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

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Citation:

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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

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[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

493 lives (e.g., financial stability). Thus, coaches' core moral values can become conflicted

494 depending on the context they find themselves in. This can lead to the action of antisocial

495 behaviours, which are justified through the maladaptive coping mechanism of moral

496 disengagement, where coaches deviate from their values. Potentially, this explains why many

497 coaches are continuously in a moral conflict within their job role, due to football's 'win at all

498 costs' context. This performance context has shown to impact coaches' feelings towards job

499 security and overall wellbeing (Bentzen et al., 2020). As a result, it could be argued that the

500 existence of some antisocial behaviour is not merely due to egotistical personal success, but

501 for self-preservation: "Football… it's everything I detest in life in terms of, the bitching, the

502 back-stabbing, all the stuff that goes on for the self-preservation" (Dickinson). This echoes

503 the work of Thompson et al. (2015) in professional football whereby colleagues would betray

504 others to succeed. Consequently, organizations should acknowledge that increased job

505 security can improve mental health, motivation, and efficiency of coaches, whereas job

506 insecurity can lead to ill-being, burnout (Bentzen et al., 2020) and dishonest acts. Coaches

507 here, alluded to colleagues acting "dishonestly for fear of losing jobs", for example avoiding

508 conflicts of opinion that may result in termination of contracts, which relates to the lower-

509 order theme of communication. This was prevalent as coaches found that desired

510 communication pathways were not followed, and this caused conflict within the team:

511   The captain had a direct line to the chairman, that's just not right. You're completely

512   undermining the manager… there's a hierarchy of how things get dealt with… it's just

513   like any lot of work. You report to your line manager. The head coach… You know

514   there's a process to everything. That's the same [for] football as far as I'm concerned.

515   So that kind of happened and I didn't like it (Dickinson).

516 Communication failures, lack of clarity, role conflicts and role ambiguity can lead to staff

517 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

543   is paramount for clubs to invest time in attempting to fully harness the potential of other

544   influential stakeholders (e.g., parents; Mills et al., 2014) as they can additionally act as social

545   moral educators for the athletes.

546   In addition to home visits, inter-club reflection was discussed in relation to sharing

547   best practice and educating others after a game. In line with research, coaches appeared to

548   advocate in-depth, reflective discussions about common moral issues they experience (Peláez

549   et al., 2016). Norman suggested that creating opportunities for inter-club reflection could be

550   particularly beneficial to improve coaches' self-awareness of their behaviours after games:

551   Get the coaches together from different clubs at the end of the game and have a real

552   frank conversation about why they do what they do… That might raise self-awareness

553   and that might improve those interactions week to week… You learn and you're doing

554   stuff off of their environment. You go "f*****g hell that's a good idea, why didn't we

555   do that" and you put it [integrate the idea] into your [club] environment (Norman).

556   Norman continued that this collaborative, reflective practice could be encouraged as an

557   alternative to traditional methods endorsed by coach development programs, where reflection

558   is typically implemented at an individual, rather than group-level.

559   Can we as adults have more conversation around how we support... and what game

560   day looked like? Can we do that afterwards and say, "Do you know that you were

561   shouting and screaming at the ref?", and they'll go, "No, I wasn't." I said, "Yes…

562   when they were offside, you were shouting and screaming." Then they might drive

563   home on the bus, and think "F*****g hell I need to work on that" (Norman).

564   This therefore could help promote moral behaviour, self-awareness, and address the

565   limitations of reflecting in the "classroom", which disassociates coaches from their everyday

566   tasks and environments, resulting in a decontextualized process (Ciampolini et al., 2019).

567   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
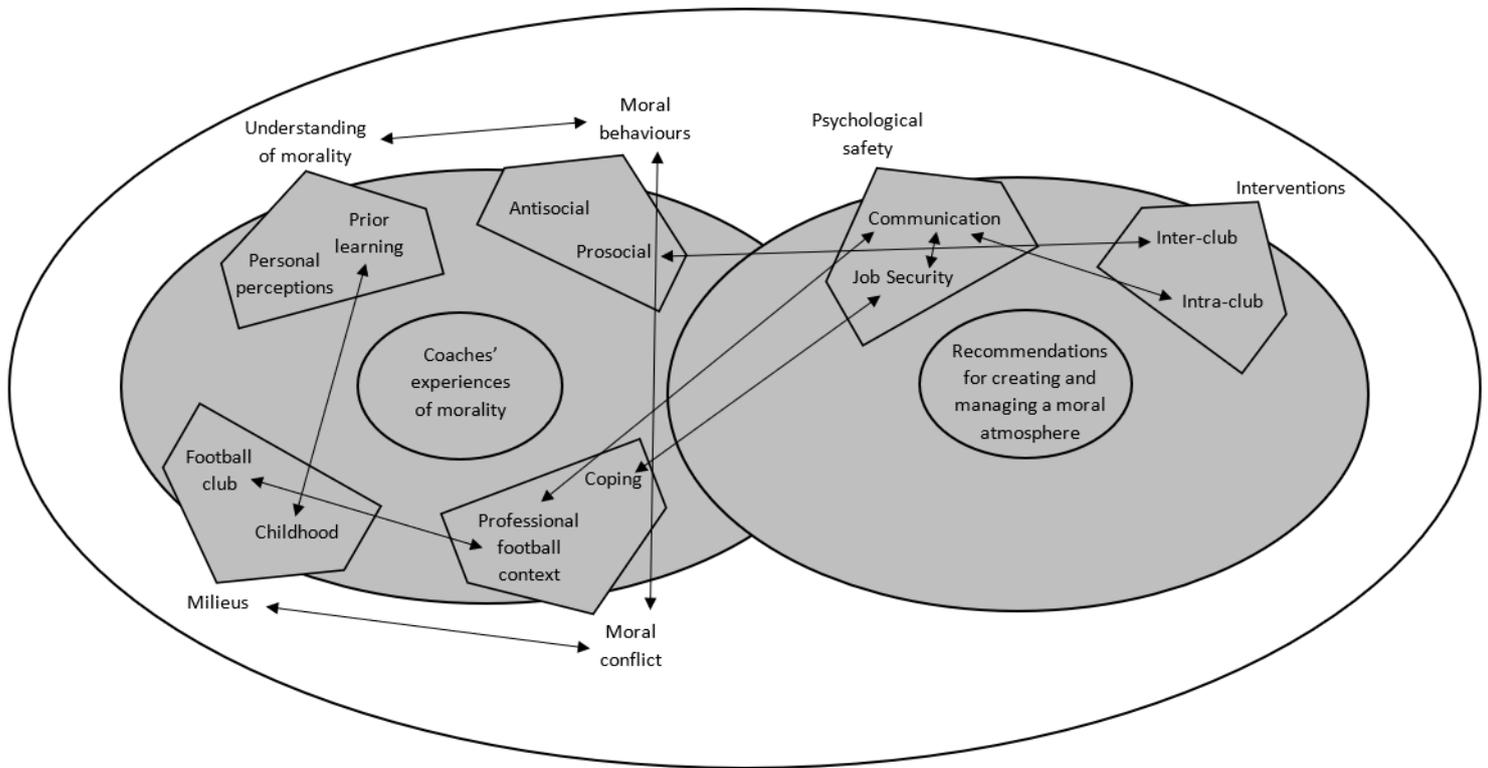
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848   **Figure 1**

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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