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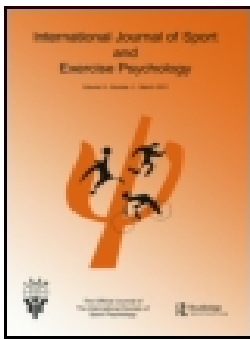
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When it is no longer a bit of banter: Coaches' perspectives of bullying in professional soccer

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ABSTRACT

Studies exploring bullying in sport psychology remain relatively limited despite various media reports of the abusive practice of some professional soccer coaches. This research explores coaches' views of bullying in professional soccer academies and how it is framed in relation to banter. Five professional soccer coaches were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The methodology and analysis were guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis. Coaches highlighted key components which identify bullying in professional soccer environments, such as intent to harm; frequency of behaviour; and an imbalance of power. Coaches also highlighted different individual and contextual factors which separated bullying from banter. These included individual differences; unintentional behaviour; immaturity; and the masculinity of the soccer culture. These findings provide an important extension to the bullying literature in sport by highlighting coaches' own perspectives on this concept within the professional soccer context. The findings also illustrate the subtle nuances through which coaches separate bullying from banter. As such, important applied implications are discussed for the development of coach education programmes to raise greater awareness around these concepts as well as the potential consequences of bullying and banter on player welfare in professional soccer.

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Introduction

Within recent years, professional soccer has seen an unprecedented rise in reported allegations of abuse and bullying (BBC, 2021). Despite this increased media attention, research in sport psychology has only just begun to investigate this issue from the players' perspective (Newman et al., 2021). While this provides an initial understanding of bullying in sport, the literature so far has tended to focus on sport performers who may be more likely to be victims of this behaviour. In this regard, there is limited understanding of the phenomenon of bullying from a coach's perspective. This could be

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problematic in the professional soccer context, as coaches can not only observe bullying behaviours that take place, but on occasions can also be the originators of abusive and intimidatory behaviours (Kelly & Waddington, 2006).

Understanding bullying in sport

Within psychological research, bullying is often defined as “an intentional, negative action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another” (Olewus, 1993, p. 8). Definitions of this concept typically stress the importance of the repetitive element of bullying (Volk et al., 2014), while identifying the importance of a power imbalance between the bully and victim. Despite definitions of bullying tending to result from an educational context (e.g., Olewus, 1993), recent workplace research has highlighted how bullying involves the targeting of an individual who feels a relative lack of power in response to mistreatment over a long period of time (Sprigg et al., 2019). In sport, while Olewus’ definition has retained some support (Jewett et al., 2019), other studies have suggested bullying presents different features in this context (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016). Here, bullying can occur as a result of teasing behaviours carried out for “entertainment purposes” which may not carry a clear intent to harm (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016). Within professional soccer specifically, research has shown that while some elements of Olewus’ definition can be supported such as repetition, power and abuse, these components are experienced in wide-ranging ways by players (Newman et al., 2021). It should be noted that while these studies make an important contribution to developing a conceptual understanding of bullying in sport, they remain focused on the accounts of players, rather than the views of other key figures such as coaches. Furthermore, although recent research in education has highlighted the benefits of inviting different perspectives of bullying (Mishna et al., 2020), this approach has not been followed to the same extent with coaches in sport.

To date, research which has focused on negative interactions within coach–athlete relationships has framed them in terms of abuse, interpersonal violence and the broader category of maltreatment, whereas bullying has been articulated more as a product of peer-to-peer relationships (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Parent & Fortier, 2018; Stirling, 2009). Specifically, emotional abuse and emotional bullying can be differentiated based on the “criterion of a critical relationship role” where one figure influences the well-being of another (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). For example, abuse occurs when a prescribed authority figure (e.g., a coach) exerts power and oppresses a less powerful figure (e.g., a player). By contrast, despite the potential for a power imbalance to still exist, bullying can also occur when neither figure is in a prescribed position of authority (Stirling, 2009). Although research supports this perspective in relation to abuse in sport (Stirling, 2013), other findings within the workplace have highlighted conceptual overlap between abusive and bullying practices (Hershcovis, 2011). In the workplace, bullying is seen to originate from those in a formal (as well as a social) position of power, mirroring the criterion of a “critical relationship” discussed in relation to abuse in sport (Hershcovis, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Equally both emotional abuse in sport and workplace bullying may result from non-intentional acts which have the potential to cause harm (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Emerging findings within the workplace of professional soccer continue to highlight this conceptual overlap, as players view abusive strategies (from coaches and managers as well as players) as part of a broader conceptualisation

of bullying (Newman et al., 2021). However, coaches' views of bullying have not been sought in this way. Given their "critical relationship role," it is important to establish whether coaches conceptualise bullying as a peer-to-peer interaction as described in some sporting literature (e.g., Stirling, 2009) or whether they view this concept differently.

The culture of abuse and bullying in sport

To date, the literature has suggested that bullying in sport is normalised (Papaefstathiou et al., 2013) to such an extent, that managing reports of abuse is highly problematic (Alexander et al., 2011). As an example, negative coaching practice is legitimised in sport in wide-ranging ways from the popularisation of abusive strategies within film depictions (Kerr, Stirling, et al., 2016), through to misguided beliefs from varying sport personnel that these approaches might enhance performance outcomes (Gervis et al., 2016). Worryingly, Gervis et al. (2016) showed that expectations around the necessity of abusive practices for performance success have been found to be normalised most within elite young athletes, suggesting that the beliefs become ingrained at a young age with this population. Furthermore, a review of safeguarding cases in the UK revealed that abuse can also target those over 18, highlighting a shortcoming in most safeguarding strategies, which are primarily aimed at children (Rhind et al., 2015). To compound this, findings with sport psychologists show that they only possess a moderate understanding of safeguarding policies, leading them to not report incidents for fear of doing wrong and jeopardising their career (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Taken overall, the normalised culture of wrongdoing, the limitations in safeguarding systems and the noticeable lack of training for individuals who are supposed to prioritise athletes' wellbeing such as sport psychologists (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) demonstrate serious concerns around a systemic culture of abuse in sport.

A noticeable limitation of some of this previous literature around abuse in sport is that it tends not to focus on the key stakeholder of coaches. In one of the few studies which addressed this, two "primary origins" (expressive and instrumental) were established for abusive behaviour (Stirling, 2013). Although this research showed that these origins lead coaches to make derogatory comments out of anger and frustration, based often on the belief that this approach motivates athletes towards success, it is not necessarily the case that coaches are abusive. Instead, they are likely to represent key observers of bullying behaviour first-hand. Interestingly, coaches highlighted how with growing awareness and reflection they become aware of the negative impact and harm emotional abuse can cause athletes (Stirling, 2013). This is noteworthy, as it demonstrates that before coaches develop knowledge around abuse, they may not be aware of how inappropriate behaviours from others might impact athletes. Consistent with this, Baar and Wubbels (2013) found that coaches were unaware of concepts synonymous with bullying such as peer aggression and victimisation. In addition, these coaches were more likely to overestimate their own impact and control in handling these behaviours. As a result, it raises questions about coaches' ability to identify and intervene in relation to negative peer-to-peer interactions such as bullying in the sporting context. Therefore, it would seem that bullying practices may stem from a lack of education in professional sport environments, whilst organisations' beliefs that these approaches motivate athletes and guarantee success remain unchallenged (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2016).

Further to issues with a lack of education and the nature of professional soccer, an additional factor which may affect coaches' understanding of bullying is the apparent necessity of banter within this context (Parker, 2006). Professional soccer, especially, is fuelled by a sense of social acceptability around the need for banter for individuals to gain superiority over one another (Magrath, 2017). While players enact this, it is a view largely shaped by senior players and coaches as part of a young player's apprenticeship within professional soccer academies (Parker, 2006). Although the concept of banter is often viewed favourably within elite sport (Wagstaff et al., 2017), facilitating positive aspects of group membership such as cohesion and bonding (McGuire et al., 2021), there is a concern in professional soccer that it is used to alleviate pressure with the demands around winning (Nesti, 2010). This concern is exacerbated by findings which highlight that those working in organised sport, such as professional soccer coaches, may find it hard to distinguish when banter becomes bullying, due to their gendered, homophobic discourse, which is aimed to "enhance" performance (Adams et al., 2010). The combination of findings in professional soccer is alarming as coaches appear to not appreciate the subtleties of banter, particularly at a peer-to-peer level, and when it crosses the line into bullying. Therefore, it is of importance to explore coaches' conceptualisations of these terms in order to establish their current understanding and to potentially sensitise them (Nery et al., 2019), to the problem of bullying in soccer.

Present study

Taken together, the research literature suggests professional coaches can normalise intimidatory practices such as bullying as a result of their own emotionally abusive interactions in the soccer environment (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). In particular, there needs to be a greater contextual understanding of coaches' views of bullying, as these figures often "celebrate" this behaviour in professional soccer academies (Parker, 2006). To date, little research has explored whether this is due to a coach's own "situated learning" (Parker, 2006) within professional soccer academies. Here, coaches may have learned as part of their own apprenticeship that bullying is a necessary function of the soccer context. Importantly, by exploring these lived experiences of bullying from the perspective of coaches operating in professional soccer academies, research can establish when banter may cross the line into bullying (Newman et al., 2021). By exploring these perspectives with coaches, it may raise awareness such that coaches may better address this problem. Finally, researching bullying within the professional soccer academy context answers calls from developmental literature (Volk et al., 2014) to consider bullying with groups other than young children, whilst adding to a growing focus on the experiences of bullying in sport with high-performing young adults (Jewett et al., 2019).

Therefore, due to previous findings in relation to bullying and the potential cultural acceptance of this behaviour in professional soccer, this study explored academy professional soccer coaches' perceptions of bullying. Specifically, given research findings to date in sport, the study aimed to explore whether bullying was framed in solely in terms of peer-to-peer relationships. Moreover, given the culturally accepted and potentially more extreme nature of banter in professional soccer environments, the study had a secondary aim to establish how coaches frame bullying in relation to banter.

Materials and methods

Due to the importance of understanding the person (i.e., coaches) in context (i.e., professional soccer academies), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore how the participants made sense of bullying (Larkin et al., 2011). Given bullying can be conceptualised in different ways, IPA allowed for a detailed, nuanced analysis of this behaviour, while challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions (Smith et al., 2017) within professional soccer. By situating coaches' perceptions of bullying within professional soccer, the study was able to maintain the "contextualist" position of IPA, whilst adopting a broadly social constructionist stance (Shinebourne, 2011). In addition, the idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) was appropriate in exploring the convergent and divergent views of bullying from the coaches' experience both within and across accounts (Brown et al., 2018). Finally, by entering the two-stage process of the "double hermeneutic" (Smith & Osborn, 2006), both the researcher and the coach attempted to make sense of the coach's world in relation to the phenomena of bullying.

Participants

Following IPA guidelines (Smith, 2016), a purposive sampling technique was implemented to identify a homogenous sample of professional soccer coaches. Professional coaches operating within academies were selected as they oversee a crucial phase in the development of young footballers from adolescence through to adulthood, where players' beliefs are shaped by the requirements of the soccer context (Gearing, 1999). As such, it was felt that their lived experience may offer unique insight into the essence and meaning of bullying in soccer. The sample (see Table 1) consisted of five British male academy soccer coaches aged between 22 and 41 years ($M = 33.00$; $SD = 8.02$) who were employed by either a Category 1 or Category 2 professional soccer academy. Coaches had between 3 and 20 years of total coaching experience in soccer ($M = 11.00$; $SD = 6.18$).

Procedure

After ethical approval was obtained, links were developed with the English Premier League to identify professional soccer clubs who were willing to take part in the study. Coaches were then contacted through gatekeepers at the interested soccer clubs. Once participants agreed to take part, a time and date were agreed for each interview. Before each interview, the participant completed an informed consent form and their right to withdraw was explained. Consistent with the principles of IPA, a semi-structured interview guide was constructed which involved an active role for the researchers in

Table 1. Participant ages and years of experience as a professional soccer coach.

Participant	Age	Years as a professional coach
Isaac	22	3
Fred	39	20
Joseph	27	9
Kevin	34	13
Paul	41	11

helping coaches make sense of their accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2006). This guide followed the phenomenological commitment to meaning-making (e.g., “what does bullying in football mean to you?,” “is there a difference between banter and bullying?”), by exploring coaches’ perspectives on what bullying is (e.g., “Can you tell me what behaviours resemble bullying among adults [players] in a football environment?”). Furthermore, probing techniques were also utilised to better explore perceptions of bullying (Patton, 2002). A pilot interview was conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the interview guide. This confirmed that the questions were clear and answerable by the participants. In accordance with previous IPA research, the interview was included in the final analysis (Mawson et al., 2011). Coaches were interviewed for between 48 and 105 min within a private room and to conclude each interview, the coaches were debriefed to reduce the risk of harm and reminded that their names would be replaced with pseudonyms.¹

Data analysis

Interviews were analysed by using the IPA procedures provided by Smith et al. (2009). Firstly to maintain the idiographic nature of IPA, once the audio files were transcribed, each interview was analysed separately (Smith & Osborn, 2006). The process began by listening back to the interview and re-reading the transcript to share the participant’s frame of reference. Then the left margin was used to document descriptive, linguistic and explanatory comments to identify potential meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2006). Following this, the transcript was returned to generate emergent themes which transformed the initial notes into a higher level of abstraction, and where possible used psychological concepts to capture the essential meaning of the account (Smith & Osborn, 2006). The analysis then moved to clustering emergent themes. By commencing several processes (e.g., abstraction and subsumption), superordinate and their subordinate themes were created to help illustrate a summary of the perspective of the coach. This process was then repeated for each participant to develop a “cross-case” analysis (Brown et al., 2018). Each case was analysed individually before finally, a master table of themes (see Table 2) was created across the accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2006). This table linked the convergent features across participants’ accounts, whilst also reflecting the divergent features both across and within accounts.

Establishing rigour

In order to maintain trustworthiness and good qualitative practice, the researchers used a relativist rather than criteriological position to ensure rigour within the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Consistent with J. A. Smith’s (2011) principles for good IPA research,

Table 2. Master table of themes in relation to bullying and banter.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
The components of bullying	Intent to harm Frequency of behaviour Imbalance of power
Separating bullying and banter	Individual differences Unintentional behaviour Immaturity Masculinity of the soccer culture

Yardley's (2017) updated recommendations for quality in qualitative research were followed. Firstly, the researchers displayed "sensitivity to context" by making a sustained effort to understand the professional soccer environment and how this impacted on the coaches' views of bullying. Additionally, the authors also made significant attempts to bracket their prior assumptions about the professional soccer context. Consistent with this, field notes were taken to enable a reflexive approach whereby the researchers could monitor their presuppositions (e.g., authors' previous research in this environment, as well as their personal interest in the sport).

The researchers spent prolonged periods of time recruiting coaches through various social media channels to show "commitment and rigour" (Yardley, 2017). To this end, pilot interviews and a thorough data collection and analysis took place. To "audit" the analysis, the first and second authors held regular meetings to explore interview data to discuss the development of emergent themes. The findings were later "audited" by the other authors who acted as "critical friends" (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This discussion was not necessarily driven by the need to agree but instead, allowed for consideration of different perceptions and interpretations within the emerging data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Finally, the aspect of "impact and importance" (Yardley, 2017) was met by the study addressing a contemporary issue in professional soccer, which offered the opportunity to educate and raise awareness for the coaches around bullying in this context.

Results

The study aimed to explore the meaning of bullying for professional soccer academy coaches and how bullying and banter were framed in relation to each other. Moreover, in relation to the specific aim which explored whether bullying occurs solely in peer-to-peer relationships, coaches exclusively viewed bullying as a product of these interactions, rather than their own with players. As a result of this, findings are discussed in the context of peer-to-peer relationships in professional soccer with two key superordinate themes being presented. Firstly, the components of bullying set out what makes this phenomenon unique in the professional soccer context. Secondly, coaches illustrated how they go about separating bullying and banter. Consistent with the idiographic commitment of IPA, convergences and divergences from the participants' accounts are revealed where relevant for each theme.

The components of bullying

Specifically within this subordinate theme, coaches highlighted the importance of a clear intent to harm. Typically, they reflected the need for an act to be carried out frequently to determine it as bullying, though there was some divergence within this theme. Finally, coaches discussed the importance of power imbalances and how this contributes to bullying.

Intent to harm

All five participants reported that bullying is apparent when the perpetrator makes personal comments. The term "personal" was interpreted as intent to harm because comments become more targeted to an individual, resulting in distress and possible

isolation, as the jokes become no longer inclusive. Nonetheless, the coaches' accounts did vary when describing topics of a "personal" nature. Kevin highlighted how "when it becomes 'personal', family members you know, it's not funny, it's not banter any more, it's crossed that line." Kevin highlighted how "personal" can include referring to family, indicating that these comments are not just about the recipient themselves. He also illustrated a boundary by referring to a hypothetical "line" that is crossed when banter and teasing become "personal," resulting in bullying behaviour. The perceptual demarcation of when this is crossed was concerning as Isaac revealed:

I think discrimination is a big word that comes into it, whether that be racial, sexual or gender, whatever it might be. I think if you [are] personal on aspects then it can definitely be one of the differences [to make an act bullying].

This suggested that comments involving racism and homophobia are "personal" and can be regarded as bullying. The use of "big" highlighted the seriousness of the topic and indicated that making fun of the identity or personal difference of a victim could cause serious harm. Moreover, by drawing on discrimination, it also hinted at a worrying assumption from the coaches that behaviour needs to be overt enough that it is underpinned by racism, sexuality or sexism in order for it to be viewed as bullying.

Frequency of behaviour

The frequency of behaviour was mentioned by all coaches as a factor that distinguishes bullying in the professional soccer environment. Isaac's perspective was that bullying begins at the point at which comments begin to harm a victim, suggesting that a singular harmful behaviour can be regarded as bullying:

There is a fine line sometimes, but even if you just cross that [line] once, it can still be determined as bullying. It only has to upset the kid once for it to have an effect, so yes, I'd say it doesn't have to be multiple times.

Most of the other participants, however, did not share this perspective. Joseph implied that it can only be considered as bullying when the victim experiences an accumulation of comments multiple times on a single day:

Does it become bullying because they [the perpetrator] carry on doing it on the pitch and they continue it off the pitch as they're walking into the dressing room? Continuing it in the dressing room and then continuing on until that person gets home ...

Fred suggested the same harmful behaviour needed to occur "every day" for it to be considered as bullying:

Banter can be something that can happen on a Monday and might happen to the same person on a Wednesday, but it's a totally different thing that they're discussing, or, trying to have a bit of banter about. Whereas bullying will be something that happens where it gets locked in on, its every day.

The metaphor "locked in" suggested an imprisoning feeling for the victim, where they have no escape and are unable to break the routine of harmful and personal comments made by the perpetrator. It also highlights when bullying becomes so sustained that it is observable to the coaches. In this case, Fred's views of bullying contrasted quite sharply from Isaac's, illustrating a vast range of "how much" of a behaviour is needed to determine

bullying. An explanation for this may result from Fred being the most experienced coach, whereas Isaac was the youngest and least experienced (see Table 1). Here, the culture of professional soccer may desensitise coaches to the severity of one-off occurrences of bullying.

Imbalance of power

All participants indicated that bullying occurs when there is an imbalance of power. From coaches' perspective, a perpetrator senses a weakness as the opportunity to become superior to the victim. The participants offered different viewpoints as to where and with whom this can occur.

I was reading about the Iranian player, who ... said Player X targeted him, by talking about his children and his family, that's not banter. You know, that's obviously Player X trying to bully him, and manipulate that player, to try and see where his weaknesses are. (Kevin)

Kevin was the only coach who illustrated how bullying can be differentiated from banter during a match, where opposition players are targeted with an intent to harm. This alluded to a sense that players legitimise bullying under the guise of sledging or "trash-talking" so that they can identify "weaknesses" in the opposition. It highlights that these established practices in sport could act as normalised bullying between players and therefore coaches must address these behaviours if they observe them.

For others, such as Paul, personal comments made by a perpetrator become more targeted at an individual within the club and are intended to cause harm and create an imbalance of power, "bullying for me is pre-meditated, it's the same person being identified as the easy target." Equally, Paul highlighted that a victim is usually viewed as being vulnerable and therefore an "easy target," suggesting recipients of bullying are perceived as weak and therefore not accepted within soccer. Seemingly, the perpetrator makes calculated attempts to capitalise on this weakness and display their authority.

Separating bullying and banter

Coaches highlighted several themes which enabled them to differentiate between bullying and banter. On an individual level, while subordinate themes such as individual differences and unintentional behaviour appear to suggest ways in which bullying can be distinguished from banter, they also reveal potential issues around perception with these concepts. Similarly, on a contextual level themes of immaturity and the masculinity of the soccer culture reveal potential concerns around how the soccer environment may make the distinction between bullying and banter, rather than focus on the behaviours themselves.

Individual differences

Individual differences were a common feature among all the participants' accounts around the degree to which banter can be classified as bullying. However, the coaches did highlight two overriding viewpoints, one which was akin to the mood of the victim on the day:

There have been incidences, where all of a sudden we're in a passing drill and some players gets peppered with a football and sometimes they [players] can't deal with it and other times it's a joke. (Isaac)

The quote from Isaac appeared to suggest that the boundaries for what is acceptable could vary depending on how the victim is feeling at a particular time. Therefore, the line that has been mentioned regarding a boundary could be difficult for coaches to determine with their different players. On one level, it may make it difficult for the coaches policing the environment, as well as the players themselves, for knowing which behaviours are acceptable for each person. In another way, though Isaac's reference to whether victims can "deal with it" or not, it appears to pathologise feelings of bullying as the victim's problem.

The other overriding opinion from the remaining coaches was that the personality of a victim will guide the interpretation. This adds further variability regarding acceptable behaviour, but as personality was viewed as stable, boundaries may be more easily understood. Joseph alluded to this almost trait-based classification: "so basically, if it's something like [the] personality of a player [!] might [respond by saying] 'right ok' [it's] teasing [but], to somebody else [it] might be complete bullying." Despite this apparent ease of separating bullying and in this case teasing, it did reveal a dangerous assumption that the perception of the player's personality could solely determine what is appropriate behaviour or not.

Unintentional behaviour

All participants highlighted that unintentional behaviour is important to consider when addressing whether an action is bullying rather than banter. The coaches varied in how they expressed this perspective. For some of the participants, it could be from a quick reaction:

I think that is to do with the "there and then" moments, where the person who said it probably hasn't thought about it. Probably just out of instinct, it pops into their head, "oh I'll say that" [react], it will get a laugh out of someone [rather than hurt somebody]. (Isaac)

Alternatively, a comment might be more considered, but still not intended to cause harm. This was referred to as a "throwaway comment," highlighting why coaches mostly agreed that for banter to morph into bullying, it must reflect an intent to harm:

It's only a bit of a throwaway comment, do you know what I mean? It's not because they want to rip him to shreds. It's because he's walked in with a new haircut, he'll be the subject of the banter for a few minutes. (Paul)

Despite the difference in age and experience of the coaches (see [Table 1](#)), banter was seen to generate laughter amongst the group, but not intended to cause harm suggesting this is a culturally accepted view for some within soccer. For Isaac, the phrase just "popped into their head" appears to suggest that there has been a lack of consideration. Paul's use of "throwaway comment" describes how a comment is not supposed to be taken literally and therefore not meant to "rip him to shreds." While on the surface, it suggested that behaviours intended as banter lack malice, it may conceal the severity of their nature and mask potential bullying. In saying that "they" (the group) do not want to hurt the victim, coaches might excuse the perpetrators

using “banter” from the singular acts that literature has suggested are intense enough to be bullying (Volk et al., 2014). In this sense, though not explicitly, coaches expressed potentially divergent views to their suggestion that bullying must carry an intent to harm.

Immaturity

It was interpreted that even though professional soccer academy players are still adults, coaches are aware that they are young and are still learning about the power of language, including the subsequent impact it may have on another individual. There was a further sense, however, that the professional soccer context may excuse certain behaviours.

I think, right or wrong it's [the language] to do with ... maybe reaching over 16 or 18, whether that's because banter becomes a bit more sexually [driven] or it becomes related to girlfriends and stuff like that. Maybe it's because, at that age, you're understanding society a bit more, you're understanding what life is about and you start talking to people a little bit differently. (Isaac)

In expressing views around “right or wrong,” Isaac illustrated an uncertainty in his perception around a definitive boundary for acceptable behaviour. There was an almost parental feeling in his tone which suggested that players were still developing morally and needed reassurance, as they are learning about the power of their language with each other and finding the boundaries, even if at times these could be inappropriate. On the other hand, it may also reflect “situated learning” in professional soccer, where players learn informal rules around how to communicate with each other in the soccer context (Parker, 2006). Here, the rules around banter shift to something more derogatory or sexual because the soccer “society” calls for it.

Kevin expressed similar ideas but these were underpinned by the idea of friendship, “I think once you're with your mates, you know that seriousness, you lose it a little bit and you become like a kid again [joking around].” Joseph also used “daft” when referring to banter. These quotes indicated that “friendship” in soccer can lead adults to act immaturity, promoting a use of banter. This may seem harmless but may not be distinct from bullying, depending on how the victim feels.

Masculinity of the soccer culture

All coaches referred to masculinity during their interview. This was interpreted as a social influence which shapes whether behaviour is defined as bullying or banter. It appears that professional soccer determines what are socially acceptable behaviours, where banter is necessitated to test the character of players in what is regarded as a fun and playful manner. Coaches seemingly assume that banter is reflective of a “good professional attitude” (Parker & Manley, 2016) where players vie with one another for a place in the team.

In reference to banter, Fred described how coaches “just chuck a hand grenade in, as the lads [players] call it, to see what happens and if it explodes.” Fred's use of the term “hand grenade” evoked a sense of players needing to demonstrate their masculine worth, similar to soldiers, by taking the coach's provocative version of banter. In soccer, being able to control emotions during banter demonstrates to coaches how robust players are, which in turn could gain them respect and reinforce a belief that they are mentally strong players who can succeed in this profession. However, this seemingly shifts the imaginary line between banter and bullying in a negative direction for challenging players' wellbeing.

An alternative way of demonstrating masculine behaviour is through coaches overseeing aggressive feedback from players, under the guise of banter. Paul mentioned that “you’ve got 20 highly fuelled, highly testosterone fuelled lads, it’s not all going to be, you know hunky dory, chummy, chummy, is it?” Joseph echoed this sentiment:

Banter, it can go further, becoming a little bit more serious. So it might be, serious to one player [who] might say [to another player], “oh you, you were crap at the weekend, you’re the worst player in our team” and the other person [responds by saying] “what do you mean, I’m the worst player? You’re the worst player.”

Interestingly, coaches of varying ages and experience (see [Table 1](#)) suggest this conflict is inevitable, leaving the impression that even though banter becomes more aggressive, players have to “put up” with it as a demonstration of their mental strength and masculine worth. Notwithstanding the coaches’ differences in ages and experience, it suggests that these values are ingrained from the top-down in professional soccer, with the result that academy coaches may suppress potential bullying under the guise of banter. Therefore, in professional soccer, these terms may not be as separate as first imagined.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore academy professional soccer coaches’ perceptions of bullying. Specifically, the study sought to explore whether bullying was framed in solely in terms of peer-to-peer relationships. In addition, the study had a secondary aim to establish how bullying was framed in relation to banter. Coaches revealed a range of components which appeared to demarcate bullying from their perspective. Yet a closer inspection of their data revealed divergence across their accounts suggesting the perception of this concept varies in professional soccer. Common to all their accounts though was the sense that bullying was conceptualised as a peer-to-peer interaction. Furthermore, from the coaches’ perspective, bullying and banter could be distinguished as separate acts which could be put down to individual and contextual factors, which are embedded in the broader professional soccer culture. Consistent with guidelines for IPA studies, the present findings will be discussed in line with relevant theories and in the context of extant literature (Smith & Osborn, 2006).

For coaches, the notion of intent to harm was fundamental in shaping their views of bullying within professional soccer. While this was consistent with one of the main features of Olewus (1993) definition, it conflicted recent research in sport which has been more equivocal about the necessity of intentional harm as a component of bullying (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2021). The difference between the coaches’ views and the literature became more pronounced when coaches cited unintentional behaviour as clearly demarcating banter from bullying. One potential explanation for this may be that previous research within elite sport academy settings has tended to focus on the views of younger participants (Rumbold et al., 2018), rather than more experienced coaches. With the present study, coaches adopted more of an adult’s research-based perspective highlighted in developmental literature (Vaillancourt et al., 2008), which places more emphasis on intentionality than players have previously. A further explanation for this difference may reside in the professional soccer context. As coaches have typically been operating in professional soccer environments longer than players, it may be that their

views are more grounded in this “community of practice,” where views on the nature of bullying and banter are more established (Parker, 2006). Consistent with the literature on emotional abuse in sports coaches (Stirling, 2013), this may reveal a worrying trend about coaches’ lack of awareness around bullying behaviours of both players and themselves. As such it suggests that a “hidden curriculum” persists in professional soccer, where coaches’ views of bullying and banter remain underpinned by taken-for-granted assumptions within the culture of this workplace (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

This sense of a lack of awareness remained when coaches discussed the notion of frequency. Although the coaches felt bullying could be classified on traditional lines through the identification of repetitive acts (Olewus, 1993), the divergence in their accounts revealed inconsistency about what the frequency needed to be to determine bullying. Moreover, consistent with research in sport (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016), one of the coaches outlined the potential for one act “to cross the line” from banter into bullying. This has important conceptual ramifications for understanding bullying, particularly within adult populations. It furthers a sense that classification of behaviours needs to be based on the actions themselves, rather than on strict definitional criteria (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016). From a contextual stance, it may also reaffirm a potential lack of coach awareness regarding bullying. Consequently, coaches may (intentionally or unintentionally) excuse severe and potentially abusive behaviours in some cases within professional soccer.

In line with previous research in soccer (Newman et al., 2021), coaches also highlighted the necessary component of an imbalance of power in shaping views of bullying. Interestingly, the coaches demonstrated an extension to the view that bullying is a peer-to-peer interaction (Stirling, 2009) by highlighting how this can be focused on opposition players. Here, by directing bullying towards an “easy target,” it alluded to the persistence of an identity conforming narrative in professional soccer (Parker & Manley, 2016), where bullying behaviours become “celebrated” (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). It appears that coaches may have been through “situated learning” in professional soccer (Parker, 2006), where these behaviours are legitimised and normalised in the pursuit of success.

The references coaches made to an “easy target” potentially highlighted others’ beliefs within professional soccer around how bullying can be distinguished from banter. There was a feeling within their accounts that bullying in soccer is dependent on the “weaknesses” in personality or mood of the victims. This was further evidence of “situated learning” where soccer’s key stakeholders are habituated to beliefs that individuals must possess an “ideal character” to succeed where they must be subservient to banter (Parker, 2006). These findings may explain beliefs within athletes that vulnerabilities in personality lead to individuals getting bullied in sport (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016). It appears that both coaches and players may be subservient as a result of their “apprenticeship” into soccer (Parker & Manley, 2016), despite the potential generational difference between them.

Alongside coaches’ views that individual differences help establish the separation between bullying and banter, they also highlighted how the immature, masculine nature of professional soccer helps to shape this divide. For coaches, banter could be separated from bullying on the basis that players are immature and are still understanding the difference between “right and wrong.” From a moral perspective, this was concerning, as it suggested the players may not have progressed to the conventional level of

reasoning (Kohlberg, 2008). As such, players' interaction with the demands of the academy soccer environment may have impacted their moral development, such that their negative behaviours have been reinforced, and they are unaware of the impact of banter on the recipient. This lack of moral development may be further evidence of how the encompassing tendencies within the totality of professional soccer (Goffman, 1961), where pranks are both expected and accepted (Parker, 2006), dangerously categorise behaviour as banter rather than bullying.

Finally, the present findings provide further evidence for the need for professional footballers to conform to a masculine identity, which may be inadvertently reinforced by coaches (Parker, 2006), that shifts their borderlines around banter and bullying. Although in coaches' eyes banter and bullying exist as separate phenomena, their perspectives highlight worrying assumptions around the degree to which players have to adhere to "performing" their masculine gender (Butler, 1988), and raise their tolerance to banter. Through indirect references to the professional academy environment not being friendly amongst the "lads," through to more direct references to banter being more serious in professional soccer, it further demonstrates a potential lack of awareness from coaches around the ramifications of banter. As a potential consequence of professional soccer's "hidden curriculum" (Cushion & Jones, 2014), the line between banter and bullying may be more blurred (Kerr, Jewett, et al., 2016) than coaches suggest. By culturally reproducing behaviours they have experienced in professional soccer, coaches may inadvertently be responsible for this blurring, due to their expectations for the types of "banter" players should have with one another.

Overall, the findings provide an important extension to the research base around bullying in sport. From a conceptual stance, as coaches solely framed bullying as part of peer-to-peer relationships, it appears that this behaviour can be categorised as a form of non-relational maltreatment in sport, which occurs in horizontal relationships where neither figure is in a position of authority (Stirling, 2009). This finding must be treated with caution though, as professional footballers have suggested bullying practices may result from the abusive practices of coaches (Newman et al., 2021). It seems the need to develop understanding around the experiences of bullying, abuse and maltreatment in sport remains.

In addition, the findings demonstrate the importance of the sporting context in shaping views of bullying and related terms such as banter. Beliefs about bullying being separated from banter due to a player's personality, as well as the need to conform to masculine ideals around the severity of banter and the accumulation of acts required to define behaviour as bullying, reinforces the sense of a "hidden curriculum" (Cushion & Jones, 2014) in professional soccer. As such, coaches do not appear to have culturally dislocated themselves (Cushion & Jones, 2014) from the norms of the professional soccer context around bullying, which may mean that this behaviour inadvertently continues to be normalised (Papaefstathiou et al., 2013). This continued normalisation of bullying reinforces why reporting cases of wrongdoing remains problematic (Alexander et al., 2011) and highlights why sport psychologists may be reluctant to report this behaviour (Kerr & Stirling, 2019).

Applied implications

To address cultural concerns around bullying in professional soccer, two implications are proposed. Firstly, coach education programmes need to be developed in professional

soccer to raise awareness around bullying and the potential severity of banter. By raising awareness around the harm these behaviours cause, it is hoped that it will encourage coaches to be more self-reflective, which may ultimately mean they will not engage in these behaviours and will discourage them among their players and staff. Here, sport psychologists can play an important role in assisting coaches in establishing when peer-to-peer behaviours cross the line into bullying. Secondly, intervention programmes need to directly address the accepted organisational culture within professional soccer, in relation to bullying and banter. Within this culture, coaches adopt a challenging position in soccer's hierarchy between being under pressure in terms of how they behave from soccer's governing bodies on one level, to holding authority over players' behaviour on another. While coaches need education to self-reflect on recognising bullying behaviours in relation to players, they also need support from soccer's governing bodies and their clubs to address bullying behaviour. As such, professional soccer as an institution needs to consider the expectations of its workplace culture.

Limitations and future research directions

This study makes an original contribution to sport literature, by exploring how the lived experiences of bullying are shaped by the professional soccer academy context from the perspective of a hard to access the sample of coaches (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). Despite these strengths, there are some limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, although gaining coaches' perspectives on bullying adds to this area of research in sport, it is important to gain perspectives from other key stakeholders such as parents, sport science and medical staff, performance directors and shareholders. By engaging multiple perspectives, it may allow for a better understanding of the interpersonal and structural implications of power dynamics in bullying (Mishna et al., 2020). Secondly, while the idiographic commitment of IPA offered benefits from exploring the convergence of the coaches' views in relation to bullying and to a lesser extent banter, it also highlighted the significant divergence in these accounts. As such, further exploration is needed to explore aspects such as the frequency of a behaviour required to identify bullying. Equally, more research is needed to understand the linkage of coach and player perceptions of the dividing line between bullying and banter.

Conclusion

This study makes an original contribution to the research on bullying in sport in several ways. Firstly, we gained perspectives of bullying from high-performance coaches who operate in professional soccer environments. Secondly, we identified how bullying potentially fits into an overall model of maltreatment in sport. Thirdly, while coaches seemingly identified bullying, the divergence within their accounts demonstrated views of this concept are nuanced. Finally, our findings suggest the degree to which views of bullying and banter are normalised and embedded within the culture of professional soccer. It is hoped that these findings may be used at multiple levels to better educate and sensitise coaches, whilst alerting sport psychologists as individuals and sport governing bodies as organisations, to the challenges they may have with improving the culture within this domain.

Note

1. Coaches were interviewed face to face prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

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