker & Manley, 2016), which can often excuse a passive acceptance of the necessity of bullying behaviors.

The present findings do, however, reveal that there is no single aspect which drives this hierarchy and power-based element of bullying. Instead it is multifaceted focusing on factors such as masculinity, wealth, longevity and competition. This convergences and divergences in the participants' accounts make a unique contribution to the bullying and sport literature, by highlighting what an individually nuanced and experienced behavior bullying is, particularly within football. In professional football the identity conforming, embodiment of hyper-masculine prowess and consumptive power, represented through aspects such as financial affluence (Parker, 2001), was seen to drive bullying. Equally, the dominance behaviors displayed by those who have been at the club longest, may demonstrate why popularity and leadership credentials have been found to trigger bullying behaviors in student-athlete populations (Kerr et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the competitive drivers of bullying such as finance and dominance highlight the complex nature of sport where athletes need to work together in one sense, whilst needing to differentiate themselves as individuals, in order to gain a starting place on their team (Kerr et al., 2016). This inherent authoritarianism (Parker & Manley, 2016) permeates various forms of harm which constitute bullying. Players articulated how the physical element, found elsewhere in bullying research (Brackenridge, 2010; Olewus, 1993), was not only buffered by the media scrutiny on football (Gearing, 1999) but may also be less relevant with adult populations. Here the present study significantly extended workplace bullying literature, by contextualizing bullying within the authoritarian, masculine, media focused industry of professional football,

where bullying can often be celebrated (Parker, 2006), rather than focusing on typically ‘white-collar’ professions (Hewett et al., 2018; Sprigg et al., 2019).

The present study shows how a hegemonic form of masculinity prevails in professional football, which in turn legitimizes verbal, mental and relational forms of bullying often under the guise of banter and where physical intimidation is more a feature of 'necessary' initiation ceremonies (Diamond et al., 2016; Parker, 2006). In contrast to verbal banter often being viewed in sport as good natured and fun (Kerr et al., 2016), players described how in professional football this was highly targeted and aimed at displaying dominance and a competitive advantage. Worryingly, the players alluded to a more disturbing form of dominance, which results in a racial element to bullying not defined in other contexts. One argument for this is a continuation of the view that non-white players are perceived as a potential masculine threat to many young footballers (Parker, 2006), suggesting institutional racism prevails and education remains insufficient. Thus, while aspects of Olewus' (1993) description of the acts which constitute bullying hold true, this study makes an important contribution to the sport and wider occupational psychology literature by showing that the organizational context and culture of professional football shapes bullying. This is crucial for developing policies and educational programs to address this behavior.

In a similar vein, the present study makes a meaningful addition to the conceptualization of harm within the act of bullying (Olewus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014), through identifying the specific emotional effects of this behavior. The findings drew important parallels between emotional abuse and bullying in sport (Jewett et al., 2019; Stirling & Kerr, 2008) where outcomes ranged from obvious displays of crying and anger, to negative impacts on performance and players suffering in isolation on their own. These outcomes persist in football and sport more broadly due to the emotionally abusive approaches adopted by coaches such as verbal and

physical intimidation, as well as fear of rejection (Stirling, 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2008), which instills a culture of fear and concerns for a player's place on their team.

There was an irony in the players' accounts around bullying only being recognized when emotions are observable, as in football players are expected to raise their tolerance to verbal derogation and interactional banter, rather than revealing their discomfort at this behavior (Gearing, 1999; Parker, 2006). This might make it unlikely that players will ever display the emotional effects discussed to signify bullying is taking place. Drawing on theories of emotional regulation (Koole, 2009; Larsen et al., 2012), players highlighted how the professional football context demands that negative psychological strategies such as expressive suppression are employed by victims of bullying to put on a 'brave face' and preserve their masculine identity. The result of which is that bullying may be more severe in this environment, as perpetrators do not identify the signs of bullying in their victims, leaving a greater impact on victims' mental health from suppressing their emotions (Larsen et al., 2012). This could be a potentially toxic outcome for some footballers, as males have already been found to be reluctant to discuss mental health issues for fear of a loss of power and diminished masculinity when cultural norms reinforce these beliefs (Emslie et al., 2006). It also raises questions about whether players feel they can whistle-blow bullying behaviors if they perceive they may be labelled as weak.

In addition, players also conflated emotional abuse and bullying by highlighting how even well-intentioned coaches may be unaware in realizing this bullying is taking place or worse still, they may be perpetrating this behavior, as coaches are often seen as the originators of violent, abusive and castigating behaviors in football (Parker, 2006, Stirling, 2013). Within the present study players revealed few options for reporting this behavior. Players may also have the sense that reporting this behavior will be viewed negatively rather than positively and be associated with the negative stigma of whistleblowing. To this end more research is required to understand what options, if any, are available for reporting to the players.

4.1. Implications for practice

The present study yielded important implications in terms of how professional footballers perceive bullying and for the workplace culture in this context. For many players, there was an assumption that behavior can only be identified as bullying when the victim displays an emotional reaction. Perceptions of this emotional reaction also seems to pathologize the victim rather than the perpetrator, as the professional football culture expects players to respond to potential bullying by putting on a 'brave face'. Therefore, education and welfare programs in professional football appear to need to challenge these perceptions, as well as what is deemed as acceptable in this context. In particular it would seem clear that any educational program aimed at addressing bullying behavior in professional football has to move away from approaches that are simply reactive; where a policy is only initiated when a perpetrator notices that a behavior 'tips' the balance into bullying because of the emotional effect produced in a player receiving it. More work would have to be completed on educating all individuals about behaviors that are appropriate and not, so that behaviors likely to produce a negative emotional effect are stopped rather than simply addressed after the fact. This approach is more about primary rather than secondary responses to the levels of bullying present in professional football. It would also remove the necessity for the victim of the bullying behavior to have to wait until a point of desperation is reached before any action would be taken. By educating players it may sensitize them to the problem of bullying and include them as key stakeholder in interventions (Nery et al., 2019; Steinfeldt et al., 2012), such that they can take responsibility for their communication with others and limit the likelihood for banter to turn into bullying.

Equally the present study unearthed findings which demonstrated that an idiographic approach is needed to understand bullying and as such football clubs need to develop codes of conducts that are bespoke to their organization. Interventions targeted at bullying may need to be inclusive of approaches such as one-to-one coaching, to fit within the broader area of

organizational cultural interventions in sport, whilst maintaining a strong focus on an organization and its individuals (Wagstaff et al., 2013). Finally, football clubs need to be aware of the institutionalized culture within their environment and consider the level at which behavior moves from banter to bullying. At present the football context appears to legitimize extreme versions of 'banter' which are not acceptable in other workplace environments. As such education programs and codes of conducts for understanding and reporting bullying behaviors may need developing or reviewing.

4.2. Limitations and future research directions

The present research demonstrated two limitations. Firstly, the players' accounts did not fully establish where the conceptual divide falls between banter and bullying. Given the prevalence of participants using banter and bullying interchangeably, and the potential negative effects of banter, future research should continue to explore professional footballers' perceptions of these terms and seek to unearth the convergences and divergences around these concepts. This may also provide clarification within wider psychological literature where the concepts of banter and bullying are also confused.

Secondly, the present study was limited to the use of a single interview on a difficult topic, focused on males within the unique and often intimidatory workplace context of professional football (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). This may have presented issues with building a rapport to discuss potentially difficult experiences (Brown et al., 2018). As noted previously male footballers may have been reluctant to discuss their experiences of bullying for fear of being perceived as weak within the football context. Future research could consider alternative approaches to establish rapport with the players, so they feel at greater ease discussing this topic area. This may include prolonged engagement and reassurance of the players to make them feel safe in sharing their stories around bullying or alternative qualitative designs such as ethnographic research. These approaches may allow for greater exploration of the potential

barriers to reporting bullying within professional football clubs, as well as whether education and welfare provision supports players and appropriately informs them around bullying as a concept. In addition, further research within the male dominated, working class industry of professional football, would also make a unique contribution to organizational literature by exploring whether the cultural nuances of the football workplace impact on the reporting of bullying. Finally, future research may also focus on female athletes to explore whether they experience bullying in a similar fashion to males (Jewett et al., 2019) and whether masculinity is inherent to football as a whole.

In summary, the present research makes a significant contribution to the bullying literature in sport by exploring this concept within a male-dominated professional football context. Overall, the study illustrated how many classical features of definitions of bullying represent themselves in this environment; however, the ways in which participants articulated this varied as a result of the individualistic nature of the data collection. While further research is required to continue to explore the nuances of this behavior and the conceptual divide with banter, the findings provide an important initial insight into understanding and addressing bullying behavior in professional football. In particular, a workplace culture persists, where more extreme behaviors are still normalized and deemed as acceptable compared to other environments, setting a dangerous example for the sport as a whole.

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Table 1: Master table of themes in relation to the bullying act

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Repetition	Frequency
	One-off
	Specific target
Power	Masculine identity
	Financial status
Emotional Effect	Noticeable display of emotions
	Personal and performance outcomes
Abuse and intimidation	Verbal harm
	Physical intimidation
	Ostracism
	Racial discrimination