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Coaches’ Experiences of Morality in English Professional Football Environments: Recommendations for Creating a Moral Atmosphere

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Abstract

Coaches are key socialising agents who influence the socio-moral context. A function of socialisation in coaching is the imparting of values and ideology, which guide behaviour. English professional football is known for authoritarian and subservient cultures, whereby coaches will enforce cultural norms and values, which consequently, shapes their players' moral development. Therefore, from a contextual viewpoint, professional football serves as a suitable site for exploring coaches' views of morality. This study consisted of two aims: (1) explore English professional football coaches' experiences of morality in football; (2) share coaches' accounts of how they create and manage a moral atmosphere. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male professional English football coaches. Thematic analysis resulted in two general dimensions: coaches' experiences of morality, and recommendations for creating and managing a moral atmosphere. Coaches shared accounts of the moral conflicts and antisocial behaviours they experienced. The findings suggest that coaches struggle to define morality whilst highlighting the lack of coach education on the topic. Furthermore, similarities were observed in relation to coaches' recommendations for creating and managing a moral atmosphere. Therefore, we conclude by providing a selection of guiding principles that professional football coaches could implement when creating and managing a moral atmosphere.

Keywords: antisocial behaviour, job security, moral disengagement, professional soccer, self-preservation.

Coaches' Experiences of Morality in English Professional Football Environments: Recommendations for Creating a Moral Atmosphere

The moral atmosphere of professional football teams has been questioned in recent times with a surge in reported cases of 'antisocial' behaviour (BBC, 2019; Newman et al., 2021). However, these are not isolated cases, as antisocial behaviour has been apparent for decades within professional football (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Parker, 1996). Worryingly, an acceptance of a negative moral climate is often hidden by the 'need to win' and to conform to the official rules of football's subculture (Parker & Manley, 2016). Therefore, antisocial behaviours become rooted in the social climate of professional football (Constandt et al., 2019). As such, the social context of sport significantly influences moral judgment, decision making, and subsequent behaviour (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The coach acts as a key socialising agent who can influence and is influenced by the socio-moral context, which in turn shapes the athletes' moral development (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Peláez et al., 2013). A main function of socialisation in coaching relates to the imparting of enduring values and an ideology that guides behaviour in accordance with given expectations (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Therefore, it is of worth to explore the concept of morality through the eyes of professional football coaches due to their influence on team moral atmospheres.

Morality has been defined as ''prescriptive judgements of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other'' (Turiel, 1983, p. 3). When discussing morality, the term 'moral atmosphere' is often used to describe the shared behaviours, norms, and values deemed acceptable to the group (i.e., team), which in turn have an influence on its members' behaviour (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The conventions described can be referred to as collective norms that comprise the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours expected from group members and are habitually created and endorsed by the coach (Shigeno et al.,

2019). Collective norms (i.e., beliefs) and values reside within coaching philosophy, which is seen as an amalgamation of axiology (e.g., values of importance, and ethical and moral values), ontology (e.g., beliefs about the nature of existence), and epistemology (e.g., beliefs on the nature of knowledge), which can be influenced by the social context (i.e., moral atmosphere) and structure a coach resides within (see Cushion & Partington, 2016).

From a practical perspective, this can be problematic because coaching philosophy underpins coaches' assumptions about learning and the types of coaching methods and practices they adopt (Jones et al., 2004). Subsequently, many coaches may find it challenging when their coaching philosophy is not in line with the moral atmosphere they operate within. Therefore, the moral atmosphere a coach oversees plays a pivotal role in determining whether sporting behaviours are proactive (i.e., prosocial) or inhibitive (i.e., antisocial) in sporting contexts (for a review, see Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017). According to Bandura's theory of moral thought and action (1991), individuals develop moral standards that are deemed acceptable from a variety of influences such as modelling and through interactions with others (e.g., coaches and peers). Consequently, the moral atmosphere of a team can be shaped via coach behaviours and the motivational climate they and the club promote, such that the environment can influence moral behaviours. For example, mastery environments have been associated with prosocial, moral athlete behaviours (Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017). Conversely, if a team's motivational climate is subjugated by performance, ego-orientated outcomes (e.g., 'win at all costs'), then this can lead to conflict and antisocial behaviour (Kavussanu et al., 2006). In addition, research suggests that individuals operating in sport environments can morally disengage with antisocial behaviours by cognitively reconstructing them into benign acts (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009).

The successful development, progression and outcomes of football players are related to the environment they find themselves in (Richardson et al., 2004), with the interactions

96 between key stakeholders (i.e., coaches) in the sporting environment playing a pivotal role in
97 players' development (Bortoli et al., 2012). This environment within professional football is
98 often characterised by managerial control, which is *sometimes* [emphasis added] founded on
99 antisocial behaviours such as, abuse, intimidation, and violence (Newman et al., 2021; Oliver
100 & Parker, 2019). Despite awareness of these issues, morality research is limited in men's
101 professional football. This is surprising given findings that have shown that professional
102 English football clubs can be riven with conflict, and viewed as an arena of struggle, whereby
103 colleagues can sabotage one another to pursue courses of action to advance or reinforce their
104 own positioning within a club (Thompson et al., 2015). An explanation for this is the 'short-
105 termism' of professional football which prioritises a need to win, avoid relegation, and
106 survive at all costs mentality. This consequently impacts philosophy and operating culture
107 (Nesti et al., 2012). In addition, professional football often cultivates an authoritarian and
108 subservient culture (Parker, 1996). Here, players are expected to adhere to a certain set of
109 behavioural norms (e.g., shaking hands with opponents and officials before and after a game),
110 which act as a demonstration of moral character (Parker & Manley, 2016). The acceptance of
111 specific cultural norms and values is crucial to player identity formation and to the attainment
112 of professional player status. Therefore, from a contextual and environmental viewpoint,
113 professional football serves as a suitable site for exploring coaches' views of morality, as
114 coaches influence the identity, integrity, and behaviour of players, by instilling collective
115 club values and ethical cultural norms (Parker & Manley, 2016).

116 Given the significance coaches have in shaping the overall environment in
117 professional football, it is beneficial to gain insight into how they create and manage the
118 moral atmosphere. As a result, this could lead to recommended practices that may reduce the
119 prevalence of antisocial behaviours within a club and improve team functioning (Kavussanu
120 & Hodge, 2019; Pizzi & Stanger, 2020). To date, rich qualitative research, which enables in-

121 depth insight into coaches' perspectives and understanding of morality, is relatively scarce as
122 most of the research conducted within this domain is embedded within a positivist tradition,
123 typically adopting quantitative measures (Peláez et al., 2016; Rudd & Mondello, 2006).
124 Though as Jones and McNamee (2000) state, "there is no such thing as a universal sporting
125 moral atmosphere" (p.136). Furthermore, Morgan (1997) proposes that sports are like
126 national languages, which sometimes can be "oblivious to cultural differences that emanate
127 from outside its own authoritative centre" (p. 14). Consequently, this suggests that an
128 interpretivist approach which gains accounts and experiences of morality in the social context
129 of English professional football is essential in developing a deeper understanding on the
130 topic. Furthermore, adopting an interpretivist approach addresses a limitation in sport
131 morality literature by offering rich qualitative accounts, rather than favouring quantitative
132 cross-sectional designs and self-report measures (Kavussanu et al., 2013; Kavussanu &
133 Spray, 2006). Gaining insights into how professional coaches experience morality and how
134 they create and manage moral atmospheres will help develop coaches understanding of the
135 concept, and offer practical recommendations as to how coaches may appropriately develop a
136 moral climate in professional football. Therefore, this study consisted of two aims: (1)
137 explore English professional football coaches' experiences of morality in football; (2) share
138 coaches' accounts of how they create and manage a moral atmosphere.

139 # Method

140 ## Research Design

141 The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, informed by a
142 constructivist epistemology (e.g., knowledge is constructed and rooted in sociocultural
143 contexts and interactions), and a relativist ontology (e.g., multiple interpretations and realities
144 exist; Cohen et al., 2018). An interpretivist approach was adopted due to the study of social
145 phenomena requiring an understanding of the personal social world that people construct

146 (Blaikie, 2007). To understand coaches' perspectives on morality, an interpretivist approach
147 was deemed necessary, as the coaches' perceptions and experiences of morality in sport can
148 only be understood by the researcher sharing their frame of reference (Cohen et al., 2018),
149 that is, the professional football context. Consequently, thematic analysis was implemented to
150 distinguish patterns of meaning across our data and due to its methodological and theoretical
151 flexibility (Braun et al., 2016).

152 **Participants and Procedures**

153 After obtaining ethical approval via the local university ethical committee, coaches
154 were invited to take part in the study via email, phone and/or social media (e.g., LinkedIn).
155 Initial recruitment took place via LinkedIn, where four professional football coaches showed
156 interest in the study after being sent a study invitation and participant information sheet.
157 Professional coaches are those who work with athletes and teams competing at the highest
158 national levels within their sport and country (Bentzen et al., 2020). In the present study, this
159 included coaches working in professional male first team and academy environments at
160 English Premier League (EPL) and English Football League (EFL) Championships clubs[1].
161 Therefore, purposive sampling was implemented to recruit coaches who had a minimum of
162 two years' coaching experience in a professional football club, and who had coached players
163 with contracts at their clubs. Snowball sampling was then employed to harness additional
164 coaches through the current participants' sporting network. This resulted in the sample
165 consisting of eight male professional football coaches ($M_{age} = 35.6 \pm 4.7$ years) with an
166 average of 12 years' coaching experience ($SD_{experience} = 4.4$ years). For the professional
167 football coaches' individual characteristics, see table 1. Qualitative semi-structured

[1] The English Premier League and English Football League Championship are the two highest leagues in England (and Wales) professional football pyramid. Clubs compete to promotion and to avoid relegation, as well as to develop professional players via their club academies. Club academies can consist of players typically between the ages of 9-18 who have paid contracts or who compete for academy places and paid professional club contracts (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

168 interviews were conducted to explore coaches' perceptions of morality in professional
169 football. The interviews took place individually via phone calls ($M_{duration}$ = 62.88 minutes)
170 and were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. When reporting excerpts from the
171 coaches, pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the
172 participants. Finally, considering professional football coaches are a hard to access sample
173 (Kelly & Waddington, 2006), the sample size was determined once we had generated enough
174 data to tell a rich, complex, and multi-faceted story (Sim et al., 2018).

175 ***Interview Guide***

176 The interview schedule was adapted from Peláez et al. (2016) which was used as an
177 initial foundation for the questions. Subsequently, questions wordings were refined and
178 additional questions were added to address the study's aims. As a result, the interview guide
179 was divided into eight interrelated sections: (a) introductory comments and instructions; (b)
180 rapport building (e.g., What is your current job role? How long have you coached for?); (c)
181 coaches' perspectives of morality (e.g., In your eyes what is morality? What is an example of
182 morality in sport?); (d) description and characterization of morality (e.g., Why would you say
183 this is an example of morality? What are the most representative characteristics of morality?);
184 (e) morality on and off the pitch (e.g., Have you ever behaved differently at the side-line to
185 off the pitch?); (f) moral environment (e.g., Have you ever witnessed anyone acting
186 immorally in football? What do you do during competition or training when a moral issue
187 arises?); (g) your own moral atmosphere (e.g., What would constitute your moral atmosphere
188 and how would you create it?); and (h) final and additional comments. Due to the nature of
189 semi-structured interviews, the lead author also engaged in active, supportive listening that
190 involved using techniques such as paraphrasing and probing, which helped encourage in-
191 depth discussion and elaboration of principles (Cohen et al., 2018).

192 **Data Analysis**

193 Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016) was used to extract rich accounts of coaches'
194 perspectives on morality in professional football environments and to identify patterns
195 between the coaches' experiences. An inductive procedure was initially used allowing for the
196 generation and development of lower-order themes before being categorized into higher-
197 order themes and general dimensions, which were then reviewed in light of deductive
198 reasoning to align with understanding of theory (Bandura, 1991) and research literature on
199 morality in sport (Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017). Semantic and latent themes were generated
200 during the analysis to share explicit coaches' meanings and experiences, as well as allowing
201 for deeper interpretation into several implicit concepts and ideas that underpinned what the
202 coaches voiced (Braun et al., 2016). For example, 'coping' was a generated latent theme
203 from our interpretations, as participants implicitly alluded to forms of moral disengagement
204 as a coping mechanism. In addition, whilst analysing the data, we found that many themes
205 interrelated with one another. For example, within figure 1, it shows that the lower-order
206 themes; communication and professional football context interact. When conducting the
207 analysis, the lead author firstly engaged in the process of familiarisation by immersing
208 themselves within the transcripts and interview recordings. Here, notes were made on
209 interesting features in the data set with analytical intent to establish codes. The first author
210 then reflexively consulted with co-authors, to discuss and challenge whether the codes were
211 deemed appropriate. Once consensus was sought, the first author then began theme
212 development (e.g., collectively grouping codes), after which co-authors once more acted as
213 critical friends to refine themes and develop theme names (Braun et al., 2016).

214 **Research Quality and Rigor**

215 The quality and rigor of the research was established based on a relativist approach
216 (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Attempts were made by the researchers to enhance rigor by
217 conducting a pilot interview with one professional football coach to assess the sequencing

218 and appropriateness of questions posed. The lead author attempted to address sincerity
219 through being transparent about their background and research motive (Tracy, 2010). For
220 example, it is important to acknowledge that the first author previously worked within a
221 professional football club environment, specifically delivering psychological, educational
222 workshops to U14 and U16 academy players. From these personal working experiences in
223 professional football, the lead author gained exposure to the moral atmosphere and developed
224 perspectives on the moral conflicts that can occur in this environment. As a result, such
225 experiences provide an 'insider status' and a common ground which was deemed important
226 to co-construct knowledge in relation to the research aims (Baldwin, 2006). In addition, all
227 authors were white British and accept from a relativist perspective that subjectivity can
228 influence interpretation of data, therefore we encouraged reflexivity (Darawsheh & Stanley,
229 2014). Furthermore, based on the first author's understanding and creation of knowledge, the
230 co-authors acted as 'critical friends' who challenged the first author to explore alternative
231 explanations for the data within the initial coding and theme development stages (Smith &
232 McGannon, 2017).

233 **Results and Discussion**

234 The purpose of the study was twofold: 1) explore English professional football
235 coaches' experiences of morality in football; (2) share coaches' accounts of how they create
236 and manage a moral atmosphere. Thematic analysis resulted in two general dimensions,
237 consisting of six higher-order and 12 lower-order themes (see figure 1). The results and
238 discussion are presented in two sections, based on the general dimensions constructed. First,
239 we discuss the coaches' experiences of morality, then secondly, explore the recommendations
240 for creating and managing a moral atmosphere. However, in view of the quantity and wide-
241 ranging themes generated, space precludes an exploration of all themes in their complexity.
242 Therefore, a selection of quotes is provided and discussed in relation to relevant literature.

243 **Coaches' Experiences of Morality**

244 Coaches' experiences of morality refer to the range of cognitive, behavioural, and
245 contextual factors that contribute towards their overall perspective on morality in professional
246 football. The higher-order themes within this general dimension are understanding of
247 morality, moral behaviours, milieus, and moral conflict.

248 ***Understanding of Morality***

249 Understanding of morality comprised two lower-order themes; personal perceptions
250 and prior learning. Personal perceptions related to coaches' individual views of morality and
251 prior learning focused upon previous learning experiences that shaped the coaches'
252 knowledge of morality. From the coaches' accounts, they found it hard to offer a clear
253 definition of morality, often questioning their personal understanding and seeking assurance
254 from the researcher: "It's not something that I've covered in the past. It's not something which
255 I would say I've learned on any coach education course either… I'm not really too sure on
256 what I believe it is (Atkinson)". This coincides with literature where coaches struggled to
257 define morality (Rudd & Mondello, 2006). This seems to be a continued issue in coaching
258 research (e.g., Shigeno et al., 2019), therefore an applied implication is that coaches need to
259 continue to reflect on their understanding of morality in sport. A potential reason for this lack
260 of understanding is limited education (e.g., prior learning) on the concept, as exemplified
261 here, by the well-qualified (obtained UEFA A/B licenses) coaches not recalling being
262 educated on the concept. Atkinson continued: "I think perhaps maybe it's something which is
263 undervalued in coaching… if I'm a coach educator and I don't understand it [morality], then
264 I'm probably not going to be teaching it." Atkinson suggests that the undervalue of morality
265 in education may contribute to a lack of teaching, which consequently results in poor
266 understanding of this concept (Peláez et al., 2016). Therefore, coach development programs
267 should intertwine the education of morality concepts to better develop coach understanding

268 (Shigeno et al., 2019).

269 With reference to professional football, despite sustained attempts to develop players'
270 education and morality through initiatives and strategies, such as the Elite Player
271 Performance Plan (EPPP) and chaplaincy (Roe & Parker, 2016), coaches feel that their
272 targeted education (e.g., UEFA A License) and support is insufficient, as iterated by Wroot:
273 "I think a lot of coach education is done in the classroom. It doesn't necessarily mirror or
274 reflect what the coaching environment is like." Ciampolini et al. (2019) denotes that many
275 coaches feel their formal education is decontextualised and negatively perceived. Therefore,
276 due to coach education not addressing coaches' morality needs, they may look to other
277 informal ways of learning such as modelling their coaching practice on their own playing and
278 coaching experiences, rather than received education (Stone et al., 2020). Wroot added:

279 I played for coaches that were quite aggressive… It was about whether we won or
280 lost… I mirrored a lot of the way that they behaved… I probably just subconsciously
281 did what I saw in the coaches that I respected to that date.

282 Wroot highlighted how the interactions within a coaches' environment may shape their
283 understanding of morality and influence moral behaviours (Bandura, 1991; Peláez et al.,
284 2016), for example, the game outcome was perceived as influencing aggression. Therefore, it
285 is suggested that some form of 'phronetic socio-education' should be delivered, which can
286 prepare coaches for complex social interactions, critical decisions and encourage reflection of
287 context related incidents (Peláez et al., 2016). This would be a proactive approach by
288 educating coaches on morality, rather than reactively addressing their morality understanding
289 learnt from informal role modelling.

290 ***Moral Behaviours***

291 Moral behaviours relate to what coaches have experienced and enacted during their
292 time at clubs, subsequently divided into two lower-order themes; antisocial and prosocial.

293 Although coaches spoke of prosocial behaviours that they have observed in the professional
294 game (e.g., treating people with respect, integrity), coaches spoke at greater length in relation
295 to antisocial behaviours. Coaches openly shared accounts of “cheating”, “verbal aggression”,
296 “fighting” and “influencing the referee” that they had experienced from others (e.g., coaches
297 and players). However, only a selected few spoke about their own actions. Interestingly,
298 previous research has discussed that players of the same team typically demonstrate more
299 prosocial behaviours towards each other compared to the opposition (Kavussanu & Al-
300 Yaaribi, 2019). However, coaches witnessed antisocial behaviour enacted from other coaches
301 and players towards their own team members:

302 I remember him [opposition coach] shouting, screaming at them. The lad that made
303 the mistake for our second goal, he started screaming at him and telling him he's let
304 the side down, he's let his mates down on the pitch… As I'm going on to shake the
305 hands after the game, I can hear one of their more physical, big, mature players went
306 over to this lad and said, “You've let us down. You've let us all down again.”
307 Whatever the coach's name is, “so and so [the coach], said so.” This lad bless him,
308 just looked like he wanted the world to swallow him up (Johnson).

309 The verbal conflict initiated by one player to his teammate was justified by stating, “the
310 coach said so”, which cements the importance of coaches acting as role models, because
311 players are receptive to the moral frame they offer. Moral decisions are typically made in a
312 social context where group norms can influence individuals’ behaviour and decision-making
313 processes (Bortoli et al., 2012). Therefore, if the coach demonstrates antisocial behaviours,
314 players may deem this acceptable and reciprocate (Romand et al., 2009). When a select few
315 coaches did ‘open up’ about their own behaviours, all were in relation to verbal aggression or
316 inciting cheating (e.g., directing players to go down if they anticipate contact):

317 I can't say to you now, hand on heart that I've never said to a player, “Why didn't you

318 go down?" But at the same time, what I can say is I've never asked a player to dive. I
319 think there is a difference (Connolly).

320 Here Connolly tries to defend his response, by stating that there is a 'difference'. This could
321 result from a moral conflict where he is against the act of 'diving', yet he encourages a
322 performance environment around winning. Previously, performance climates focused on
323 winning have been related to coaches encouraging unsportsmanlike, antisocial behaviours,
324 which consequently results in their athletes engaging in such conduct (Boardley &
325 Kavussanu, 2010; Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017). This was verified here when Connolly said
326 he believed players dive "to win" which reinforced the significance of the environment a
327 coach creates in influencing player behaviours.

328 ***Milieus***

329 Milieus refer to the range of social environments coaches are exposed to which
330 influence their behaviours and moral thought, for example, their football club (e.g., the
331 professional football context and workplace) and their childhood (e.g., upbringing and
332 interactions). Heald offered several milieus that influence their moral functioning and
333 experiences: "I think morality would be how you'd act in relation to your values. The
334 judgement that you make based on the culture you live in, your previous experiences… it's
335 also your workplace that affects you." Johnson had a similar perspective but suggested that a
336 coach's parameters for what could constitute acceptable moral behaviour is formulated from
337 childhood experiences: "Morality is based on, I suppose, your values and the environment
338 you've been brought up in… the experiences you have as a kid tends to start to set how
339 narrow or wide your boundaries of morality are."

340 Nesti et al. (2012) suggest that critical incidents and the environment can contribute
341 significantly to the development and refinement of coaching philosophy. As a result, a
342 coach's social context and interactions (e.g., upbringing, culture, past sporting experiences,

343 and workplace) influences their practice (Holmes et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2020), which
344 consequently can be a major contributor to the moral values held in a sport environment
345 (Peláez et al., 2013). The coach is a socialising agent and role model in a player's
346 environment (Peláez et al., 2013). A significant function of socialisation in coaching is
347 associated with imparting core values and ideology, which guides behaviour in accordance to
348 given expectations (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Football coaches are known for encouraging
349 values and 'behavioural norms' such as an unquestioning work ethic and a will to win (Parker
350 & Manley, 2016), which is congruent with serial winning professional coaches (Lara-Bercial
351 & Mallet, 2016). Connolly shared a similar view: "I expect them to work hard, I expect them
352 to sort of sacrifice themselves to the football club." This reinforces the important interaction
353 between the professional football context and coaches' views of morality. However, the
354 notion of 'sacrificing' oneself may misguide views about the moral atmosphere where players
355 become subservient to the coach and they must conform and respond in the correct way
356 (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Parker & Manley, 2016). Consequently, if a coach promotes
357 antisocial behaviours as a 'behavioural norm', then their players will likely model and follow
358 (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010) as suggested by Heald: "I think whoever the leader is,
359 everybody else falls in line with that really because it's the norm of behaviour…" The
360 statements of 'sacrifice oneself' and 'everybody falls in line' are almost militant in nature and
361 could be associated with symbolic violence, whereby individuals comply to the dominant
362 values and the behavioural regime utilized in the environment (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

363 The findings in our study are consistent with previous research, for example if
364 professional players are to demonstrate professionalism and good attitudes, it rests on their
365 ability to adhere to set behavioural norms as well as by displaying strong work ethic, which
366 in football is considered good moral character (Parker & Manley, 2016). For example, many
367 coaches framed their views of morality around social values and the context of professional

368 football as they expected “work ethic [hard work]”, “willingness [to learn]”, “sacrifice” and
369 “empathy”. These findings blend moral and social perspectives by demonstrating the
370 importance of the professional football context in shaping coaches’ views of morality. Many
371 coaches suggested that they and colleagues (including players) should aim to be on the “same
372 page” and have a “collective line in the sand” to perform well, which is echoed by Nesti
373 (2012) who suggests facilitative team environments are those which have shared norms,
374 values, and actions. In addition, many coaches noted concern with the “win at all costs”
375 context in professional football (Lawrence & Pipini, 2016) as Wroot stated:

376 Winning was the primary focus. It wasn’t necessarily whether we played aesthetically
377 well, whether we adhered to our values, whether we played to our philosophy… At
378 the elite level they [a manager] could be a few games away from the sack… the result
379 is the main thing… The behaviour at the elite level is very much driven by the result.

380 Therefore, an explanation as to why coaches demonstrate certain antisocial behaviours could
381 be due to their coaching philosophy being affected by the highly competitive social
382 environment of professional football, where the motivational climate can be egotistical and
383 personally driven, linking to antisocial behaviours (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010). Here, the
384 social structures that coaches inhabit (i.e., sporting cultures and environments) appear to
385 determine their ideologies and philosophies (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Coach Johnson
386 referred to egos and the need to win to progress their coaching career in professional football
387 and how it influences behaviour:

388 Almost everything you can think of based around ego... Self-centred, single-minded.
389 It's all driven around the ego. Those particular coaches that I consider, you can tell
390 that every decision they make, every action they make, is based off emotion and
391 where they want to get to, not what's best [for the athlete] … a poor performance is an
392 attack on their own ego. They value winning… In an interview like this, they could

393 tell you what the right behaviour is but when it's impacting where they think they're
394 going to get to in their career they struggle with it.

395 This can be explained by previous work which shows that in competitive environments, team
396 members can oppose shared organizational goals to advance their own careers and team
397 positions (Thompson et al., 2015). This is possibly due to the uncertainty and ambiguity of
398 professional football, whereby individuals are often employed on limited tenure and as a
399 result deal with such insecurities with maladaptive coping techniques (Roderick, 2006).

400 ***Moral Conflict***

401 Moral conflict consisted of two lower-order themes; coping, and the professional
402 football context. The former refers to how coaches tried to justify and cope with their moral
403 conflicts and behaviours, such as 'bending values' and 'breaking rules'. The professional
404 football context incorporated cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors that led
405 coaches to feel conflicted in their roles. One conflict stressed by coaches was that they
406 perceived a battle between their personal values and their organizational demands, as
407 Atkinson suggests: "I think you maybe have a morality struggle… when you're trying to
408 think about what it is that the organization wants you to do but also how you want to be
409 working." This demonstrates how a coach's moral values (cognitive) are strained by the
410 professional context of football (environment), as coaches can disagree with the values they
411 have to transmit and that they find the demands of competition (the need to win), hard to
412 balance with the teaching (behaviour) of values (Peláez et al., 2016). Such strain on moral
413 values may be explained from an organizational stress perspective (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012),
414 whereby the external expectations placed on coaches from hierarchy (environment) can
415 create management inconsistencies (behavioural) due to stress (cognitive), and lead coaches
416 to accept less exemplary behaviours: "I suppose it means maintaining that [morals and
417 values] whilst being competitive. You want to win in the right way… We want to be

418 competitive, and we want to win, but not at all costs" (Norman).

419 After probing, Norman stated that breaking the rules (i.e., cheating) to win would be
420 classed as "winning at all costs" but "not in the right way". Once more, this suggests that
421 antisocial behaviours such as cheating is apparent when there is a need to win performance
422 climate (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010). Cheating was explained as 'playing outside of the
423 rules': "I think the rules are the rules of the game and they're open to interpretation but there's
424 other things, those would be outside that interpretation, and I wouldn't be happy to win in that
425 manner as an individual." For Norman, it suggested a reluctance for football coaches to
426 function at the lowest level of moral reasoning as behaviours such as "handballs" and
427 "diving" were described as cheating and outside the boundaries of fair play. However,
428 Norman also suggested that the rules of the game are "open to interpretation" which could be
429 considered as euphemistic labelling, a form of moral disengagement (Boardley & Kavussanu,
430 2007), whereby coaches select such language to guise their actions. Similarly, Connolly also
431 displayed moral disengagement features when discussing his players diving:

432 If you do get a bit of a nudge, you do feel almost like you've got to go down to win
433 the free kick at times, so there is that element of well, if other people are going to do
434 it, you feel like sometimes you've got to join that. It's wrong, but… you know you'll
435 near enough get a free kick and you don't want to feel like you're getting penalized
436 and losing out, so I think players take that on board.

437 Here, Connolly tries to justify his team's antisocial behaviour via displacement of
438 responsibility (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007) as he states that due to opposition behaviour,
439 they feel it is socially acceptable to adopt the same behaviours that they would not usually
440 contemplate due to feeling penalized if they do not. Furthermore, Connolly appears to
441 demonstrate moral conflict in the sense that personal moral values can become disregarded:

442 I had an example where the team had the Christmas do, a lad came back in, and he'd

443 broke his arm and he'd got a cut on his head, he'd clearly got into trouble. He was
444 telling me that he had fallen down these railings... That was difficult because I
445 obviously questioned his morality there. I think if you're going to actually get into that
446 position, I am of the opinion that, right, you've got to man up and face it and say look,
447 "I got into this scrap." Whatever it was. This is what happened, whereas he was trying
448 to pull wool over my eyes. It was pretty obvious and at the time, how did I deal with
449 that? Because it was over the Christmas period and we had so many games coming
450 up, I kind of just, not ignored it but he could not really play so there was almost-- I
451 guess it was a punishment there for him and I just let that go without questioning him
452 too much for the good of the group.

453 In this example, Connolly referred to physical fighting as being 'antisocial' but would ignore
454 said behaviour "for the good of the group", by not creating team, and more so, coach-athlete
455 conflict. Therefore, this suggests that coach values and standards are not fixed and can be
456 adjusted given the situation and context as Connolly previously stated, "I am big on honesty",
457 yet in the aforementioned example the player was dishonest and not punished, stressing the
458 complex contexts coaches will face and the decisions they must make in relation to moral
459 value conflicts (Peláez et al., 2016). As Bandura (1991) argued, consequences of actions are
460 more important than the intentions of people in determining whether behaviours are
461 considered unacceptable. In this light, the coach may conclude that the behaviours are benign
462 because the consequences for players, coach, and the team are not particularly severe.
463 However, when the game outcome or team dynamics are negatively affected, this then might
464 be the line where coaches deem behaviours to be unacceptable and intervene. This could
465 explain why the coach avoided conflict as it serves to benefit their perception of job security,
466 due to fear of punishments from hierarchy for reprimanding key players.

467 **Recommendations for Creating and Managing a Moral Atmosphere**

468 The recommendations presented here are in relation to strategies and ideas coaches
469 provided, for creating and managing a conducive team moral atmosphere. The higher-order
470 themes generated from this general dimension were psychological safety and interventions.

471 ***Psychological Safety***

472 The need for psychological safety was generated from the data due to asking coaches
473 how they create and manage a moral atmosphere. Coaches refer to interventions they desire,
474 but cannot alone implement, therefore requiring action from an organizational level. As a
475 result, two lower-order themes were created: job security and communication. Firstly,
476 coaches spoke about the need for psychological safety in relation to job security:

477 The problems tend to lie with people not feeling safe within their role… One thing
478 that football really lacks probably is either psychological safety or security at times…
479 I had that pressure and it is tough. When you're thinking, “I've got a mortgage, I've got
480 two kids, I could lose my job here” (Johnson).

481 Coinciding with previous work (Bentzen et al., 2020) coaches referred to psychological and
482 job insecurity in their roles and that a moral atmosphere would be created on the basis that
483 coaches are allowed time to develop and feel safe and secure in their roles; a basic
484 psychological need (e.g., security). The current insecurity, as Phillips described, may cause
485 some coaches to “bend their values” and adopt antisocial behaviours such as cheating, to win,
486 so that they can stay in a job and support their family:

487 They've got to look after themselves, their family, their life. That threat becomes
488 really difficult. I mean, ‘short-termism’ in football will push people to do desperate
489 things. I think it'll push people to bend their values… to stay in the game or stay alive.

490 Phillips appeared to demonstrate moral disengagement, more specifically euphemistic
491 labelling (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007) by justifying the “bending of values” to look after
492 themselves (e.g., maintaining job), their family (e.g., earning money to provide) and their

lives (e.g., financial stability). Thus, coaches' core moral values can become conflicted depending on the context they find themselves in. This can lead to the action of antisocial behaviours, which are justified through the maladaptive coping mechanism of moral disengagement, where coaches deviate from their values. Potentially, this explains why many coaches are continuously in a moral conflict within their job role, due to football's 'win at all costs' context. This performance context has shown to impact coaches' feelings towards job security and overall wellbeing (Bentzen et al., 2020). As a result, it could be argued that the existence of some antisocial behaviour is not merely due to egotistical personal success, but for self-preservation: "Football… it's everything I detest in life in terms of, the bitching, the back-stabbing, all the stuff that goes on for the self-preservation" (Dickinson). This echoes the work of Thompson et al. (2015) in professional football whereby colleagues would betray others to succeed. Consequently, organizations should acknowledge that increased job security can improve mental health, motivation, and efficiency of coaches, whereas job insecurity can lead to ill-being, burnout (Bentzen et al., 2020) and dishonest acts. Coaches here, alluded to colleagues acting "dishonestly for fear of losing jobs", for example avoiding conflicts of opinion that may result in termination of contracts, which relates to the lower-order theme of communication. This was prevalent as coaches found that desired communication pathways were not followed, and this caused conflict within the team:

> The captain had a direct line to the chairman, that's just not right. You're completely undermining the manager… there's a hierarchy of how things get dealt with… it's just like any lot of work. You report to your line manager. The head coach… You know there's a process to everything. That's the same [for] football as far as I'm concerned. So that kind of happened and I didn't like it (Dickinson).

Communication failures, lack of clarity, role conflicts and role ambiguity can lead to staff dissatisfaction and disruption within a club (Nesti et al., 2012). Therefore, clear club

518 communication is of importance for creating a moral atmosphere as the group (i.e., team)
519 need a shared understanding (Kavussanu & Hodge, 2019). As a result, coaches should aim to
520 build rapport, effective communication and aligned expectations with superiors and
521 colleagues to reduce job insecurities (Cho & Lee, 2021). Through effective club
522 communication, it could be argued that what many coaches referred to as "short-termism" in
523 football would be reduced due to more collaborative aims and objectives, which may reduce
524 organisational stress (Rumbold et al., 2018), ill-being, job insecurity (Bentzen et al., 2020)
525 and the prevalence of antisocial coach behaviours due to self-preservation.

526 ***Interventions***

527 Interventions refer to the recommended strategies and practices which clubs and
528 fellow coaches implement to create a conducive moral atmosphere. Interventions were
529 divided into intra-club and inter-club, such that some were recommended to be
530 operationalized internally within the club environment and others externally. For example,
531 while coaches stressed the importance of coach, player, and parent education, Wroot felt that
532 training and qualifications do not mirror the coaching environment, suggesting that reflection
533 in education has lost meaning and application (Cushion, 2018):

534 We can talk about a reflective cycle… a 30-minute workshop on a coaching course in
535 a classroom doesn't necessarily reflect what the coach may be doing on a day to day
536 basis… I think it's something that coach education may need to have a look at.

537 Therefore, coaches suggested several alternative inter-club management interventions, such
538 as "player home visits" to promote a moral atmosphere: "Coaches now go and visit all the
539 players at their home at the start of the season. Just to go into their environment to get some
540 context" (Johnson). Home visits were mainly in relation to academy players, as this was a
541 way for coaches to interact with parents and to assess their values and daily interactions. To
542 this end, research has shown the importance of building parental trust and transparency, as it

is paramount for clubs to invest time in attempting to fully harness the potential of other influential stakeholders (e.g., parents; Mills et al., 2014) as they can additionally act as social moral educators for the athletes.

In addition to home visits, inter-club reflection was discussed in relation to sharing best practice and educating others after a game. In line with research, coaches appeared to advocate in-depth, reflective discussions about common moral issues they experience (Peláez et al., 2016). Norman suggested that creating opportunities for inter-club reflection could be particularly beneficial to improve coaches' self-awareness of their behaviours after games:

> Get the coaches together from different clubs at the end of the game and have a real frank conversation about why they do what they do… That might raise self-awareness and that might improve those interactions week to week… You learn and you're doing stuff off of their environment. You go "f*****g hell that's a good idea, why didn't we do that" and you put it [integrate the idea] into your [club] environment (Norman).

Norman continued that this collaborative, reflective practice could be encouraged as an alternative to traditional methods endorsed by coach development programs, where reflection is typically implemented at an individual, rather than group-level.

> Can we as adults have more conversation around how we support... and what game day looked like? Can we do that afterwards and say, "Do you know that you were shouting and screaming at the ref?", and they'll go, "No, I wasn't." I said, "Yes… when they were offside, you were shouting and screaming." Then they might drive home on the bus, and think "F*****g hell I need to work on that" (Norman).

This therefore could help promote moral behaviour, self-awareness, and address the limitations of reflecting in the "classroom", which disassociates coaches from their everyday tasks and environments, resulting in a decontextualized process (Ciampolini et al., 2019).

By contrast, a recommended intra-club intervention was the coach acting as a role

568 model: “I don't want my players complaining and whining to the referee. I don't want them
569 cheating, so I can't do it myself… I think it's important to role model… 100 percent got to
570 live by what you believe in” (Heald). Coaches in the present study stressed encouraging an
571 atmosphere that promotes prosocial behaviours and deters antisocial behaviours through their
572 own actions. Furthermore, coaches addressed the importance of encouraging player
573 autonomy as it promotes adaptive functioning, self-governance, and internal endorsement of
574 one’s actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Coaches stated that they promoted autonomy as they
575 want players to ‘self-police’: “I also like to get the players to self-regulate, if they spot a
576 player that's not adhering to some behaviour… the players self-police that, they register that,
577 they address it themselves in the appropriate way” (Wroot). To self-police, players need to
578 take ownership when enforcing the club’s code of conduct and expectations amongst others.
579 Six of the eight coaches addressed the use of codes of conduct at their clubs: “It's around how
580 you reflect those values. For the players, they have a code of conduct. They have particular
581 values or behaviours that we expect to see. Just things like shaking hands, engaging with
582 visitors, treating [people] with respect” (Johnson).

583 Research suggests codes of conduct improve the ethical climate of clubs and those
584 processes such as self-policing and whistleblowing are vital in aiding in this process
585 (Constandt et al., 2019). It should be noted that intra-club recommendations are not without
586 challenge, given that professional football often fosters a culture of organizational silence,
587 whereby players are reluctant to voice their concerns for fear of the impact it might have on
588 their career progression (Parker & Manley, 2016). Therefore, clear expectations and
589 standards should be outlined from the start along with support for ‘whistleblowers’
590 (Constandt et al., 2019). However, this can be further complicated as the present study
591 demonstrated, because of the stress coaches place on ‘club intra-unity’:

592 I'd just ensure that everyone role modelled it [code of conduct], all the staff at all

593 times. That's the hard bit. Because if all staff don't buy-in, why would all the players
594 buy-in? I would have every single coach and every single staff buy-in to it and live it
595 and breathe it every single day in everything that they do. If you do that [role model],
596 the players will do it (Phillips).

597 Coaches stated the importance of “singing from the same page”, “all living and breathing it”
598 and have a “collective line in the sand”, all of which referred to the signing of an agreed
599 internal social contract between the organization and its members (Constandt et al., 2019).
600 Phillips continued that if this synergy did not occur, they would initially look to “staff
601 education”, and if this failed would seek to recruit “the right people”, signalling towards
602 those who have the same values and morals:

603 It's a workshop with the coaches. I'm a firm believer of helping to change the staff, or
604 change the staff. For me, I think there has to be a point where we say, “Listen, we've
605 tried to make this work with you for long enough, but we need to get someone else in.
606 We need to get the right people in.” The more of the right people you have on the bus,
607 the better. There has to be education, and [coaching staff] have to be given examples
608 of how to do things. “This is how we'll role model this”. But, eventually, if they
609 [coaching staff] don't buy-in to it, then we need to get somebody in who will.

610 This emphasizes that clubs and coaches should look for synergy amongst staff to create and
611 manage a moral atmosphere that has collective values and norms. Coaches alluded to ‘aligned
612 recruitment’ being of utmost importance to establish a successful team environment. Thus,
613 during the recruitment processes, potential employees should be evaluated against the current
614 club values and norms. However, some coaches may have no influence on recruitment,
615 highlighting the importance of rapport and communication with hierarchical figures in
616 professional football (Cho & Lee, 2020), so that recruitment is congruent with club workings.

617 **Conclusions for Applied Practice, Limitations and Future Directions**

618 Explorative research aiming to develop coaches' understanding of morality and moral
619 atmosphere is limited. To our knowledge, this is the first qualitative paper that explores
620 morality and the moral atmosphere from the perspective of English male professional,
621 football coaches. It should also be noted, whilst coaches offered a multitude of
622 recommendations and interventions, every club will operate and be influenced differently due
623 to the situational context they find themselves in. Nonetheless, the current sample of English
624 professional football coaches have offered consistent accounts of interventions (e.g.,
625 promoting a range of social moral values, role modelling behaviour, implementing a code of
626 conduct, aligned recruitment, club intra-unity, inter-club reflection, psychological and job
627 security, clear club communication, home visits and self-policing), suggesting that such
628 guiding principles could be implemented to help create and manage a moral atmosphere. One
629 way to promote and incentivize said guiding principles could be to educate coaches on the
630 team outcome benefits of improving the moral atmosphere, such as increased effort, team
631 cohesion and player commitment (Kavussanu & Hodge, 2019; Pizzi & Stanger, 2020).
632 Furthermore, given that coaches demonstrated moral disengagement tendencies, which were
633 considered a maladaptive coping strategy, it is recommended that coaches aim to be reflective
634 and honest with how they conduct themselves and view morality (Shigeno et al., 2021). This
635 could be achieved via the inter-club reflection intervention offered previously, by building
636 upon the work of Peláez et al. (2016) and following the insights of our coaches interviewed.
637 We would recommend that a form of educational, reflective networking takes place, where
638 active reflection and sharing best practice occurs through coach discourse after or in between
639 training and match schedules. Such an intervention has the potential to develop coach self-
640 awareness of behaviours and contexts that may place morality at risk, as well as develop
641 overall coaching practice by harnessing a greater awareness and understanding of morality
642 through coach networking and open discussion. In addition, a novel finding of the study was

643 in relation to self-preservation as a probable reason behind the occurrence of antisocial
644 behaviour. It is well established that the performance climate strongly influences moral
645 climates (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019), but it appears that job insecurity may also result in
646 the occurrence of such behaviours (e.g., belittling and screaming at players, cheating by
647 encouraging diving, pressuring referees), through fear of losing job roles when results and
648 performances are poor. As a result, we suggest that future work aims to investigate the
649 relationship between job security and moral functioning in professional football coaches.

650 Although the present study targeted a hard-to-reach sample and added to the field of
651 research by sharing their experiences of morality and providing applied recommendations,
652 the study is not without limitations. Firstly, all coaches were of similar cultural and ethnic
653 origin (e.g., white male British), therefore it would be beneficial to explore the aims of the
654 current study with a culturally and ethnically diverse sample. In doing so, this would collate
655 varied perspectives and experiences of morality to help develop understanding of its
656 complexities on a wider scale, possibly opening the avenue for sharing of moral best practice
657 and education internationally. Therefore, we recommend that research is conducted into
658 whether coach morality perspectives differ for females, as well as internationally and/or
659 culturally within professional football, as sports, particularly of western influence are
660 *sometimes* oblivious of non-western voices (Morgan 1997), in this case, their views and
661 perspectives on sport morality need representing. Secondly, future work could implement the
662 suggested guiding principles and measure club morality over a season (e.g., longitudinally) to
663 observe if moral functioning improves over time.

664 Overall, the current study has accessed a hard-to-reach sample in professional football
665 coaches and has harnessed their rich qualitative accounts to create practical guiding
666 principles. These principles could aid clubs and coaches in creating and managing conducive
667 moral atmospheres, which are suggested to improve team performance and functioning.

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843 **Table 1**

844 *Sample Characteristics of the Professional Football Coaches'*

Coach	Citizenship	Position	Players coached	Qualifications	Contract	Club Level
Connolly	England	First team manager	First team seniors	UEFA A license	Paid full-time	EFL Championship
Dickinson	England	Assistant first team manager	First team seniors	UEFA A license	Paid full-time	EFL Championship
Phillips	England	Head of academy coaching	First team seniors and professional club academy players Under 17's-21's	UEFA A license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EFL Championship
Atkinson	England	Development phase coach	Professional club academy players Under 12's-17's	UEFA B license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EPL
Johnson	England	Lead youth phase coach	Professional club academy players Under 12's-17's	UEFA A license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EPL
Norman	England	Development phase coach	Professional club academy players Under 13's-17's and international youth players	UEFA A license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EPL
Wroot	England	Lead development phase coach	Professional club academy players Under 18's	UEFA A license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EPL
Heald	England	Lead development phase coach	Professional club academy players Under 16's-18's	UEFA A license and Advanced Youth Award	Paid full-time	EFL Championship

845 *Note*. EPL = English Premier League | EFL = English Football League

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848 **Figure 1**

849 *Interrelated Thematic Map of Coaches' Experiences of Morality and Recommendations for Creating*

850 *and Managing a Moral Atmosphere in Professional English Football.*

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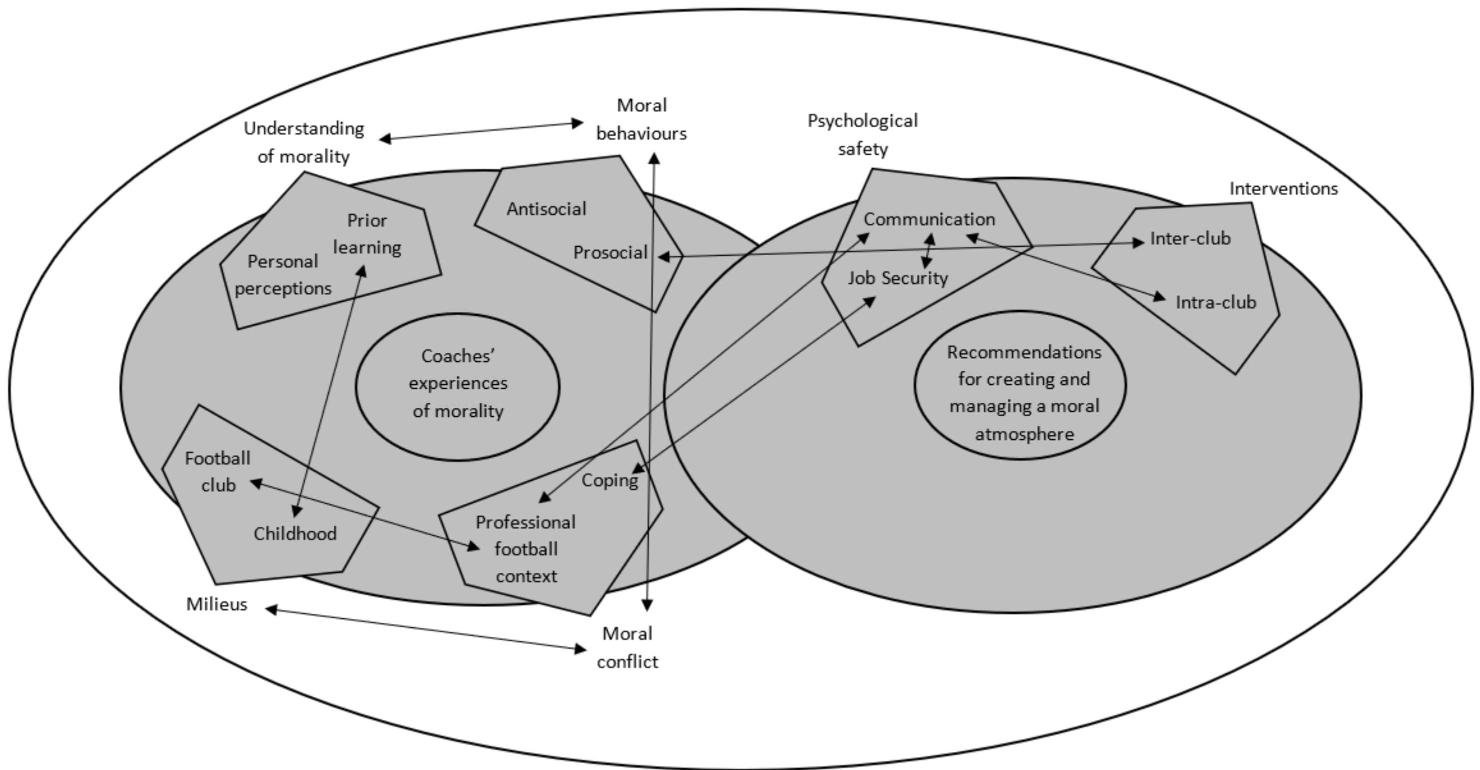

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