

# The under-representation and experiences of elite level minority coaches in professional football in England, France and the Netherlands

International Review for the

Sociology of Sport

2018, Vol. 53(3) 313–334

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DOI: 10.1177/1012690216656807

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## Abstract

This article will examine the previously under-researched area of the under-representation and experiences of elite level minority (male) coaches in (men's) professional football in Western Europe. More specifically, the article will draw on original interview data with 40 elite level minority coaches in England, France and the Netherlands and identify a series of key constraining factors which have limited the potential for and realization of opportunities for career progression across the transition from playing to coaching in the professional game. In doing so, the article will focus on three main themes identified by interviewees as the most prescient in explaining the ongoing under-representation of minority coaches in the sport: their limited access to and negative experiences of the high level coach education environment; the continued existence of racism and stereotypes in the professional coaching workplace; and the over-reliance of professional clubs on networks rather than qualifications-based frameworks for coach recruitment. Finally, the article will contextualize these findings from within a critical race theory perspective and will draw clear linkages between patterns of minority coach under-representation, the enactment of processes and practices of institutional racism, and the underlying normative power of hegemonic Whiteness in the sport.

## Keywords

coaching, institutional racism, minorities, representation, Whiteness

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## Introduction

The social and cultural arena of elite level professional sport is often held up in popular public and mediated discourse as a post-racial, meritocratic and egalitarian space where 'race' no longer matters and where racial inequalities are a thing of the past (Carrington, 2010; Hartmann, 2000; Van Sterkenburg, 2012). Such assumptions draw heavily on the achievements of a growing number of high-profile sports performers from diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds across a range of individual and team sports. These commonly utilized and powerful neo-liberalist narratives posit that successful sporting endeavours of this kind provide evidence of the inherent inclusivity of organized professional sport and position it as a putatively apolitical space which can (and does) act as a natural harbinger of equitable 'race' relations and unfettered meritocracy. However, such assumptions actively promulgate the meritocratic and integrative myth of sporting modernity and serve to extricate the organization, development and practice of professional sport from the distinctly racialized socio-historical and contemporary national contexts in which they have been 'played out'. From this more critical perspective, professional sport can be understood as a distinctly 'racial formation' which 'remains a critical site for the reproduction and re-articulation of forms of racial knowledge and common-sense and is an important location in the contested struggles over ideology, politics and identity' (Carrington, 2010: 175).

Professional sport is also a site in which old biological and new cultural racisms impinge upon and are generated by sporting practice and have become manifest in sporting arenas in explicit and more coded forms. Anthias and Yuval-Davis have argued that racisms need to be recognized as a multiplicity of 'modes of exclusion, inferiorisation, subordination and exploitation that present specific and different characters in different social and historical contexts' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993: 2). Referring to racisms in the plural in this way recognizes the complexity and diversity of racisms and their often contradictory character and supports the assertion that 'there is no-one monolithic racism but numerous historical situated racisms' (Back et al., 2001: 9). Recognizing the existence and plurality of racisms provides a useful conceptual starting point from which to develop an enhanced understanding of the varied ways in which different minorities experience different forms of racisms and discrimination within sports across a range of intersectional indices such as ethnicity, culture and religion (Hylton, 2009). This is especially the case in relation to professional football in Western Europe where myriad processes of overt, culturally coded and more institutional forms of racisms have impacted in shaping the experiences of different ethnic, cultural and religious minorities in different ways across different nation states (Bradbury et al., 2011).

This article aims to offer an original empirical and theoretically grounded contribution to the previously under-researched area of the under-representation and experiences of elite level minority (male) coaches in (men's) professional football in three countries in Western Europe: England; France; and the Netherlands. In doing so, the article will draw on original interview data with elite level minority coaches ( $n=40$ ) in these three countries to identify a series of key constraining factors which have limited the potential for and realization of opportunities for career progression across the transition from playing to coaching in the professional game. In doing so, the article will focus on three main

themes identified by interviewees as the most prescient in explaining the under-representation of minority coaches in the sport: their limited access to and negative experiences of the high level coach education environment; the continued existence of racisms and stereotypes in the professional coaching workplace; and the over-reliance of professional clubs on networks rather than qualifications-based frameworks for coach recruitment. Finally, the article will contextualize these findings within a critical race theory (CRT) perspective and will draw clear linkages between patterns of minority coach under-representation, the enactment of processes and practices of institutional racism, and the underlying normative power of hegemonic Whiteness in the sport.

Before moving on to examine the main findings of the study, it is important to note that in the multi-national context of this research, the term 'minority' is used here as a broad descriptive marker to refer to ethnically, culturally, and religiously distinct groups of 'non-European' heritage resident in England, France and the Netherlands. More specifically, the term refers to first, second and third generation 'settled' minority populations drawn from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. It also includes the 'special case' of transcontinental Turkish minorities whose ethnic, cultural and religious 'visibility' seems heightened in these countries of settlement. The authors remain cognizant that categorizations of this kind which seek to capture the commonalities and specificities of diverse minority identities and experiences remain conceptually limited and subject to contestation. This task is made more difficult here given: (a) the myriad diversity of societal and sporting populations within the three countries under review; and (b) some marked national differences in political approaches to terminological classification and everyday nomenclature used to describe minority (and White) populations. However, whilst interviewees in this study used a range of 'locally relevant' terminologies to refer to different minority groups, the overarching term 'minority' was commonly cited and understood by all interviewees as a central reference point to describe 'composite' minority populations of non-European heritage. To this end, the authors proceed with some scholarly caution in using the term 'minority' as a means of identifying, classifying and, importantly, seeking to empower some distinctly racialized groups with shared experiences of social and cultural marginalization from the sporting contexts under review.

## **Previous research on representation and institutional racism in professional football**

Whilst over the last 30 years there has developed a steadily growing body of academic research investigating issues of overt and culturally coded racisms in men's football, there has until recently been a much more limited focus on examining the linkages between the under-representation of minorities and institutional racism in the professional realms of the sport. Where such focus exists it has largely sought to identify and examine the extent and ways in which processes and practices of institutional racism have impacted negatively in limiting the inclusion of marginalized minority groups in the playing, coaching and leadership tiers of the professional game. For example, a number of English based studies have identified a series of relatively 'closed' operational approaches to youth talent identification at professional clubs which have failed to incorporate a range of local settings in which young South Asian players are present, and have illustrated how these

practices of institutional closure are underpinned by some misplaced cultural conceptions and processes of racialized 'othering' on the part of physical education teachers, amateur and professional football coaches (Bains and Patel, 1996; Burdsey, 2004, 2007; Fleming, 1994, 2001). Similarly, other studies have identified the tendencies of some professional club coaches to socially construct minority players as 'difficult', 'troublesome' and 'lacking in social etiquette', and to question their 'attitude', 'aptitude' and 'mental reliability' to succeed in the professional game (Agergaard and Sorenson, 2009; Moran, 2000). Within such 'limited conditions of equality' it is argued that minority players are expected to exercise much greater adaptation to the social and cultural mores of dominant majority populations at clubs and to 'leave their cultural identities at the door'. These findings chime strongly with the work of King (2004a, 2004b) in England who asserts that the upwardly mobile career trajectories of minorities in professional football are premised on the successful negotiation of dialogic, non-verbal and ritualized processes through which the attainment of 'cultural passports' and contingent inclusions are granted or withheld within the normative White spaces that define the football workplace. Similarly focused studies have also alluded to the commonplace utilization of stereotypes by key stakeholders in professional football which narrowly conceptualize Black players in terms of perceived 'natural' traits of speed, power and athleticism, whilst simultaneously downplaying their motivational, analytical and organizational skills (Jones, 2002; Maguire, 1988; Melnick, 1988). Relatedly, a number of authors have argued that the continued existence of and adherence to stereotypes of this kind in the professional game is underpinned by the construction, maintenance and normalization of these racial myths within popular mediated sports discourse (Hermes, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2003; McCarthy and Jones, 1997; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004).

More recent large scale evaluation based studies have shifted attention to the 'open-secret' of the under-representation of minorities in senior governance, administration and coaching positions in professional football in Europe (Bradbury et al., 2011, 2014). For example, these studies indicate that less than 1% of senior governance and senior operations positions at professional clubs, national federations and at the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) is held by minority staff. Further, the authors of these studies have argued that despite the longstanding involvement of minority players in professional football in some Western European countries there has thus far been only a minimal throughput across the transition from playing into senior coaching positions at professional clubs. They argue further that this disparity seems especially marked in countries such as England, France and the Netherlands where the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of national populations and the relatively high number of elite level football players from minority backgrounds (around 25%) is not reflected in the coaching tiers of the sport; for example, Bradbury et al. (2014) note that at the beginning of the 2013/2014 season only three first team head coaches and two assistant head coaches at 92 professional clubs in England were from minority backgrounds. Similarly, there were no first team head coaches and only five assistant head coaches from minority backgrounds at 58 professional clubs in the French Ligue 1, Ligue 2 and Championnat de France National League. Roughly similar skewed figures applied to Dutch professional football during this period where only four minority coaches held senior coaching positions at 36 elite level professional clubs in the Eredivisie or Eerste Divisie. More focused

research undertaken in September 2014 by the Sports People's Think Tank (2014) also revealed that only 19 out of 552 senior coaching positions across the adult and youth coaching infrastructures at all 92 professional clubs in England were held by minorities: a total of 3.4% of positions of this kind.

These studies have also drawn on the informed experiential testimonies of key stakeholders from across the continent, to identify some historically embedded and relatively unshifting practices of racially inflected institutional closure which have impacted negatively in limiting the inclusion of minorities in the senior organizational tiers of the professional game. Further, Bradbury (2013) has argued that commonly operated processes of identification for and recruitment to senior coaching and leadership positions shared marked similarities in relying heavily on personal recommendation, patronage and sponsored mobility of key power brokers from within the dominant (White) social and cultural 'old boys' networks of the professional football industry. He also argues that whilst these everyday practices of recruitment and reward are often presented as relatively benign and might be unconscious and unintentional, they nonetheless constitute a form of institutional racism which militates against the recruitment of minorities in favour of 'preferred' White candidates with similarly perceived norms, values and behaviours. From a CRT perspective, the processes, practices and outcomes of institutional racism identified above can be understood to be underpinned by the invisibility, centrality and normativity of hegemonic Whiteness embedded within the senior organizational tiers of the sport. In this respect, the power of Whiteness as a process is in its ability to frame White privilege and related social, cultural and economic advantages as the norm whilst precluding any recognition of the beneficial membership in dominant (White) social and cultural networks of racialized mutual acquaintance (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Bonnett, 2008; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997, 2001; Essed and Goldberg, 2002; Frankenberg, 1999; Rothenberg, 2008). From this powerful hegemonic position, minority under-representation in coaching and leadership in professional football is often uncritically framed as resulting from wider societal exclusions or in terms of the negatively conceptualized cultural properties of minority groups, rather than as being created, shaped and maintained by the practices of dominant individuals, organizations and institutions. For some authors, these deeply embedded racialized power relations have enabled a series of more institutional forms of racism to be effortlessly reproduced and perpetuated and for the dominant White hegemonic structures of professional football (and sport more broadly) to remain unchallenged and unchanged over time (Hylton, 2009, 2010; Long and Hylton, 2002). We argue that these more critical perspectives provide a useful theoretical starting point from which to examine the factors underpinning the under-representation of minorities in relation to coaching in professional football and their conceptual positioning as 'fit for doing' but not 'fit for organizing' the practice of the sport.

## **The study and methods**

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a wider study examining the levels of representation and experiences of minority men and women in leadership and coaching in professional football in Europe. This wider study was commissioned by the Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) Network and conducted by the authors

between July 2013 and June 2014. The study draws on the qualitative accounts of forty interviewees drawn from a range of diverse, but, contextually targeted, demographic, playing and coaching backgrounds in England (15), France (15) and the Netherlands (10). Interviewees were selected from a range of first, second and third generation 'settled' minority populations in each of the countries under review. These included: Black Caribbean (7), Black African (3) and South Asian (5) in England; Black African (8), Black Antillean (1) and North African/Maghreb (6) in France; and Surinamese (4), Moroccan (2), Turkish (2) and Indonesian/Moluccan (2) in the Netherlands. The majority of, mainly, Black, interviewees had prior experience of playing professionally at clubs in elite level national leagues in England, France and the Netherlands and a further six interviewees had also represented their respective national football teams. Other interviewees had formerly played at semi-professional clubs in leagues such as the National Conference in England or *Championnat de France National League* in France. Almost all interviewees had achieved UEFA B, UEFA A (or national equivalent) coaching qualifications and seven interviewees had successfully completed the football coaching 'pinnacle' UEFA Pro-license award. These UEFA 'endorsed' high level coach education programmes are delivered by certified coach educators at national federations and feature a strong emphasis on theoretical and experiential learning. The successful completion of these courses is considered by key stakeholders in the professional game in each of the three countries under review to be a regulatory pre-requisite for accessing coaching positions at professional clubs. Finally, all interviewees had previously worked or were presently working in paid coaching positions within professional club coaching infrastructures in England, France and the Netherlands, and twelve coaches had also previously held positions of this kind in other countries in Europe, Africa and North America.

In a relatively small number of, mainly, English, cases, the interviewer and interviewees knew each other prior to the interview process as a result of prior research collaboration and/or through mutual involvement in national sports equality forums. However, in most cases, in all three countries under review, interviewers and interviewees did not know each other prior to interview. These latter interviewees were recruited through contact with key 'gatekeepers' at relevant football bodies or through processes of snowball sampling where existing interviewees recommended and helped broker contact with other interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by the authors and interviewees in English, French or Dutch at mutually agreed venues, including: club training facilities; office spaces; or the homes of interviewees. This allowed interviewees to openly articulate their experiences and perceptions in their own terms of reference in a safe discursive space and enabled the research team to yield in-depth, informative, textual data which helped to illuminate more fully the topic under investigation. Central to this grounded approach to qualitative data collection and analysis was the realized intention to place a strong emphasis on prioritizing the value of the 'experiential knowledge' of the interviewees and to (re)position them centrally as the 'knowers' within this interactive discourse. In doing so, the research team members were keen to adhere in practice to key tenets of CRT (and other critical studies) methodological approaches which seek to 'give voice' and 'make heard' the historically subjugated narratives of marginalized populations (Hylton, 2009). In particular, this was a means of

identifying, understanding and challenging some ongoing racialized inequalities embedded in the everyday processes and practices of coach education and coach recruitment environments in professional football. These ‘empowered articulations’ helped the authors to confirm or repudiate prior analytical contentions and facilitated a more informed analysis of the varied experiences of minority coaches across a range of national contexts. In this respect, the authors were especially conscious to consider the shared, overlapping, and, occasionally contrasting, testimonies of interviewees whilst maintaining enough critical distance from these accounts to construct an ‘analytically welded composite’ in order to encapsulate a series of central narrative thrusts whilst also allowing conceptual space for individual dissimilarities and variance.

It is, of course, the case that efforts of the kind identified above are made more challenging by the differently advantaged racial identities and inherent power imbalances embedded within the social distance between (White) researchers and (minority) researched (Frankenberg, 2004). Like many academics working on the topic of ‘race’, ethnicity and sport, we are White researchers who (notwithstanding our own nationally and culturally diverse White identities) are drawn from majority ethnic populations in our respective countries of origin. We recognize that the normativity and invisibility of Whiteness (to White people, not to minorities) is well documented in the extant literature and that we may tend (unconsciously) in places to draw on some White situated hegemonic discourses surrounding ‘race’ in our analysis and reporting (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Frankenberg, 2004; Hylton, 2009; Sin, 2007). However, critical ‘race’ scholars such as Frankenberg (2004) have argued that this influence is never total or definitive and that critical self-reflexivity is a key intellectual tool for researchers to avoid writing and/or acting in ways that are automatically congruent with culturally narrow discourses of this kind. Our own critical self-reflexivity in this respect is enhanced by our adherence to the theoretical lens of CRT which encourages us to rethink and practice *preferred* hegemonic discourses in and through our research as well as in our everyday lives (Van Sterkenburg, 2011). This also enables us to extend the diversity of discourses we draw on to make sense of and contextualize the narratives produced by interviewees. However, we remain acutely aware that our Whiteness inevitably positions us in a privileged space in relation to the racisms experienced and reported by minority interviewees in this study, which we seek to record, analyse and challenge, but which we have not been subject to directly. As such, we accept that these structural and cultural barriers to experiencing and comprehending the consequences of racisms are likely to impact to some extent in ‘whitening’ the chronicles of minority voices in this research. However, it does not necessarily follow that the ensuing analysis is any less epistemologically authentic or academically astute in its capacity to consider sensitively the subtleties and complexities emergent within the dynamical research process. To this end, we concur with Rhodes that rather than illuminating a singular, objective, (and, arguably, unattainable) racial ‘truth’, narratives revealed through the interview process are more likely to reflect a series of ‘situated and contingent creative mappings of a complex and multi-faceted reality of realities’ (Rhodes, 1994: 210). This latter assertion is especially relevant in the context of the myriad ethnic, cultural, religious, (and national) diversity and varying experiences of participants in this study. In this respect, we argue that the findings presented in this article offer a theoretically informed, analytically reflexive and contextually situated

account of the experiences of elite level minority coaches in professional football in the three countries under review.

## **The findings: key constraining factors for minority coaches**

### *Limited access to and negative experiences of high level coach education courses*

Around one-half of interviewees in all three countries reported on negative experiences in relation to accessing and undertaking high level coach education courses. In the first instance, these interviewees alluded to the adverse impact of not being in employment as coaches at professional clubs and being positioned outside of the eye-line of key gatekeepers at professional clubs, players unions and national federations. This was felt to have limited opportunities for identification, selection, mentoring and financial support to access and complete high level coach education courses. This was especially, but, not exclusively, the case for minority coaches with limited prior experience of playing or coaching at the elite level of the professional game and for whom related professional football capital was limited. One South Asian UEFA A license coach in England outlines these key 'accessibility filters' and the ways in which they impact on the capacities of some minority coaches to successfully complete high level coaching awards:

*'If people aren't in the game at a professional level, it's difficult in getting on the courses. It's difficult financially, and in terms of giving up your time. You really need to be in that environment to get a break and to be working with elite players to help you get your A and B badges. I've seen coaches from ethnic minority backgrounds, from the grassroots, it's hard for them. It's an additional barrier they have to face that the professionals sometimes take for granted'* (Interviewee 5, England)

In the second instance, interviewees from professional playing and coaching backgrounds also reported on experiences of marginalization within some culturally narrow professional club coaching environments. This was especially the case in France where around two-thirds of interviewees reported being overlooked for selection to attend high level coach education courses despite their strongly evidenced experiential track record in coaching elite level youth and adult players. These interviewees also referred critically to the pivotal role played by senior staff at professional clubs and national federations in ensuring that access to limited places at high level coach education courses was prioritized towards preferred White candidates drawn from formerly high profile professional playing backgrounds. One Black-African UEFA B license coach in France with manifold experience of coaching at Ligue 2 and Championnat de France National League clubs neatly summarizes these processes of exclusion:

*'The problem is co-option. They choose themselves. They choose those who are the same as them, who played with them, and they're not interested in any-one else. The problem is who gets to go for trials of certification. Not many Blacks or Arabs, they didn't get to go for it, not at the higher levels'* (Interviewee 7, France)



Almost all interviewees in all three countries also referenced the continued incidence of intentional and unintentional racisms within the high level coach education environment, around one-half of which reported observing or experiencing racisms of this kind directly. Interviewees here also reflected on the consequences of these racisms in negatively shaping the experiences and aspirations of some minority coaches. For example, all five South Asian interviewees in England recounted incidences of explicit racist name-calling or more culturally codified forms of racialized ‘banter’ expressed by White coach educators and/or White coaches at courses of this kind. In these specific cases, the lack of recourse against these racialized micro-aggressions and pressures to ignore rather than challenge behaviours of this kind were felt to have had a direct impact in discouraging further engagement in the coach education process. One Sikh UEFA A license coach in England offers some deeply personal reflections on this score:

*‘I walked into the classroom with a beard and a turban and I did get comments. There was a Premier League player who said a racist remark. I looked at the coach educator and he put his head down and didn’t know how to deal with the situation. I looked at the other assessors and one of them was laughing and the other two had little smirks on their faces. I thought I can’t challenge it there and then, because when it’s a residential environment you’re eating together, studying together, you’re on the football field together. So I had to bite my tongue and put up with it. But after that, that was it for me, I never went back’ (Interviewee 11, England)*

Whilst overt racisms of this kind were felt to be a relatively rare occurrence, interviewees in all three countries referred to the more commonplace incidence of subtle, nuanced and codified forms of racisms within the high level coach environment. In particular, the tendencies for minority coaches to be viewed with ‘suspicion’ and ‘surprise’ and being spoken to and dealt with differently by White coach educators and other White coaches. These subtle imbalances in everyday interactions and assessment were perceived by interviewees to be underpinned by a series of deeply embedded and misplaced cultural stereotypes regarding the (poor) attitude and (limited) aptitude of minority coaches and were felt to constitute a form of racially inequitable treatment to this end. Two highly qualified Black-African coaches in France illustrate these experiences further:

*‘I think they are really surprised. Especially the federation’s representatives, the coaches at the training, when you speak without accent, when you wear a suit. It is just like we should come to the training barefooted, with lucky charms. For some it is unimaginable to have us pass exams’ (Interviewee 3, France)*

*‘We’re judged on the way we talk, on our attitudes. There is a view that the Black trainees don’t seem to care about the lessons. People see them as nonchalant, the way they move to go to the blackboard. Everything is noted by the instructor. It will be written “nonchalant” in his file’ (Interviewee 14, France)*

Perceptions of racisms and racially differential treatment of the kind alluded to above (and below) on the part of those who have witnessed or experienced it as such is not a necessary or sufficient condition of its existence (Long and McNamee, 2004). Nonetheless,

it is important to locate the interpretation of these racially generative meanings within the contextually layered and interactional settings in which these actions and behaviours have been performed and experienced. Such an approach allows for a heuristically informed consideration of the relationship between the perceived intentionality, morphological content, and actualized outcomes of these racialized interactions from a distinctly victim-centred perspective, and one which places much greater emphasis on centralizing the erstwhile silenced voices and previously overlooked experiences of marginalized minority groups. In the context of this study, whilst the processes of racialized 'othering' identified above (and below) were felt by interviewees to be largely unconscious, unintentional and reflective of a distinct cultural awareness deficit on the part of perpetrators, they were nonetheless felt to have contributed to marking out some culturally contingent parameters of belonging and inclusion within the high level coach education environment. These themes are articulated below by one Black-Caribbean coach with extensive experience of studying at and delivering high level coach education courses in England:

*'I think people do things and don't realize the consequences of them. I've been at coach educational things where I'm the only black guy and there's about five of us talking together. But the guy who's talking doesn't address me at all. He's making eye contact with the others. I'm thinking "I'm here as well". I don't think that's a purposeful thing to leave me out of the group. But there's a lot of that and it's kind of subliminal. It has an effect on me as person because I think "Why am I being left out of the conversation? Am I welcome here? Or am I just making up numbers?"'* (Interviewee 2, England)

Finally, interviewees in all three countries felt these experiences of social, cultural and professional marginalization had engendered further pedagogical and psychological 'hurdles' for minority coaches to overcome, especially with regard to additional pressures of building confidence, proving competence and gaining acceptance within this deeply racialized (and heavily masculinized) coach education environment. In this respect, it was felt that the limited professional and cultural value accorded to the technical abilities and experiential knowledge of minority coaches by White coach educators had made the successful completion of high level coaching awards markedly more difficult. This was especially, but, not exclusively, the case for minority coaches from South Asian, Maghreb, Turkish, Moroccan and Moluccan backgrounds who seemed doubly marginalized by their embodied (and, often, unproblematically, assumed) ethnic, cultural and religious distinctiveness and their prior lack of experience as elite level professional players – at least, within some dominant (White, Western European) hegemonic conceptualizations of cultural normativity and football embedded within the high level coach education environment. One South Asian UEFA B license coach working at a professional club in England illuminates further:

*'If people can see that you can play the game it almost becomes an acceptance. There was an Asian guy, he was a reasonable coach, but he certainly wasn't a player, and he wasn't attached to a club. So straight away there were negatives for him. You could see that the others on the course made a judgment, which is wrong, but that does happen. So I think some of the Asian lads haven't been made to feel valued in that environment and that will affect your confidence, especially on the practical side of the courses'* (Interviewee 10, England)

## *Continued existence of racisms and stereotypes in the professional coaching workplace*

All interviewees in all three countries felt that overt forms of racism were a relatively rare occurrence within the professional football coaching workplace. However, around two-thirds of interviewees referred to the continued incidence of more subtle, nuanced, and codified racisms within professional coaching environments of this kind. These less obvious and more ‘disguised’ forms of racisms were felt to be apparent through racially inappropriate words, language and ‘banter’ used to describe different minority groups and in the questioning of the technical competencies of minority coaches in ways which were rarely transferred to the review of similarly qualified White coaches. One highly qualified and experienced Black-African coach in England reflects on discussions with other minority coaches in this respect:

*‘I’ve had black coaches say to me “this shit is still going on”. There are things that are said that have a racial connotation to it, and it’s racist, but it’s not obvious. It’s the way it’s put, little comments about your cultural background, how you do things, the way you conduct yourself. Stuff about not being organised, punctuality, being “laid back” and so on. Even when it’s done in a joking way, it still frames you in a certain way, you know, as different, less important. And if you get a crowd of people who do things like that, then you haven’t really got a chance at that club’ (Interviewee 4, England)*

Whilst actions and behaviours of this kind were considered to have largely been enacted subconsciously by senior staff at professional clubs, they were nonetheless felt to have accorded less status and value to the contributions of minority coaches and to constitute a form of racially inequitable treatment to this end. Further, they were felt to have engendered some negative impacts in denying opportunities for minority coaches to gain promotion within club infrastructures and in undermining the strength of applications for similar posts at other clubs. One highly qualified Surinamese coach from the Netherlands offers some personal reflections on this score:

*‘Do I think I would have been in a position as head coach if I was White? Yes I think so, I do have that feeling. If I see what I have performed, others have performed less well. I do not know what are their qualities but if I look at my CV, I have a big name as a player, I have performed well as a coach, and I have not been engaged in messy stuff that may make clubs think “we should not hire him”. The coach has just been fired at FC Groningen and at FC Bruges. Why was my name not mentioned? I get really disappointed then. I feel really small’ (Interviewee 3, Netherlands)*

Interviewees in all three countries also alluded to the continued existence of some deeply held physical and cultural stereotypes about minorities by senior figures at professional clubs, which were felt to be rooted in a series of misplaced historical conceptions regarding the naturalness of ‘race’ and perceived inevitability of cultural inclination. This was felt to be evidenced in the conceptualization of Black players in terms of key ‘performance physicality’ traits of ‘innate’ strength, athleticism and instinct, whilst simultaneously underplaying their relevant cerebral, analytical and organizational skill-sets. Interviewees in France

also referred to the attitudinal and behavioural problematization of Black and Maghreb players from (sub)urban, working class, locales and dominant conceptions of the latter group with notions of individual 'trickery' and 'cunning' over more collectivist team working attributes. One highly qualified Maghreb coach in France summarizes these popular racialized perceptions further:

*'They think we (Maghreb) are too vindictive, too cunning. If we are defenders we are brutal. If we are attackers we are selfish. Blacks suffer from another kind of racism than us, especially if they come directly from Africa. They are seen as primitive, not very clever, made to be obedient. But if they come from the neighbourhood, they are "scums", like us. Still strong and tough, but wild'* (Interviewee 12, France)

Stereotypes of this kind had some common currency in professional football in England, France and the Netherlands (and in other countries and other sports) in the 1970s and 1980s and led to the phenomenon of 'stacking' of minority players in more peripheral team positions. Whilst these processes of 'stacking' have lessened significantly over time, interviewees felt that the increasing positional 'centralization' of minority players in professional football had done little to disrupt some long held racial ideologies in this respect. Further, the residual permanence of and adherence to ideas and practices of physical and cultural stereotypification were felt to have significant transference across the playing to coaching tiers of professional football. In this respect, interviewees in all three countries drew attention to the tendencies of senior figures within the game to 'unproblematically' draw on and transpose popular stereotypical misconceptions of minority players to evaluation of the (inevitably, limited) social and technical potentialities of minority coaches. From these dominant, but, culturally uninformed, perspectives, minority coaches were felt to have been wrongly conceptualized as having limited career aspirations towards coaching, to exhibit 'difficult' and 'challenging' attitudes and behaviours, and to lack the analytical acumen, organizational skills and leadership qualities to become successful coaches. Two highly experienced Black African and Moluccan coaches in France and the Netherlands respectively articulate these themes further:

*'Black players are appreciated because they are strong, tall, hard workers. Many play in central and defensive positions, where most of the present coaches have been recruited. But they are seen mainly as executants. They have to be driven. They lack talent to think about the game. They are not seen as leaders. There are exceptions. But I know that they are very suspicious about the ability for them to become a good coach'* (Interviewee 5, France)

*'It will never be expressed explicitly, but there is a certain feeling that minority ethnic people are less educated and that their under-representation in coaching has to do with that. "They can play football well but they are not fit for certain positions or for policy making", they just do not see that.'* (Interviewee 6, Netherlands)

Further, interviewees in all three countries alluded to related tendencies to negatively question the professional and cultural 'suitability', 'competence' and 'authority' of minority coaches to manage teams made up of mainly White players or where players were drawn from a range of nationalities, including expensive 'star' players from less

'racially progressive' countries. Here, it was felt that similar 'social scrutiny' was rarely applied to comparably qualified or experienced White coaches with responsibility for the development and management of players within culturally narrow or racially diverse club-based environments. Accordingly, there was a strong consensus amongst interviewees that minority coaches tended to be adversely conceptualized in terms of their perceived ethnic and cultural traits rather than in relation to their realized technical abilities and experiences as coaches. To this end, it is argued that within the dominant White hegemonic narratives of professional football, minority coaches have been and continue to be socially constructed, culturally defined and vocationally constrained by a series of culturally misplaced and overly prioritized perceptions as to their assumed 'racial self' rather than by a more analytically reflexive consideration of their actualized 'professional self'. Three highly qualified and extensively experienced coaches drawn from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in France and the Netherlands comment further in this respect:

*'We are French. We have been living here for fifty years. But we are Algerian. You can do what you want, speak without accent, drink alcohol and eat pork. But for some, you will be Algerian always. This is still the case. If you want to do something you will be accused of communitarianism, of clannism. In football, they always find you're different'* (Interviewee 9, France)

*'If you perform well as a Moroccan then this is seen as good, as normal. But when it is not going so well, they say "well it is a Moroccan, you see"'* (Interviewee 9, Netherlands)

*'I believe you are stigmatised easier if you are a minority coach. If a "foreigner" acts in a certain way, they lump all individuals together. They will say, "You see, they are all the same". For the majority [White] Dutch this is different. They will get more chances'* (Interviewee 4, Netherlands)

Taken together, the embedded normativity and unremarked definitional power of the stereotypes identified above were felt by interviewees to have engendered some deeply negative outcomes for minority coaches. In particular, it was felt that the primacy awarded to these perceived identity traits over a more balanced consideration of relevant technical and experiential acumen had led senior decision-makers at professional clubs to conceptualize the appointment of minority coaches with 'uncertainty' and 'risk'. This was felt to strongly inform decisions to 'shy away' from appointing minority coaches with whom they have had little direct prior personal connection with, in favour of falling back on the 'safety option' of recruiting White candidates with whom they have greater levels of professional and cultural familiarity and social comfort. This was felt to be especially the case in relation to senior coaching positions at professional clubs where there is often regular interaction between first team coaches, club owners, directors and senior executive staff. One Black-Caribbean UEFA Pro-license coach in England neatly summarizes the impact of these racially underscored practices of coach recruitment in maintaining the under-representation of minority coaches in the sport.

*'I don't think that Black coaches in general are given the opportunity that some others are given. I don't think people are brave enough to put Black people in those positions. I think in their*

*minds it's more of a risk because they've not worked with a Black person at that level, they maybe don't understand enough about Black people, so they stick with what they know. They employ people who they feel comfortable around and they can identify with'* (Interviewee 3, England)

### **Over-reliance on networks rather than qualifications based methods of coach recruitment**

Almost all interviewees in all three countries alluded to the continued heavy reliance of professional football clubs on networks rather than qualifications-based methods of coach recruitment. This was felt to be especially the case with regard to accessing senior coaching positions which were largely premised on processes of personal recommendation, sponsored mobility and patronage enacted by key power brokers, such as club owners, directors, senior executives and pre-existing senior football management teams. These commonly practised approaches to identifying, head-hunting and appointing senior coaching staff were also felt to replicate established mechanisms for the targeted recruitment of elite level players. There was a strong consensus amongst interviewees that these traditional networks-based methods of coach recruitment differed markedly from and were much less transparent than other areas of public life where there has (slowly, but significantly) developed a much stronger adherence to more formalized equal opportunities approaches to the employment of staff. One Black-African interviewee in England with significant experience of working in professional football coaching, business and sports media illuminates these assertions further:

*'The way the football industry works is that if you've played with someone, you know someone, that's normally the way you get a job within the game. It's like a bit of a code really. So in terms of recruitment, it's pretty much the opposite of what you really want it to be. You want it to be open and transparent, but football doesn't work like that. It works on trust, friendships and things like that'* (Interviewee 9, England)

Whilst a small number of interviewees from ex-professional playing backgrounds referenced their own successful efforts to utilize professional football 'insider' networks to access coaching positions at professional clubs, there was a strong consensus amongst almost all interviewees in all three countries that experiences and outcomes of this kind remained a relatively rare occurrence rather than a normative feature of the coach recruitment landscape. Further, these interviewees felt that the over-reliance on networks-based methods of coach recruitment tended to militate against potential applicants from minority backgrounds and to favour 'preferred' White candidates with, often, fewer qualifications and less experience, drawn from within the dominant (White) social and cultural networks of the football industry. One highly qualified Moroccan coach in the Netherlands succinctly summarizes this wider industry malaise:

*'In football, becoming a coach, it is not about how much you know, but about how many people you know'* (Interviewee 10, Netherlands)

Interviewees here also provided some useful insights into the ways in which these powerful 'insider' networks effectively functioned to limit opportunities for the inclusion of minorities over their football life-course and across the transition from playing to coaching in the professional game. For example, in the first instance, whilst some interviewees referred to examples of building positive relationships with White playing colleagues, coaches and coach educators over time, there was a strong sense amongst other interviewees that minorities had traditionally been (and continued to be) marginalized from some distinctly racialized power dynamics within team settings and the coach education environment. This was felt to have positioned minorities disadvantageously as 'outsiders within' these football work-place environments and to have resulted in them being less likely than White counterparts to have developed long term relationships with White colleagues, whose own upwardly mobile career trajectories had led to them assuming senior coaching positions at clubs with powers to appoint coaching support staff. One Black-African coach at a Championnat de France National League club and former professional player comments further on the exclusionary power of these racialized networks:

*'Today you have a coach's social milieu. They know each other because they played in professional teams, because they were in the same training sessions, and they are all White. They make sure they look after each other because they are all friends'* (Interviewee 2, France)

Interviewees also drew attention to the cumulative impact of processes of physical and cultural stereotyping which had positioned some minority players as peripheral rather than central to the organization of team performance, and related tendencies of team managers to confer captaincy duties on White rather than minority players. This was felt to have excluded some minorities from commonly practised 'captain to coach' pathways and to have consequently limited opportunities for them to formally exhibit highly valued leadership skills and competencies considered as essential markers of coaching potential within the professional game. Interviewees also noted that team captaincy positions enabled players to have greater levels of personal contact and opportunities for networking with senior decision-makers at professional clubs, which in turn enhanced their 'personal profile', 'visibility' and 'favourability' in relation to forthcoming coaching appointments. One Black-Caribbean UEFA Pro-license coach in England comments further on the symbiotic relationship between 'race', captaincy and coaching below:

*'I think a lot of the time there's a tendency to want someone who's been a captain, who you almost think his next step is going to be coaching or managing. But the problem is how many black players have there been that really fit that bill. I mean, they're few and far between, partly because they weren't given the opportunities or the responsibility to be the captain in the first place'*. (Interviewee 6, England)

Relatedly, interviewees in all three countries argued that these patterns of marginality were especially marked in relation to the 'inner circle' of almost exclusively White power brokers at professional clubs with key responsibilities for the appointment of senior

coaching staff. As a result, it was felt that many suitably qualified and relevantly experienced minority coaches remained beyond the consciousness and narrowly conceptualized preferences of these key decision-makers and that this social and cultural distance had impacted negatively in limiting opportunities to access senior coaching positions. One highly qualified Turkish coach in the Netherlands comments further in this respect:

*'It does not matter whether you are a good coach or not. If you know others who are willing to give you a chance, you will become a coach. I find that very discouraging for those who have studied to become a coach, but who do not have that network. Those are not picked for a coaching position'* (Interviewee 8, Netherlands)

Further, interviewees in all three countries felt these processes of marginality were further enhanced and reinforced by the tendencies of the wider sports media to frame discussions around coaching appointments at professional clubs in ethnically narrow terms. In particular, interviewees allude to the propensities of sports journalists in the print and broadcast media to focus singularly on the assumed merits and occupational expectations of some high profile White players to become good coaches. In contrast, similarly experienced minority players and aspiring coaches remained notably absent from these powerful narratives. One Black-African former professional club coach in England neatly summarizes these assertions:

*'I've seen so many top players coming to the end of their careers who are being promoted as the next managers, but I don't see many Black players talked about in that way. I think people are influenced by the media, particularly people in positions of authority, and it reinforces their opinions if they're saying "Well, every-one else thinks that, the press is thinking that" '* (Interviewee 13, England)

Finally, interviewees in all three countries suggested that as a result of the dominant practices and discourses identified above, coach recruitment had come to exhibit some predictable patterns of racial closure in which experienced White head coaches (and their White coaching support teams) regularly moved from one coaching position to another at different professional clubs. In contrast, minority coaches were felt to have remained peripheral to and excluded from this coaching and managerial merry-go-round and to be positioned 'on the outside looking in' at all levels of the coaching infrastructure in professional football. These racially closed processes of coach recruitment were also perceived by some interviewees to have limited the frequency and types of opportunities available to minority coaches in ways which were not apparent for their White counterparts. In this respect, minority coaches were felt to have been awarded fewer and less high profile coaching opportunities at professional clubs and to face additional pressures to be successful given their reduced likelihood of being offered 'second chances' to assume coaching positions at other clubs over time. These wider assertions are summarized below by one Black-Caribbean UEFA Pro-license holder who also reported having applied unsuccessfully for over forty coaching roles in the professional game:

*'I think football is quite a unique environment or industry where more than any other it's a lot about who you know. It's about friends in the game and calling on favours. You only have to see*



*how managers drag the backroom staff about with them when they get new jobs. So without a proper recruitment process, advertising, equal opportunities and all of that, it's still about who you know that gets you jobs'* (Interviewee 8, England)

## Conclusions

The findings in this article have drawn on and 'given voice' to the extensive narratives of forty elite level minority coaches to identify and explain the key factors which have constrained their own (and other minority coaches) progress across the transition from playing into coaching in professional football in three countries: England; France; and the Netherlands. In doing so, the authors have endeavoured to analytically conceptualize and arrange these 'empowered articulations' into three distinct but intrinsically linked areas of thematic focus. In the first instance the article has drawn attention to a series of organizationally embedded and interactional practices of racially inflected institutional closure which have limited access to and engendered negative experiences of the high level coach education environment for minority coaches. In the second instance, the article has alluded to the continued existence and 'unproblematic' transference of racisms and stereotyping in the professional football coaching work-place and the misconceptualization of minority coaches in terms of their falsely assumed 'racial self' rather than their actualized 'professional self'. In the third instance, the article has identified and illustrated the ways in which the continued reliance of professional clubs on networks-based methods of coach recruitment has militated against the appointment of qualified minority coaches in favour of 'preferred' White candidates drawn from within the dominant social and cultural 'old boys club' of the professional football industry. To this end, this article represents an ambitious scholarly attempt to empirically uncover and analytically construct an interwoven composite account of the varied, but, overlapping experiences of elite level minority coaches drawn from a diverse range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds across three distinct national contexts.

In our efforts to reveal the experiences of minority ethnic coaches, it is important to make a few additional remarks. Firstly, the interview process was one which involved discourse between White interviewers and interviewees drawn from a range of ethnic, cultural and religious minority backgrounds. As previously discussed in some depth in the methods section, research encounters of this kind are inevitably underscored by a series of racialized power imbalances between interviewers and interviewees, and it is important for researchers to engage in critical self-reflexivity as to the impact of their Whiteness on processes of data collection and analysis. We would add here that previous literature has suggested that within such contexts, interviewees from minority backgrounds may also downplay their experiences of racism due to 'a tendency to satisfy the racial expectations of the interviewer' and to avoid embarrassment and maintain a smooth flow of conversation (Sin, 2007: 480). Taking this into contextual consideration we argue that the racisms experienced and reported by minority coaches in this study might be more commonplace and emotionally impactful than has been revealed to us through the interview process. It is also likely that the reticence of some interviewees to talk openly about such experiences is informed by underlying concerns regarding anonymity and being problematized as 'complaining' and 'troublesome' by key stakeholders

within the professional game, through whom employment opportunities for minority coaches are often dependent. Secondly, we contend that despite the diverse range and powerful impacts of racisms discussed thematically in this study, it is highly unlikely that any single minority coach has experienced all or none of these practices of racially inequitable treatment. Rather, it is arguably much more prescient to contend that all of the minority coaches interviewed had previously experienced or are likely to experience in the future at least some of these racisms and racialized exclusions in subtly different ways, across different professional coaching contexts, and at different stages of their professional coaching careers. We also maintain that whether taken singularly, collectively or cumulatively, these historically embedded and contemporaneously enacted forms of individual and systemic racial bias constitute a form of institutional racism. Whilst these processes and practices of institutional racism might have been for the most part unintentional, unconscious and 'embodied', they have nonetheless engendered a series of deeply racialized negative personal and professional impacts for minority coaches. In particular, in limiting the potential for and realization of opportunities for career progression across the transition from playing to coaching in the professional game and in maintaining the low levels of minority coaches in the professional football coaching workforce.

We further argue that the processes, practices and outcomes of institutional racism identified throughout this article can be understood to be underpinned by the invisibility, centrality and normativity of hegemonic Whiteness embedded within the senior organizational tiers of the professional football industry. We would concur with Giroux who argues that 'analyzing Whiteness as a central element of racial politics becomes useful in exploring how Whiteness as a cultural practice promotes race based hierarchies and how white racial identity structures the struggle over cultural and political resources' (Giroux, 1997: 295). Singer adds that 'any examination of race and racism [within a CRT framework] must begin with an understanding that Whiteness has been positioned as the optimal status criterion in this society' (Singer, 2005: 467). This normativity of Whiteness applies to a range of cultural practices and social institutions in the Western world including academia, media, education, the arts, and business (e.g. Essed and Nimako, 2006; Essed and Trienekens, 2008), but, also, to sport and sport management (Singer, 2005; Van Sterkenburg, 2012). This assertion is especially relevant to the football context under review since the social, cultural and political arena of professional football does not exist in some kind of magical sporting and societal vacuum, but, rather, is reflective of and reflects back upon a series of historically inscribed and deeply racialized power relations embedded within the societies in which it takes place (Andrews, 2002). However, until relatively recently, very little scholarly attention has been paid to how sports institutions are actually embedded in such racialized power relations and the ways in which their everyday practices can privilege some groups and marginalize others (Knoppers, 2015). Drawing on a CRT framework, we argue that professional football (and sport more broadly) is both receptive to and productive of racial meanings and is a site in which social relations between peoples have become structured by the signification of human biological and cultural characteristics in such a way as to define and construct social collectivities differentially along distinctly racial, ethnic and cultural lines. This seems to be especially the case in relation to the findings

presented in this study where the conjunctive definitional and relational power of Whiteness has enabled key power brokers in the game to problematize and overlook the experiential abilities and technical potentialities of minority coaches and to cement their position as 'outside' and 'excluded' from the professional football coaching environment. Further, we argue that these deeply racialized and relatively unshifting hegemonic power relations are likely to have a significant impact in maintaining the under-representation of minority coaches over time and beyond what some more optimistic social and sporting commentators might wish it to be or have envisaged. On this latter score, interviewees in all three countries drew attention to the significant disincentivizing impact of the continued lack of minority coach role models and the lack of commitment towards (or resistance against) the implementation of targeted positive action measures to redress this racialized imbalance. This was felt to have impacted on limiting the ambitions and motivations of some minority former players to undertake relevant coaching qualifications and to have led other highly qualified minority coaches to actively pursue coaching careers in countries of familial origin in Africa and the Caribbean, or in seemingly more equitable emerging football markets in North America. In other cases, a number of minority coaches had simply dropped out from the professional football coaching marketplace and had transferred their talents to other sports and non-sports employment realms in the public and commercial sector where their skill-sets seemed more highly valued and less racially coded.

In conclusion, we argue that any meaningful efforts to prevent further losses of this kind need to remain cognizant of the symbiotic relationship between the under-representation of minority coaches, processes and practices of institutional racism, and the underlying normative power of hegemonic Whiteness embedded within the professional football industry. To this end, we argue that UEFA, national football federations, elite level professional clubs, and players' unions in each of the countries under review should listen to and work closely with minority coaches and campaigning organizations to critically reflect on and then purposefully dismantle the structural and cultural barriers which have thus far constrained the upward career mobility of minorities in the sport. As part of this process, we recommend that such bodies work together to implement a holistic package of positive action measures which might begin with an educational programme targeting key stakeholders within the game's governing bodies and professional clubs as to the extent, shape, and scope of institutional racism, its impact on constraining opportunities for minority coaches, and the benefits of increasing the cultural diversity of the professional football coaching workforce. Such measures should also include the establishment of clear policy goals in relation to target setting, data collection and monitoring of progress over time and might draw on the experiences of other sporting bodies such as the US National Basketball Association, the International Olympic Committee and the US National (American) Football League (NFL) who have implemented mechanisms of this kind as a means of promoting increased racial and gender diversity in coaching and leadership in sports (for a review of sporting models of best equality practice, see Bradbury et al. (2014)). However, perhaps most notably, positive action measures should also include the development and implementation of a legislatively bespoke (European) football focused version of the US NFL's Rooney Rule which could be applied to professional football clubs. In short, the Rooney Rule is a selection and recruitment based 'consideration forcing' mechanism rather

than a hard quota which mandates that NFL clubs must interview at least one appropriately qualified minority candidate upon vacancy of head coaching positions. Since its implementation in 2002 the numbers of head coaches (and other coaching support staff) from minority backgrounds has steadily grown and it has garnered widespread support from minority players and coaches and (some) White club owners. Such an approach was strongly supported by almost all minority coaches interviewed as part of this study and has also been advocated in recent years by a growing number of more progressively minded (but, not the most powerful) stakeholders in professional football and the sports media, especially in England. The Rooney Rule squares with CRT 's claim that liberalism alone is unable to address more institutional forms of racism and that more strident positive action measures are needed to effectuate social change (Singer, 2005). Its value in the context of this study is most prescient in relation to its potential to increase the professional visibility of minority coaches within the previously narrow consciousness of key decision-makers at professional clubs and to ensure the implementation of more equitable and transparent processes of coach recruitment across the professional game. We would simply add that the extent and ways in which key power brokers in professional football (and sport more broadly) are willing to act upon (rather than silence and ignore) the growing volume of empowered voices of dissent and implement positive action measures of this kind will be key to bringing about more equitable, meaningful and sustainable social change.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Football Against Racism in Europe Network.

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