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Repairing relationship conflict in community sport work: "Offender" perspectives

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ABSTRACT
Through our investigation of relationship conflict and repair in community sport coaching this article makes a novel contribution to the sociology of sport work. Such inquiry is necessary as interpersonal conflict has the potential to erode worker commitment, engagement, performance, satisfaction, and mental health. To date, the study of interpersonal conflict in coaching has been framed psychologically. It is our position that sociologically inspired inquiry is not only necessary but can valuably contribute to academic debate in this area. To redress this situation we conducted in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with 18 community sport coaches to produce rich insights into the participants' (transgressors) understandings of fractured workplace relations, remedial work used to repair and restore relationships, as well as desirable and undesirable consequences emanating from these restorative efforts. Through our application of Ren and Gray's and Goffman's theorization addressing restoration mechanismsthe present study extends existing understanding by detailing how a) relationship conflict was triggered by the participants having violated the identity and control of significant working others, b) participants attempted to repair relations by offering accounts, apologies, and demonstrations of concern, and c) the success of these restorative efforts was variable and dependent on their being accepted by the offended parties. It is our hope that these original empirical and theoretical insights not only advance understanding about relationship conflict and repair but prompt further sociologically inspired research into this important interpersonal aspect of sport work.

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Sport work; relationship conflict; relationship restoration; identity violation; violation of control; corrective process

Introduction

Scholars have progressively challenged the overly sanitised and functional representations of sport work that have historically dominated the literature base and much professional preparation and development provision (e.g. Gale et al. 2019; Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020; Ives et al. 2021; O'Gorman et al. 2021; Stamp, Potrac, and Nelson 2021). Through the rigorous application of qualitative methodologies and sociological theorising, this evolving body of scholarship has provided critical insights into the social, emotional, and relational challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas that sport workers encounter in the everyday performance of their working roles (e.g.

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Huggan, Nelson, and Potrac 2015; Kelly 2017; Magill et al. 2017; Potrac, Smith, and Nelson 2017; Rowley et al. 2020). This research has highlighted how sport workers represent much more than variables upon, or through, which social structures exert influence in a consistent and predictable manner, or whose work simply entails applying good practice guidelines, completing technical tasks in an efficient manner, and unproblematically filling a position in an organisational flowchart (cf. Grills and Prus 2019; Voronov and Weber 2020). Instead, it suggests that sport work is 'fundamentally intersubjective, processually-based, [and] situationally emergent' (cf. Grills and Prus 2019, 81; Ives et al. 2021).

Central to such inquiry is the recognition that sport workers simultaneously occupy the roles as both targets and tacticians of influence in everyday organisational life (Grills and Prus 2019; Prus 1999). For example, researchers have addressed a) the intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies that sport workers variously use to build, maintain, and advance relationships with their colleagues (e.g. Hall et al. 2021; Jones, 2006, 2009; Jones, Armour and Potrac 2004), b) how sport workers read and subsequently engage with the micropolitics that comprise the (often competitive and precarious) underworld of their respective employment settings (e.g. Gibson and Groom 20192004, 2021; Potrac 2009; Potrac et al. 2013; Purdy & Jones 2011; Purdy, Jones and Cassidy 2009; Rowley et al. 2020), as well as c) the emotions that they experience, hide, show to, or manufacture for, others in their efforts to achieve both organisational and personal goals (Ives et al. 2022; Magill et al. 2017; Nelson et al. 2013, 2022.; Potrac, Smith, and Nelson 2017). Crucially, such research has illuminated how sports organisations are not immune from interpersonal conflict and relational damage. However, the strategies individuals (i.e. transgressors and victims) might use to repair fractured relationships remain (surprisingly) under-examined. While psychological analyses have started to consider interpersonal conflict prevention, management, and resolution in coach-athlete relationships in performance environments (e.g. Wachsmuth, Jowett, and Harwood 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Smith and Arthur 2021), there is a dearth of critical social inquiry into those violations that generate relationship conflict as well as strategic remedial moves that sport workers enact to restore fractured relations.

The situation described above is problematic because interpersonal conflict and the repeated failure to repair relationships has the potential to produce several negative consequences (Epitropaki et al. 2020;; Potrac et al. 2021; Ren and Gray 2009). These include mental health issues, an erosion of worker satisfaction, engagement, and commitment, as well as a reduction in individual, group, and organisational performance (Potrac et al. 2021). Aware of these potential impacts, researchers in the social science literature have increasingly considered how individuals may seek to iteratively repair conflicts and breaches of trust with others (see reviews by Epitropaki et al. 2020 and Olkehans et al. 2019). Such inquiry has, for example, examined the triggers that lead to relationship fracture (e.g. gradual drifts and abrupt shocks), the important role that prosocial sensemaking processes play in facilitating relationship repair, and the interactive processes that are employed in an individual's efforts to restore or strengthen their relationship with another or others (Epitropaki et al. 2020; Olkehans et al. 2019). In terms of the latter, scholars have increasingly considered transgressors' usage of, and victims' responses to, the following strategies; the provision of a) *accounts* that attempt to deny, reduce or explain the transgressors culpability, b) different types of *apologies* offered to the victim by the transgressor, as well as c) an indication of the transgressor's *concern* for their victim, and d) providing compensation to the victim in the form of *penance* (Epitropaki et al. 2020; Olkehans et al. 2019). Unfortunately, there remains a paucity of such inquiry in the context of sport work.

The purpose of this study was to generate original knowledge concerning the meaning-making and interactional strategies that the participant sport workers (in this case, community sport coaches) utilised in their efforts to repair relationships that they had (un)intentionally violated or damaged with workplace colleagues. Through the rigorous application of in-depth interviews and iterative sensemaking (i.e. Goffman 1967, 1971; Ren and Gray 2009), our research provides novel empirical and theoretical insights concerning the participants' (transgressors) understandings of a) the fracturing of workplace relationships, b) the remedial work used to repair and restore these relationships, and c) the desirable and undesirable consequences emanating from these attempts to

responsively influence others. The significance of the paper also resides in its positioning of relationship conflict and repair as a socially embedded activity; that is, we explain, from the participants' perspective, what provoked conflict, the nature of the damage done, as well as what needed to be repaired in the specific social context of community sport coaching work (cf. Epitropaki et al. 2020; Ren and Gray 2009). Here, relationship repair is connected to righting wrongs and re-establishing social order in the participants' workplace settings (cf. Epitropaki et al. 2020; Olkehans et al. 2019; Ren and Gray 2009). This knowledge is crucial for developing rich and critical representations of sport work that explicitly engage with the issues of 'cynicism, ritual, and trust' and the organisational, cultural, and social factors that underpin them (cf. Manning 2007, 72; cf. Shulman 2017; Gale et al. 2019).

Theoretical framework

In this study, the theorising of Goffman (1967; 1971) and Ren and Gray (2009) were used to provide a novel, critical, and in-depth interpretation of the participant community sport coaches' understandings of, and interactive responses to, relationship conflict and repair. According to Goffman (1967), individuals seek to maintain *face* during interpersonal interactions. Maintaining face means sustaining 'a claimed sense of desired social self-worth or self-image in a relational situation' (Ting-Toomey 1994, 19–20). To preserve such self-respect in social encounters, a person must ensure that the *expressive order* (i.e. an order that dictates the responsibilities of each social actor and regulates the flow of events) is consistent with their face (Goffman 1967). Individuals are also expected to uphold a standard of considerateness during their interactional encounters (Goffman 1967). That is, 'he [sic] is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings' (Goffman 1967, 10). The combined effect of the rules of self-respect and considerateness is that individuals usually conduct themselves in ways that maintain one's own face, the face of the other, and, as a consequence, the expressive order (Goffman 1967).

Goffman (1967) also noted that, despite common knowledge about social decorum, people (un) wittingly behave in ways that causes others to *be in the wrong face* (i.e. sharing information which questions the self-worth and image of another), to *be out of face* (i.e. leading another to be out of touch with the situation and the expressive order), or to be *shamefaced* (i.e. providing a lack of judgemental support in the midst of the encounter so that another becomes embarrassed and chagrined). Ren and Gray (2009) defined such defacement of others as an *identity violation* because the individual is illegitimately obstructing another person's ability to maintain their identity and face during social interaction. Ren and Gray (2009) further argued that an individual can commit *violations of control* during interactional encounters. This occurs when a person's 'ability to exert influence over one's desired goals and to realise expected outcomes' is obstructed by another's behaviour (Ren and Gray 2009, 112). As these actions threaten or violate another person's important core needs (i.e. those associated with identity and face and those with control of desired goals), they are likely to provoke conflict and impede working relations (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009).

To repair the relationship and restore the expressive order, both the offender and the offended might, according to Goffman (1967), enact a *corrective process* entailing four stages. These are: *challenge*, *offering*, *acceptance*, and *thanks*. The first move of the restorative interchange is the *challenge*. This entails the offended calling attention to the offender's misconduct (Goffman 1967). The challenge can be expressed in *overt* or *covert* ways (Ren and Gray 2009). For example, 'some offended parties will exhibit strong nonverbal signals of offence without any verbal expression, whereas others may share their angry feelings with a third person but not directly with the perpetrator of the perceived misconduct' (Ren and Gray 2009, 108). For restoration to proceed, the offender must also directly or indirectly grasp that they have committed a violation in the eyes of the offended (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009).

The second stage of the restorative process is the *offering* (Goffman 1967). Here, the offender is given a chance to a) acknowledge the offensive act and its potential consequences for both the offended and the expressive order and b) engage in *remedial work* to restore the lost face, identity, and sense of control of the offended (Goffman 1971; Ren and Gray 2009). The combined thinking of Goffman (1971) and Ren and Gray (2009) highlights five principle remedial tactics that offenders might utilise to restore what has been damaged. These are: *accounts* (i.e. offering explanations), *apologies* (i.e. showing remorse), *requests* (i.e. offering a disclaimer prior to engaging in a potentially offensive act), *demonstration of concern* (i.e. showing considerateness for another's welfare), and *penance* (i.e. offering compensation). By engaging in these remedial activities, the offender hopes to display a desire to repair damaged relationships, provide compensation for the harm done, remove interpersonal tension, ameliorate the victim's negative impression of them, and restore the expressive order (Goffman 1971; Ren and Gray 2009).

Following the offering, the third move of *acceptance* can occur (Goffman 1967). At this stage, the persons to whom the offering is made (i.e. the offended party) can 'accept or reject the offering, extend forgiveness or dispensation, and revise [their] negative impression of the offender' (Ren and Gray 2009, 108). If accepted, the offender is then required to perform the terminal move of the interchange; that is, they are expected to express *thanks* or a sign of gratitude to the victim for giving them forgiveness (Goffman 1967). However, if the efforts to repair the relationship are not accepted by the offended, then conflict continues. The combination of Goffman's (1967, 1971) and Ren and Grays (2009) conceptual insights permitted a critical and rigorous examination of the participant community sport coaches' experiences of repairing relationship conflict and, in doing so, enabled us to make original empirical and theoretical contributions to the sociology of sport work.

Methods

Participant selection and recruitment

We used an interpretive methodology to critically analyse the issue of work-based relationship conflict and repair for community sport coaches (Tracy 2020). We sought to investigate our participants' perception of their occupational relations by recognising that there is no reality independent of perception (i.e. internalist-idealist/relativist ontology), knowledge is subjective and socially constructed (i.e. subjectivist epistemology), and, as such, there is a need to understand their lifeworlds in relation to organisational others (i.e. idiographic methodology) (Sparkes and Smith 2014; Potrac, Jones, and Nelson 2014). In the United Kingdom (UK), community sport coaches are typically required to: a) promote opportunities for diverse community groups or groups with health conditions to move and become physically active; b) work in collaboration with a wide range of organisations and professionals (such as those in public health, social work, and law and order) to organise and enact sport and physical activity programmes; c) focus their activities towards the achievement of non-sport outcomes (especially those related to many forms of social and health inequality); and d) evidence the impact of their work in terms of its contribution to the UK government's policy priorities (i.e. physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, economic development, and social development) (Ives et al. 2021; Smith, Greenough, and Lovett 2021).

Upon receiving ethical approval from the lead author's institution, *purposeful* sampling was used to recruit 'information rich' participants for this study (Patton 2015; Tracy 2020). We, as a research team, agreed on predetermined criteria for selecting participants. These were that participants had to be a) aged 18 years or older, b) employed as a community sport coach on a part-time or full-time basis, and c) had experienced and were willing to talk openly about interpersonal conflict and restoration (Patton 2015). The first and second authors then used their existing *networks* to contact and formally invite individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria to be research participants (N = 10) (Tracy 2020). *Snowball* sampling was subsequently

deployed to recruit additional participants (N = 8). Here, we used our existing networks of community sport coaches to identify and direct us to additional individuals that met the study's criteria for inclusion and who might be willing to participate (Tracy 2020). The final sample consisted of 18 full-time, White British, community sport coaches. 10 males were recruited from the North-West of England and 8 males from South-East England. All participants gave written and verbal informed consent at the conclusion of an introductory meeting that aimed to help the participants fully understand the purpose of the research and the nature of their involvement. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to protect the confidentiality of the participants, as well as any other individual or organisation that were mentioned during the research process (Tracy 2020).

Data collection

Given our focus on the participants' meaning making, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for generating data (King et al. 2019). Each of the participants was interviewed on one occasion. 11 of the interviews occurred in person, whereas 7 were conducted electronically via Skype. Our decision to complete online interviews, alongside more traditional face-to-face discussions, was a pragmatic one that permitted us to a) more easily reach participants that were geographically dispersed and b) to conduct research safely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Merriam et al. 2015; Brinkman 2018).

The interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and occurred at locations where both the interviewer and interviewee felt able to talk openly and honestly (King et al. 2019; Merriam and Grenier 2019). Face-to-face interviews were conducted in coffee shops, whereas both interviewer and interviewee were at their respective place of residence or work during online interviews. Our interviews sought to understand how the participants experienced relationship conflict and repair by exploring specific episodes and events from their respective coaching biographies (cf. Tracy 2020). To facilitate this, an interview guide was developed which broadly focused on exploring a) how the participants understood interpersonal conflict resulted from their actions, b) those interpersonal strategies they utilised to repair interpersonal conflict, and c) how relationship violation and repair affected the quality of working relationships. Questions included within the interview guide were informed by our reading of related literature, as well as desire to generate insights that would directly address the aims of the investigation. While the interview guide ensured that discussions responded to the purposes of our research, the interviewers locally determined the sequencing in which questions were asked. This required the interviewers to 'think on their feet' and make 'on-the-spot' decisions (Mason 2018). The interviewers needed to simultaneously orchestrate the intellectual and social dynamic of their interviews to ensure that interactions generated relevant data and associated insights (Mason 2018). During these interviews the first and second authors a) actively listened and interpreted the meanings of what participants shared with them; b) endeavoured to establish whether these sharings related to our research purposes; c) observed and responded to the demeanour of the interviewees; d) reflected on information shared earlier in the interviews; e) formulated and used follow-ups and probes (e.g. open-ended elaborations, open-ended clarifications), and f) monitored the duration of conversations and decided when to appropriately terminate each interview (Mason 2018; Tracy 2020). In total, 18 interviews were conducted; 10 by the first author (31-year-old White British, female) and 8 by the second author (31-year-old White British, male). Each interview lasted between 40–80 minutes. A total of 16 hours of interview data were produced and transcribed verbatim.

While the interviews focused on seeking to develop rich understandings of the participants' 'lifeworlds' in relation to workplace conflict and relationship repair, we acknowledge that asymmetrical power relations were an inherent feature of those interviews that took place (Tracy 2020). That is, we recognise that the interviewers had scientific competence, determined the topic of the interviews, posed the questions, critically followed-up on answers, and decided when to terminate

conversations (Brinkman 2018). The interventions of the first and second authors during the interviews inevitably led to aspects of the participants' experiences and shared examples being given more or less attention and critical focus. As such, rather than viewing interviews as the extraction of truth claims from research participants (Mason 2018), shared realities were dialogically constructed by the interviewee and interviewer (Rapley 2001).

Iterative data analysis

We adopted an *iterative approach* to qualitative data analysis, which cycled between 1) data collection, 2) consulting existing theories and guiding research objectives, and 3) examining emergent findings (Tracy 2018, 2020). The tagging back and forth between these stages continued until we believed our research effectively communicated the issue of relationship conflict and repair in ways that key audiences (e.g. researchers, practitioners, students, and educators) would deem significant, valuable, and interesting (Tracy 2020). Following each interview, and throughout the entire data collection phase, we subjected each transcript to emic and etic coding. The emic analysis involved (re)reading the transcript to develop a rich understanding of the participant community sport coaches' experiences of relationship conflict and repair and engaging in what scholars have termed descriptive primary cycle coding or open coding to capture the basic ingredients of the empirical data (i.e. who, what, when, where) (Tracy 2018, 2020). The etic analysis was concerned with consulting past theories and concepts addressing restoration mechanisms (i.e. Goffman 1967, 1971; Ren and Gray 2009) to create analytical codes that attended to the research objectives and addressed the more complex questions of 'why', 'how', or 'because' (Tracy 2020). During the secondary cycle, we also identified codes that were a consequence of another and grouped smaller first-level codes together into a hierarchical category (Tracy 2020). Engaging in these emic and etic activities throughout data collection enabled us to a) identify promising areas of interest, b) explain the participants' experiences using relevant sensitising concepts, and c) develop and refine the questions used in subsequent interviews (Tracy 2018). As such, the focus of our study, the generation of data, the construction of research findings, and our theoretical analyses required both inductive and deductive approaches (Tracy 2018).

Our iterative approach to data analysis involved more than the emic and etic coding strategies described above. It also included a series of collaborative writing activities to further learn about and interpret the empirical data (Richardson and Adams St Pierre 2018). We achieved this by creating a live document using Google Drive, which we regularly revised and updated before, during, and after our collective conference calls. For example, the first and fourth authors collectively engaged in the brainstorming activity of creating analytical memos (i.e. thoughts and ideas about emergent codes, key stories, and their meanings) and a loose analytical outline (i.e. selecting pertinent interview quotes that attended to our research purpose statement and presenting them in a coherent and persuasive order). The second and fourth authors then set about using this analytical outline to inform their drafting of the manuscript. This was an important analytical phase (Richardson 1994), as it enabled them to share new reading material, alternative interpretations of theory and data, as well as air and debate developing thoughts and ideas as they crafted and recrafted sentences and paragraphs (Ives et al. 2021). During this phase, the first and third authors read through numerous drafts, offered comments and suggestions, and weaved in their own analytical ideas to further develop the emerging argument. What follows, then, is a rigorous, interpreted thematic discussion of what we, the research team, considered to be the most significant features of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding relationship conflict and repair in community sport work (Tracy 2020).

Research findings and analyses

Our analysis of the interview data led to the production of three distinct but interrelated themes. The first was concerned with how relationship conflict was triggered by the participant community sport coaches intentionally or unintentionally challenging the professional self, autonomy, and decision-making of significant working others. The second theme focused on the remedial moves the participants enacted to restore and repair these fractured relations. The final theme addressed the extent to which the community sport coaches perceived that their restorative efforts were successful in repairing and revitalising these strained relationships. Each of these themes are explored in turn below.

Theme 1: fractured relations - violations in the workplace

The participants variously shared with us how, as transgressors, they had contributed towards interpersonal tensions and conflict in the workplace. They highlighted how they became aware of their misconduct through the offended's use of a *challenge* to express their negative reaction to the participant's decisions and actions (Goffman 1967). In other words, the offended others went about 'ratifying it as a threat that deserves direct official attention' (Goffman 1967, 19) through a combination of *overt* and *covert* strategies (Ren and Gray 2009). For example, Michael explained how an events manager challenged (Goffman 1967) him and his coaching team's organisation and delivery of a large sports tournament. Here, the events manager overtly (Ren and Gray 2009) communicated to Michael that the coaching team had violated (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009) the relationship via an 'abrupt' change in body language, facial expression, tone of voice, and words spoken. In his own words:

> I was asked to run a big tournament with our events team at the club on match day – 700 people, 56 children in attendance. After each match, we need to know who has won so that the winning team can take part in a small presentation with the first team women captain, receive a medal, and have photos. My staff didn't communicate to the players who had won [I was inside getting the next wave of the tournament ready so missed the final score] [. . .] so when called in for the presentation nobody knew which players needed to be sent to the stage. I decided to pick six random kids to go up, but it looked like a shambles! When the events manager realised the mess up he flapped, folded, and made a remark to me 'it's not difficult is it' whilst stomping around upset with my mishap. I think he was annoyed as I told him it was all in hand and my actions clearly didn't match this. The events team enjoyed the 'shiny shiny' and the cameras on them, but as soon as it went wrong I was handed the medals and they sidestepped. We usually get on well with each other, communicate well, he's happy, and smiley towards me but that wasn't present. Instead, he was choosing to be abrupt and quiet and all he kept telling me is, 'what's happened will be in the debrief', that those would be informed of this mistake, and I wasn't allowed to attend said debrief. I knew then I would have some explaining to do and build some bridges. *(Michael)*

The participants also outlined how offended others may present their challenges in a more covert manner (Ren and Gray 2009). For example, in the extract below, Mason's (the transgressor's) coaching methods and practices were covertly questioned by Phillip, one of the parents of a child on Mason's scheme. Here, Phillip contacted Mason's workplace director to share his displeasure with Mason's delivery approaches, especially the lack of attention that Phillip believed Mason was paying to him and other parents. Mason indirectly learned about this relationship violation (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009) through a text message from his director:

> The issue was with a dad of one of the guys I coached. Phillip wasn't a fan of my coaching style and the fact I didn't give the parent's much attention; all my focus was on the kids. I came to learn of his discontent through conversations with two of my colleagues, one of these being the director of rugby. I received a text from the director saying, 'Mason, one of the parent's really isn't happy with what you're doing in your sessions, please can you look to do something about it'. To be honest, I was oblivious but felt insulted and frustrated at the fact my actions were causing problems but he didn't speak to me face-to-face about it. It came across as it was done in a demeaning way. It was undermining that he believed that due to being around for longer at the club and being an older person that he could go and speak to someone to get me kicked out and then him take over my role. *(Mason)*

Analysis of those example challenges experienced by the community sport coaches revealed that they provoked relationship conflict through *identity violations* and *violations of control* (Ren and Gray 2009). That is, some violations occurred when the participants wittingly or unwittingly threatened the face of the victim, failed to recognise or show appropriate deference, and brought into question the intention to preserve the expressive order (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009). Equally, other violations were the consequence of the participants intentionally or unintentionally threatening or blocking the significant other's sense of control and achievement of desired goals (Ren and Gray 2009). For example, Luke shared with us how he publicly reprimanded and undermined a coaching colleague's practices in front of parents, participants, and co-workers. Similarly, Issac explained how he openly questioned his operations manager's decision to terminate a sport and physical activity scheme. The angry and confrontational responses Luke and Issac received from their respective workplace colleagues indicated to them that their decisions, actions, and behaviours triggered relationship conflict by causing these others to 'be in the wrong face, to be out of face, or to be shamefaced' (Goffman 1967, 9). In their own words:

> I had a community coach come to support a tournament at one of our emerging talent centres on the last session before Christmas. Whilst the intention of this Monday evening was to have fun and play games, the teams still needed to focus on the topics we had previously covered in training sessions. My colleague welcomed the players on the pitch with 'last session, let's have a mess about lads and have some games'. The problem I had with this is that it's a paying session of £25 per month and he said this in front of the parents. I corrected the coach in front of the kids and parents to reiterate that, although we will have fun, we are still working on development and playing performance as well. He responded, 'No, no kids, were just going to have fun and play games', the kids found this hilarious. I didn't find this hilarious when the parents are stood looking and thinking what the hell is going on. I decided to publicly correct the coach again and followed this by sending the kids out in the groups they had been allocated. As we walked away to join them, I pulled him and, in an assertive tone and manner, I voiced how he was massively out of line and told him he wasn't to do that again. My actions were making a statement to the parents that this is not acceptable, I have recognised that, I have dealt with it, and I have reprimanded him. I knew as the coach walked off he was angry and that I had just made him look an idiot and undermined him in front of parents, kids, and the other coaches. I could see it in his face, his body language, and the speed in which he strided off from me. He walked over to the pitch then I joined him to work with the groups. Then he said it again, about the kids just having fun today. I told him he must go and put some restrictions on the game that enforce what we have been trying to get out in these six weeks. It escalated with him refusing to do it, he turned round and told me to sod off and do it myself. This was followed by him storming off the pitch, leaving the session, and going back to his car [. . .] I was shocked and surprised by his actions, and also gutted as we have a good relationship and I would call him a friend. *(Luke)*

> I ran a schools disability league and it became the biggest league in the country. The operations manager brought me in for a meeting at the club where he announced he wanted to scrap it. I couldn't believe it and straight away, I responded 'what do you mean you're getting rid of it? How can you have an opinion about something you have never seen and have no knowledge on?' He was all about growth and money and simply said it's not working. I openly challenged him [in front of another manager] and began explaining how it's the heart of the programme, and if you take the heart out of an animal, it dies. I told him his decision would ruin the full disability programme and I wouldn't be staying at the club, in this role, to watch that unfold. At this point, the other manager in the room said, 'I think you should give Issac a week to develop a proposal as to why we should keep the league running'. Reluctantly, I was given the nod to do this. I went all out and created a PowerPoint [. . .] I collected the statistics, impact case studies, and statements from key stakeholders who were involved in the league, income generation, and the key partnerships we had developed. When I presented this back, you could tell he was shocked at how far I went and that he didn't realise how significant this programme was for those involved. He sat across the room with limited eye contact, giving the impression I wasn't important to him [. . .] I guess he saw me as a direct challenge. In the meeting, it was agreed that the schools league would continue as my evidence spoke volumes to its success. As he left and walked past me he said, 'you're a bit of smart f**ker aren't you, you've won this battle but not the war'. Although this was a threat, in the sense of him implying he was going to make things difficult between us, I knew I was well respected in the work I had done for the club so I felt in a strong position to challenge him to defend what I am passionate about. *(Isaac)*

Theme 2: accounts, apologies, and concern - enacting remedial work

In response to those challenges discussed above, the community sport coaches described how they performed, what Goffman (1967) conceptualised as, the *offering move* to 'correct for the offence and re-establish the expressive order' (Goffman 1967, 20). The offering of *accounts* represented a key remedial strategy that the participants employed to repair strained working relations (Goffman 1971). Consistent with Goffman's ideas, the participants shared additional information and insights with the offended with a view to 'restructuring the initial response of the offended and appreciably reducing the fault of the actor' (Goffman 1971, 112). That is, they explained how they utilised various forms of accounts (e.g. mitigating circumstances, reduced responsibility, external attribution, reframing the situation) to explain, reduce, or deny their culpability (Ren and Gray 2009). For example, in response to the social media challenge (Goffman 1967) presented by Parkrun volunteers (who were angry about the Council publicly taking credit for the success of Junior ParkRun activities), Christopher explained that he arranged a meeting with these volunteers to provide an account (Goffman 1971) for why the Council accepted the local media's invitation to share a good news story regarding the expansion of Junior Parkrun within the region. Within this meeting, Christopher argued for mitigating circumstances to 'establish that the act is not to be taken as an expression of his [sic] moral character' (Goffman 1967, 112):

> We (the council) had reported a good news story on the extension of Junior Parkrun indefinitely and as part of that, a TV crew, media channel, had wanted to interview someone from the council. I guess they'd come to the council because they weren't sure who else they should be speaking to. From the council's point of view the Parkrun take place on our land so we grant permission, we've given all of the funding to the adult Parkrun, a big chunk of the funding to the Junior one so we were just stating the facts; 'aren't they fantastic?' 'We're glad we have them here', 'the volunteers are great, couldn't do it without them'. Unfortunately, the council receives a lot of external online community bashing and this was no exception. When the video was posted online, it was clear the Parkrun community were dissatisfied with me doing the interview. Comments were left 'they are trying to take credit for its success', 'what's this have to do with the council', 'they aren't the ones that show up every Saturday and Sunday morning to volunteer'. We weren't trying to take any of the credit, couldn't be further from the truth. So I invited those in who are involved in the programme so I could explain the council's role within the Parkrun activities. To inform them properly on what and why of the video so they could get the full rounded picture of my intentions. I wanted a meeting to lay it out on the table, state the full facts in the attempt to eradicate the conflict issues. My attempt was a success in that I received comments of 'don't worry about it' and 'we really appreciate all your help in the last eighteen months', 'you did a really great job of giving credit where it's due, there will always be those who prefer to be contentious'. (Christopher)

The participants also explained how they used *apologies* to repair conflict in damaged relationships (Goffman 1971). Through the sharing of apologies, the participants acknowledged that harm was done, they were guilty of the offence, remorseful for their behaviours, and regretted acting inappropriately (Goffman 1971; Ren and Gray 2009). In the following quotation, Jonathan explained how one of his players, Charlie, used a text message, lack of punctuality, and demeanour to express his displeasure at being deselected for an important sporting fixture. In response to this challenge (Goffman 1967), Jonathan offered Charlie an apology via text message to try to repair the relationship conflict. In other words, Jonathan used an apology as a gesture to take responsibility for the violation and demonstrate that the offence should not be construed as a typical or accurate reflection of their identity and moral character (Goffman 1971; Ren and Gray 2009):

> As Head Coach, I had some decisions to make around two players and team selection ahead of our biggest game of the season. I had Harry, the captain who had been out of play for some time due to injury, and Charlie, one of my best players but he'd recently rolled his ankle. Harry and I were in frequent contact and he was adamant he was match fit and ready to play his final game, and I was unsure about Charlie's ankle and fitness. I decided to start Harry and bench Charlie! I messaged Charlie before the match to say, 'I'm not entirely happy that your ankle is up to it and I'm starting you as a sub', no reply [. . .] until the next morning. I got a lengthy reply detailing how unhappy and disappointed he was with my decision and that I'd allowed myself to be pushed by Harry. I think he was embarrassed having started every game he'd be subbed for this match,

> he felt betrayed, shocked and gutted by my actions. He turned up for the match, but was deliberately late. I could tell how upset he was with me, his body language and the fact he didn't talk, that was tough as we had a good relationship. After the match, Charlie sent me another text reiterating his displeasure and said he wouldn't be playing for me again. I reached out with a text, I replied to Charlie apologising for this situation in an attempt to smooth things over. By saying sorry, it was my intention to repair the healthy relationship we had and for him to return to the fold. *(Jonathan)*

The participants also described how they regularly offered offended parties a *demonstration of concern* by being considerate of their welfare and acting in ways that protect their interests (Ren and Gray 2009). By way of example, Henry shared with us how Sam's, one of his team member's, body language appeared to overtly challenge (Ren and Gray 2009) his decision to publicly question Sam for playing a computer game in the office. Sam also covertly expressed his displeasure at Henry's actions to a senior member of staff, who later disclosed this information with Henry. After a period of reflection, Henry sent Sam a series of emails and WhatsApp messages to demonstrate his concern, reiterate his personal and professional support, and commend Sam for his hard work and efforts. By enacting this remedial move, Henry sought to convey renewed good intentions, demonstrate his benevolence, and restore perceptions of trust and respect (Ren and Gray 2009):

> I'd caught one of my junior coaches in the office playing football manager (i.e. a computer game) and called him out on it in front of the full office. I said to him 'do that after you've won the Champions League because that's more important this afternoon'. I did see the other coaches laugh but when I glanced over, Sam was not amused. One of my senior coaches called me in the evening and said Sam had told him he was pissed off I'd being sarcastic and said that in front of everybody. After sitting at home and thinking about it, I did feel bad. I'm old, he's young, and it's his first job in football, and in an office like this. I let my guard down a bit when really with somebody young, new, and looking to me for guidance and kindness I should have been supportive of him. I can overthink and be sensitive and this played on my mind and kept me awake. It sparked me to send an email to my staff (including Sam), in the personal email to him, I thanked him for the great work he was doing for the team and let him know that as his boss I'm there if he needs me. Along with the reach out email, over the coming weeks, I also sent Sam more emails and WhatsApp's. These were to check-in on how he was, so make sure he was ok and to gauge if our relationship was ok. *(Henry)*

Theme 3: accepted, rejected, ongoing - responses to repair attempts

Once offerings were made by the community sport coaches, the offended others then had opportunities to accept or reject these remedial efforts as a 'satisfactory means of re-establishing the expressive order and the faces supported by this order' (Goffman 1967, 22). Many of the participants explained how their symbolic efforts allowed them to re-establish some degree of equilibrium in the relationship (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009). For example, Anthony explained how after violating his relationship with one of his players, Trevor, he used various strategies of remedial work to repair the relationship (Goffman 1971). Following the implementation of these symbolic efforts, Anthony felt that he not only restored his working relationship with Trevor but these restorative efforts made it even stronger (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009). Indeed, Trevor's responses indicated to Anthony that his offering had been accepted and forgiveness granted (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009). In Anthony's own words:

> The conflict between me and the player made me reflect on my approach. I was so naïve to the importance of speaking on a one-to-one level with players both in training and away from training before. Following the various strategies of repair, my relationship with Trevor got better and better with each and every personal interaction we had. He was more committed and engaged in training sessions and I think that's because we now have a greater connection to where we were going as a team. We are able to have some really good and dynamic conversations. Of course, there will be opportunities for our relationship to keep on improving but I feel like it's repaired, there's an element of trust between us now. *(Anthony)*

While some participants felt that their remedial work effectively restored the relationship and revised their victim's negative impression of them (such as Anthony), other participants explained how their working relations with the offended never fully returned to their original state. In the extract below,

Edwin explained how his financial decisions left a chairman of a sports club 'disgruntled'. In seeking to re-establish and restore this relationship, Edwin enacted remedial work (e.g. emails, collaborative working practices, and open communication) (Goffman 1971; Ren and Gray 2009). While Edwin felt that these restorative attempts were largely successful, he believed his relationship with the offended party was not yet fully restored and, as such, required further restorative investment:

> Through my operational decisions, I'd managed to disgruntle the chairman of one of the biggest clubs in the county who is switched on, used to getting his own way, and gets fiery. When our relationship turned cold, became tense, and erupted I found it difficult as I pride myself on making relationships. I don't like that somebody doesn't like me. I identified ways to get him back on board to re-establish and build the relationship. A period of reflection, negotiations, emails, collaborative practices and open conversations allowed us to slowly get our relationship back in a better place. I wouldn't say we're 100% repaired; I would probably say about 90%. I would never think it would be back to 100% because I just genuinely think that's the character he is – there will always be a little bit of a grudge there. It's still a bit egg-shelly and maybe a matter of time before it kicks off again so it's just an on-going attempt to keep this relationship going in a positive direction. *(Edwin)*

In addition to examples of successful and ongoing restorative attempts, participants explained how their efforts sometimes failed. For instance, Kenneth shared with us how he fractured his relationship with one of his community sport coaches when he openly criticised and formally sanctioned them for failing to be punctual for a continuous professional development course. Despite numerous efforts by Kenneth to restore the relationship (e.g. positive emails, feedback, phone calls, and weekly meetings), his restoration attempts failed to induce forgiveness or dispensation. The individual in question instead decided to submit their formal resignation and discommunicate themself from Kenneth. In other words, Kenneth's repair efforts were not accepted by the offended party who decided to terminate their working relationship (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009):

> The problem was with one of my school sports coaches. He was a highly qualified football coach, quite uncommon to find someone who is willing to work in schools; they would normally be operating in academies or clubs. I'd booked him on a training course and he turned up late to the assessment day of the qualification and was unable to complete. I sat him down with the school games organiser (who we deliver a lot of work for) and informed him of our disappointment at him failing to meet the expectations of the course. I could tell he was quite taken aback by this meeting and he was back peddling to make excuses. He was given his first warning! I was wary of his commitment but I wanted him to stay. Unfortunately, I think because of this 'incident' he started to drift and became disengaged (turning up late and changing session's last minute). I tried a few things to get him back on board like copying him into emails with the positive feedback he was receiving from schools and parents, phoning him, and trying to schedule weekly meetings to discuss work tasks and developing his role with us. He then missed a further important staff meeting; I attempted to call/email him across two days. The day he received his wage slip he handed in his notice (said it's not enough money). I tried to negotiate with him, he was then told he had a months' notice to work but nothing. I've just had to cut ties and leave the relationship. *(Kenneth)*

Conclusion

In seeking to make an original and significant contribution to the sociology of sport work (e.g. Roderick 2006; Magill et al. 2017; Potrac, Smith, and Nelson 2017; Roderick, Smith, and Potrac 2017; Gale et al. 2019; Ives et al. 2021), this paper explored how the participant community sport coaches understood themselves to have violated relationships with significant working others, the remedial work they enacted to repair and restore these fractured relationships, as well as their sensemaking regarding the impact and consequences of their restorative efforts. Our analysis highlighted how relationship conflict was triggered by the participants violating the identity and control of those they worked with (Goffman 1967, 1971; Ren and Gray 2009). Having recognised the challenge posed by significant others, the participants attempted to repair these relations by offering remedial moves, namely accounts, apologies, and demonstrations of concern (Goffman 1967; Ren and Gray 2009). The success of these restorative efforts was variable. Some moves were accepted and contributed to working relations returning (or close) to their previous state, others were partially restored but had

yet to fully recover, and some were rejected and remained fractured (Goffman 1967, 1971; Ren and Gray 2009). By focusing our analyses on relationship conflict and repair, this paper provides important insights into the fragile and negotiated nature of social relations in sport work. While the findings of this study cannot be unproblematically generalised across all sport work settings, we have endeavoured to provide detailed, layered, descriptions of our participants' experiences, along with comprehensive supporting evidence in the form of rich interview quotations, to permit *naturalistic generalisability* by enabling readers to reflect on whether the presented relationship conflict and repair accounts resonate with their (your) own (Smith 2018). In addition to this, through a critical interpretation of our participant community sport coaches' understandings of, and responses to, relationship conflict and repair, we have not only demonstrated the *analytical generalizability* of Goffman's (1967; 1971) and Ren and Gray's (2009) theorisation of the restorative process for present purposes, but in a way that invites readers to consider the utility of these concepts for making sense of their (your) own relations and interactions in sporting places of work (Smith 2018).

While this investigation has provided novel insights, we urge scholars to further examine how workplace culture influences and shapes the implementation and success of repair mechanisms (Ren and Gray 2009; McCarthy 2017). This could not only include an examination of employment conditions, power, hierarchy and status in the workplace, but also the overlapping identities (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation) that are an inherent feature of these social encounters. This would seem especially important given the homogeneous nature of our sample (i.e. 18 full-time, White British, community sport coaches). Researchers are also invited to consider how the perceived severity of violations, quality of working relations prior to transgressions, time that elapses between offences and reconciliation attempts, and (perceived) sincerity of repair mechanisms impact the restoration process (McCarthy 2017). A further worthwhile line of inquiry would be to explore if certain restorative processes are more effective than others at addressing distinct types of relationship violation (Ren and Gray 2009) and how the social awareness and skills of sport workers influence restorative decisions, actions, and outcomes (Goffman 1967). Such work could entail exploring these issues from the perspectives of both transgressors and victims. Indeed, given the absence of the victims' voice in this paper, future inquiry may benefit from examining when, how, and why victims may choose, or not, to provide forgiveness to the transgressor (Epitropaki et al. 2020; Olkehans et al. 2019). Considering the research findings shared in this paper, it would also appear prudent to investigate the place and use of e-communication for presenting challenges and enacting remedial work. The examples shared by our participants suggest that workplace conflict and repair attempts are not exclusive to face-to-face interaction, but also take various electronic forms (e.g. emails, phone calls, and text messages). Studies might seek to more explicitly understand why perpetrators decide to enact remedial efforts via e-communication rather than addressing matters face-to-face, how victims variously perceive and judge such restorative attempts, and what leads victims to respond to perpetrators using the communicative channels that they do. Recognising that community sport coaches also work as part of performance teams (Potrac et al. 2021), we also invite scholars to investigate team level conflicts as repair mechanisms are likely to be more complicated, may be perceived differently, and could have alternative expectations regarding resolution (Ren and Gray 2009). Finally, it would be productive to understand why some offenders refrain from trying to repair fractured working relationships through restorative actions as well as the associated consequences of this decision (cf. Goffman 1967).

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