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Understanding workplace collaboration in professional rugby coaching: a dramaturgical analysis

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ABSTRACT

This ethnography examined the occupational teamwork of a Head Coach and his colleagues (assistants) in the rarely accessed world of professional rugby union. Extensive field notes and participant interviews were subject to emic and etic interpretations. The heuristic framework comprised the work of both classic and contemporary dramaturgical theorists. Our analysis generated novel findings regarding the everyday strategies and tactics that underpinned the collaborative production of this team's workplace performances. These included how a team identity was constructed and how the Head Coach pursued co-operation, envisioned and advocated for collective missions, and sustained team ventures in their rhythmical doing of organisational life. This study is among the first to provide situated insights into how team performance was productively managed, negotiated, and co-ordinated in the context of a high-performance sport workplace. The insights provided hold significance for researchers, practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders concerned with the dramaturgical demands of organisational life, and with the coherent doing of sports work by managers (head coaches) and their colleagues.

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Introduction

Dramaturgy concerns the ways in which individuals and groups strategically stage their social interactions to exercise influence over others including in various social settings (e.g. workplaces; Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020). The dramaturgical features of sports work have received increasing attention (e.g. Gale et al. 2019; Potrac and Jones 2009), often drawing on Goffman's (1959) conceptual oeuvre. This research highlights how, as both targets and tacticians engaged in an 'ongoing exercise of collective influence' (Grills and Prus 2019, 80), coaches strategically consider their everyday interactions with other stakeholders (Hall et al. 2021). Importantly, the literature suggests that these audiences' experiences and evaluations of coaches' social performances are integral to the levels of 'trust' and 'respect' afforded to the coach and, relatedly, their subsequent ability to implement desired programmes and philosophies.

Notwithstanding these contributions, there is considerable room for expanding our understanding of the dramaturgical features of sport coaching. Specifically, research has tended to focus on the dramaturgical strategies of individual coaches with little, if any, consideration given

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to how they co-ordinate, stage, and adapt their interactions as members of a larger performance team (i.e. a group of coaches). This situation is somewhat surprising, as studies across sports and domains including professional rugby union (e.g. Avner et al. 2021; McKay et al. 2021; Mouchet and Duffy 2020) have acknowledged (though did not examine) that the everyday doing of coaching work is a collective endeavour. To date, the limited scholarship examining coaches' dynamic working relationships has highlighted the deleterious effects of personal fears and agendas, competitive rivalries, and the Machiavellian alienation of co-workers (Gale et al. 2023; Potrac et al. 2012). Consequently, there remains much to learn about the ways in which collaborative and cohesive performances between workplace actors are developed, maintained, advanced, damaged, and repaired in the fulcrum of everyday life in (sport) organisations (Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, and Katovich 2017).

Existing dramaturgical research has primarily relied upon retrospective interview data to develop insights into the identities and interactions of sports workers (e.g. Gale et al. 2023; Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020). While such work has illuminated the importance of generating trusting relations with colleagues and repairing relations where (un)intentional damage occurs, there remains a paucity of scholarship that engages in-situ with the emergent doing of workplace relations between colleagues (i.e. teamwork). Here, inspired by Goffman's commitment to studying the contingent minutiae of social life in the field, and calls to examine how people actually 'find ways to collaborate in the day-to-day here and now' and ultimately get everyday 'life done' (Becker 2014, 187), we believe rigorous examination of unfolding collective (inter)action holds significant potential to advance understanding of sport coaches' collective performances.

The purpose of this study was to dramaturgically examine the strategic workplace interactions of an Academy Head Coach and his subordinates (assistant coaches) in a professional rugby union club. Specifically, we sought answers to three connected research questions: a) How does the coaching team carefully prepare and develop their collective performances?, b) How are these plans faithfully enacted?, and c) How do they then consciously review this work together? The significance of addressing these questions lies in generating original and nuanced insights regarding the coaches' efforts to 'navigate the[ir] ongoing and, at times, problematic joint actions with one another' (Grills and Prus 2019, 3). Moreover, this study responds directly to wider calls for expanded empirical attention to the ways in which teams of workers collectively utilise impression management tactics to exercise influence over the various audiences that comprise their organisational domains (Kibler et al. 2021; Ramsey et al. 2023; Shulman 2017). Indeed, we provide new knowledge regarding the dramaturgical repertoire that underpins how sport workers productively negotiate, co-ordinate, enact and evaluate their teamwork.

Methodology

The research context

The context for this study was an English professional rugby Union Academy. There are 14 licenced academies in England. Their purpose is to identify and develop talented male players aged 14 to 24. Academy coaches are tasked with 'stewarding their wards [players] through an apprenticeship for a profession defined by highly skilled manual labour' (Avner et al. 2021, 680). The participant coaches, particularly the Head Coach, sought to provide a positive and supportive environment in which to help players achieve desired performance outcomes. However, we also acknowledge that more sinister forms of disciplinary power relations can exist in these social settings (Williams and Manley 2016).

The National Governing Body's Head of Coaching recommended the Academy's suitability for this study owing to their perceptions of effective team performance between the coaching staff (locally referred to as *co-coaching*; see Figure 1). Indeed, the development and maintenance of productive

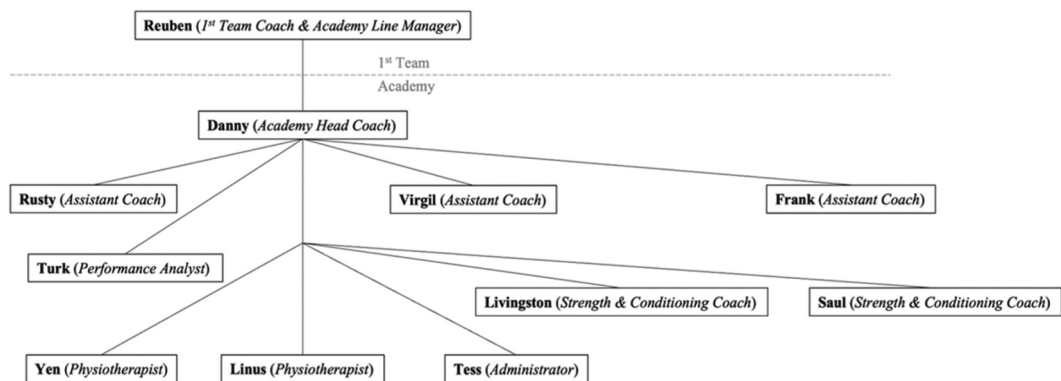


Figure 1. Organisation of staff within the academy.

working relations was Danny's (Head Coach) key priority; something that he noted was a significant challenge in professional sport:

Developing relationships with people that's the biggest thing ... I think it becomes a lot easier place to work; there's not people banging heads. You've got a lot of very competitive, very driven people in the same place, so I think its managing people together, that's the biggest thing for me.

Institutional ethical approval and informed consent were received before commencing. Plankey-Videla's (2012) notion of consent as an on-going process stimulated the adoption of a critical self-reflective stance regarding issues of access, rapport building, and ongoing participant observation throughout the research and write-up process. Pseudonyms are employed throughout this article in efforts to protect the identity of the people and organisations involved.

The six-year study spanned the initial forming of this team and concluded following its disbanding when key members left to take up new roles. I (the lead author) worked with the Academy as a mentor. My position provided privileged entry to a notoriously closed and under-researched social world. Indeed, elite sport professionals are often suspicious of outsiders and hold concerns about the research process 'interfering' in their business, as well as for anonymity and secrecy given the highly public, publicised, and competitive nature of professional sport (Champ et al. 2020). My own biography as a coach was acknowledged and valorised by the academy staff (Jachyra, Atkinson, and Washiya 2015). Perceptions of my 'practitioner-competence', along with a shared relational network with some of the coaches (Atkinson and Morriss 2017), contributed to rapport building and the development of trusting relations with the participants, which led to my unrestricted access to the organisation. Through my familiarity with the language, traditions, and usual rhythms of rugby coaching practice, I endeavoured to 'walk alongside' the coaching staff in the field (Neale and Flowerdew 2003, 194), but avoid becoming a conspicuous irritant in such a way as to put my continuing access at risk.

Fieldwork methods

This paper adopted an Aristotelian interpretivist perspective to inquiry. This form of interpretivism focuses on the 'centrality of the group for comprehending all notions of human meaning, purpose and interchange' (Grills and Prus 2019, 25). Specifically, it stresses that while people can act knowingly and with intention, they do not have total freedom or experience social life in an autonomous fashion. Instead, peoples' meaning making, actions, and interchanges are inherently connected to a linguistically achieved culture that they acquire through their association with others (i.e. their participation in group life; Grills and Prus 2019, 25). Thus, ethnographic participant

observation offered a means to 'uncover and explicate the ways in which [co-coaches] in [their] work setting c[ame] to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation [together]' (Van Maanen 1979, 540).

Extensive field notes were generated including written notes in (several volumes of) a diary as well as extensive audio recordings and dictations into a digital voice recorder. Initially, the field notes focused on comprehensively recording the general rhythms and routines of everyday organisational life. Over increasing time spent in the field, my focus shifted to chronicle, in detail, events, interactions, emotions, and relations with respect to the coaches' collective work. Field notes were reviewed and elaborated upon after each day in the field. Reflexive memos were added, to iteratively (re) consider, check, and challenge interpretations of the data, which were further stimulated by critical discussions of the emergent meaning making with the participants and my co-authors (Tracy 2020). This was not a form of simplistic member checking, in the sense of seeking agreement about the 'truth'. Rather, these ongoing discussions contributed to a critical dialogue about interpretive possibilities. Indeed, such conversations often catalysed criticality regarding my positionality and our analytical interpretations (Smith and McGannon 2018).

The longitudinal field work enabled member reflections to be sought, which focussed on the nature of team performance itself, as well as the fairness, appropriateness, and credibility of our interpretations (Tracy 2020). Generally, this process occurred in informal interviews with the co-coaches about 'Things I've noticed' and 'Ideas I'd like to check'. Data from these are included in the *Discussion of the Analysis*. Unlike Cavallerio et al. (2020), member reflections produced no crushing disappointment that our interpretations were 'wrong'. Instead, the participants were usually intrigued by our sense-making, and this regularly stimulated further comment and reflections on their doing of teamwork. For instance, where our emergent analysis suggested that the practitioners used huddles as a quasi-backstage (see Act 2, below) one coach responded: 'Well, yeah, it's like hiding your workings isn't it. We don't want them [the audience] to see the cogs turning; just to feel that the engine's running smoothly when they do pay attention to us'. Through such processes, we sought to move beyond notions of individualistic interpretive authority in ethnography towards contemporary considerations of 'the shared production of and coping with epistemic contingency' (Bieler et al. 2021, 80).

Data analysis

A phronetic-iterative approach to data analysis was adopted (Tracy 2020). This abductive process alternated between data generation, emergent readings of these data (emic analysis), consulting relevant theory (etic analysis), and sharing analytical insights with critical friends and the participants (Smith and McGannon 2018). Emic analysis involved immersively reviewing the various data and the development of first-level descriptive codes to capture the essence of these data (e.g. 'Rehearsing Interactions'). Initial relationships and common threads were noted along with provisional ideas about their connections to the purposes of this study.

Etic analysis involved scrutinising, synthesising, and categorising the first-level descriptive codes into hierarchical categories (e.g. 'Rehearsing Interactions' became part of a higher-order category 'Preparing Together'), identifying relationships between codes, and critically examining how they addressed the research questions (Tracy 2020). Emphasis then shifted to theoretical sensemaking. Here, connections were explored between possible interpretations of the data, relevant concepts and theory, and the aims of this study (e.g. Goffman's notion of *scripts* connected strongly with 'Rehearsing Interactions'). Goffman's (1959) classic treatise addressing the presentation of the self in everyday life proved to be especially insightful regarding the mechanisms of team performance. Equally, our phronetic-iterative approach to data analysis helped us to move beyond some of the limits of Goffman's theorising. Here, the respective work of Scott (2015) and Shulman (2017) was valuable in considering Goffman's continuing utility to understand the dynamics of contemporary institutions and the participants' doing of teamwork.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical insights regarding the regions (or stages) in which collective workplace performances are planned, enacted, and evaluated, and his discussion of impression management (i.e. dramaturgical loyalty, dramaturgical circumspection, and dramaturgical discipline), were particularly generative. In terms of the former, he argued that a workplace consists of front and back regions. The front region is the place where workers' performances occur. Here, workers seek to present an idealised image of themselves to scrutinising audiences whilst simultaneously seeking to conceal aspects that might discredit the impression that they are seeking to generate. In contrast, the back region enables workers to step out of character and, to some degree, relax or drop the front that is presented in the front region. It is also where actors plan, rehearse, and reflect upon their performances and the audiences' reception(s) of them. Thus, access to the back region is not normally provided to audience members (Scott 2015). Indeed, witnessing behind-the-scenes work (i.e. seeing team members 'out of character') may lead the audience to regard future performances with scepticism or question the credibility of those performing them (Goffman 1959).

Often led by what Goffman (1959) labelled a director, a *performance team* is any set of individuals who co-operate in seeking to create a desired and unified impression for their audience(s). Consequently, actors engaged in team performances strive to avoid 'unexpected events that disrupt the version of reality fostered by the participants and make the performance grind to an embarrassing halt' (Scott 2015, 88). These include unmeant gestures (i.e. an actor gives off a contradictory impression), inopportune intrusions (i.e. an audience member catching a performer out of character in the back region), *faux pas* (i.e. a performer endangering the image the group wish to project), and causing a scene (i.e. a performer explicitly challenging the projected consensus; Goffman 1959). Such incidents have the potential to lead to spoilt performances, ones where the audience consider situationally expected and appropriate standards to have not been met (Goffman 1959).

Goffman (1959) identified three defensive strategies that teams utilise to prevent the above from happening. *Dramaturgical loyalty* refers to the moral obligation among team members to not betray their shared secrets (e.g. the planning of their show, the backstage realities, and the workers' off-stage identities; Goffman 1959). *Dramaturgical discipline* requires team members to 'carefully manage their personal front to appear nonchalant, while concealing the extensive work that they are doing to create this very impression' (Scott 2015, 88). Simply put, it entails a worker both remembering and positively executing their role in the group's performance, managing their own verbal and non-verbal communication, carefully monitoring the team's performance, and having the presence of mind to prevent deleterious incidents from occurring. Finally, *dramaturgical circumspection* is concerned with the 'exercise of prudence, care, and honesty' in the staging of a team performance (Goffman 1959, 212). This includes workers putting measures in place to avoid or minimise anticipated incidents or disruptions, as well as preparing for likely contingencies (Scott 2015).

While Goffman's theorising offered considerable interpretive value, our analysis also led us to consider the limits of his concepts. Here, we supplemented our analysis by drawing upon Scott's 2015 symbolic interactionist work on identities and Shulman's (2017) modern interpretation of the presentation of the self to develop richer insights into the dynamics of workplace collaboration. Building on Goffman's foundational theorising, Scott's (2015) work illuminates how contemporary work colleagues generate a collective social identity through collaborative performances and the pragmatic utility of carefully enacting defensive strategies together. Likewise, Shulman (2017) helps to bring Goffman's concepts up-to-date by highlighting the performative and ritual features of interactions within contemporary organisations and in the digital age. In sum, when fused together, these theorists' insights provided a more insightful heuristic framework than any one of them would have done alone (Tracy 2020).

Discussion of the analysis

Our analysis highlights how the collective performance of teamwork by the Head Coach and his colleagues was centrally characterised by what Goffman (1959) termed impressional

protectiveness. We explicate below how their performances were carefully prepared, developed, enacted, reviewed, and repaired together. The discussion is organised around three 'acts', which reflect overarching interaction rituals of team performance within the academy. Specifically, following Goffman's (1959) use of theatrical metaphor, and responsive to observed rhythms of situated practice, we trace the team's performances as they: a) regularly (re) convened in the coaches' office and engaged in circumspect preparation for their collective performance; b) collectively enacted loyal and disciplined teamwork in the front stage; and, finally, c) retired to the office to more privately reflect upon various aspects of their cooperative work.

Act 1, preparing for team performance

The conduct of team performance first necessitated the convening of its members, during which facilitative rituals were found to express the co-coaches' collective identity:

Staff converged on the stadium car park. The banter was peculiarly primitive and reassuringly familiar (like a social warm-up). Danny was mocked for carrying a whole cooked chicken he'd just collected from the supermarket; he gave as good as he got in return – everyone laughed. Clad in matching sponsored team kit, these informal exchanges reveal no pecking order, no conspicuous hierarchy within this team. At least, not until Danny punched in the keycode to give us access to the private office. Once inside, jovial solidarity subsided. We quietly took our places at desks and chairs. Danny hadn't issued an explicit call for order; he'd simply assumed a familiar pose at the heart of his gathered subordinates. The team now oriented themselves towards him in silent acknowledgement of his leadership. With a shared focus achieved, Danny sketched out the plan for tonight's session.

Among the team's ritualistic expressions of a team identity, the shared coaching kit, nuanced in its distinctiveness from that issued to players and publicly available merchandise, can be understood as a symbolic tie sign (Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019). This was part of the personal front that anchored each individual to the others and signalled their place within the collective (Goffman 1959). Likewise, though not as politely positive as the communicative gestures to which Scott (2015) alludes, as part of typically supportive greetings, leave-takings, and farewells between team-mates (e.g. 'How are you?'), the coaches' 'banter' about the roast chicken is but one example of an access ritual. Here, as was observed throughout the fieldwork, the team members expressed mutual regard, familiarity, and solidarity through symbolic interchanges. Indeed, the team was remade at each juncture through such situated routines, familiar only to us as insiders.

The car park can be understood as a transient space where the participants participated in a process of (re)making their team. By assembling well in advance of the session, the stadium was usually free from players and parents, so the participants were generally 'safe' to engage in puerile banter without losing face. On the one hand, then, the car park and coaching office were putatively back regions where the coaches could relax the individual and collective front presented to their principal audience (Goffman 1959). Just as Halldorsson et al. (2017) found, 'key elements [of team performance], such as friendship, trust, and strong social bonds, that strengthen group solidarity [were] developed backstage' (p. 1293). Simultaneously, however, the performance of these rituals exemplified strategic interaction within the staff team, with each coach conscientiously performing the role first of a relaxed, humorous 'mate', and subsequently of a focused and committed colleague. This finding corresponds to Roderick and Allen-Collinson's 2020 point that certain spaces, at certain times, operate as liminal locations, somewhere between a back-stage or front-stage. Thus, the journey from the car park to the office was where the participants collectively 'got into role'. Extending Scott's (2015) conceptualisation, this is an example of what we have termed a 'focussing encounter', a liturgical transition from unfocused to focused interaction through a shared symbolic and pragmatic centring of attention.

As we subsequently unpack, preparing together, away from the audience's gaze, served to both hide possible stigmas (e.g. disagreements, disorganisation) and guard against unfavourable

impressions when subsequently enacting collective practice in the front stage. This backstage work was so integral to the functioning of team performance that additional, virtual back regions were also created (Shulman 2017). In one example, encrypted WhatsApp groups managed by Danny enabled deliberations, preparations, and reflections to be shared, as part of the shadow administration of work (Shulman 2017), even while the coaches were not convened in person. Danny explained:

That's the title of our coaches' WhatsApp group: 'Singing from the Same Sheet'. So, every time someone sends a message, we see it under that title. It's a reminder . . . we need to be 'on-the-button'. Without it [alignment], it just leads to confusion for the young lads we're trying to develop. When there's confusion, I think the players would just stand still. They'd view us as unorganised . . . We want our message to be consistent with whichever coach is speaking to them.

Here, Danny exemplified the coaching team's shared concern to deliver *alignment*. Their circumspect back region planning focused on coping with contingencies in the organisational context, avoiding unmeant gestures or faux pas, maintaining self-control, sticking to the party line, and preventing backstage secrets from being revealed (Scott 2015). The team discussed *how* to achieve these aims in meticulous detail, rehearsing different scripts 'with painstaking care, testing one phrase after another' (Goffman 1959, 42), and agreeing intricate stage directions for their own positioning and movement during different phases of the session. In Goffman's (1959, 228) terms, Danny and his coaching staff sought 'to settle on a complete agenda before the event, designating who is to do what and who is to do what after that' (228), such that disciplined and loyal performances could be sustained for their audiences. For example:

Danny rendered the activity being discussed onto the whiteboard. 'Let's make sure we're all on the same page here' he explained. Danny reiterated the different coaches' positions in relation to the players on the board and clarified that Frank and Virgil's jobs were to look out for opportunities to support a group of players they'd each been allocated. For players expected to shine, Frank and Virgil were to 'make sure they're being stretched' [by giving individuals personal challenges within the activity]. For players anticipated to find the activity less complementary, the coaches were to prompt, motivate, and scaffold in ways that would keep these players engaged in the less conspicuous 'graft' that enables the star players to stand out.

Our analysis suggests that particular attention during the act of preparation was given to managing conflict between team members in ways that maintained an outward impression of coherent alignment (Potrac et al. 2022). Disagreement in the backstage, where coaches would vigorously debate, test, and challenge each other's ideas, was encouraged in the Academy. There was seemingly no space here for private concerns when colleagues discussed their practice. They unambiguously wanted to generate the best possible front-stage impressions of their coaching and of the organisation by baring their nuanced (even conflicting) beliefs in the back region. In Rusty's own words:

Danny and I would start with an idea, and it would have changed six times before it made it onto a piece of paper. Let's say I was coaching defence and Danny saw something that he thought 'That's different, or not aligned' . . . he wouldn't withdraw from the conversation. He'd go: 'I just want to understand why we're doing that?' Danny would ask that question a lot, of all of us. It was always from the place of – not him wanting to show his authority – just him wanting to create alignment.

Danny concurred in a separate discussion, reiterating how the fellowship of trust contributed to a feeling of security to share ideas and expose vulnerabilities in pursuit of improved collective coaching practice:

He'd [Rusty] quiz me: 'Is that the best thing?', and I'd kind of counter back, [then] he'd counter me. I would be quite open to say: 'I'm not sure about this', or 'We need to have a look at this'. Then we'll sit down and have a discussion about the best way to do it. You know: 'That won't work', or 'This might work'.

The coaches also recognised that, when executing their individual roles during the collective performance of a session, they could not always avoid inadvertent performance disruptions (such as by players or parents). For instance, the co-coaches anticipated that players could question any

one of the co-coaches (especially those not immediately leading the activity), at any time, and that for any coach to express doubt, uncertainty or inconsistent information would be damaging both to the individual and the collective. Thus, the coaching team spent time discussing *how* to enact their plans, but also developed shared scripts about *why* these plans were to be pursued at all (Goffman 1959). For example:

Danny and Rusty were deep in discussion about one aspect of the team's attacking strategy. Their critical discussion of alternative approaches that could be taken highlighted differing preferences for how to play. Seeking to move the conversation forward, Rusty urged 'Well, we need to decide on what we're doing, because the players need clarity from us'. Danny concurred: 'Look, this is your area (Rusty is in charge of the team's attack), so go with your gut on this, but let's run through its pros again so that all of us [gesturing around the gathered coaches] are on point if we're asked about it'. Rusty then set out his stall in more detail, incorporating examples of how the coaches could explain the specific *how* and *why* of his strategy.

Developing these back-stage scripts was intended to help ensure that, when they performed together in the front region, each coach was loyal to their teammates and supported the collective line (Goffman 1959). In Rusty's own words:

I don't feel that it's right saying something that those guys [co-coaches] would disagree with me saying. If we do have a disagreement in our opinion then we wouldn't project that to the players. It's important that we have those continuous discussions as coaches.

Such preventive practices engaged with the complexity of coaching together by recognising that practitioners often hold divergent beliefs about *whats*, *hows* and *whys*, and that, to adhere to the obligations of teamwork, personal preferences had to be suppressed at times (Goffman 1959). Equally, their circumspect preparations anticipated that suspending one's own tastes and sticking to the expressive status quo for the good of the team might be problematic without adequate preparation. Thus, agreeing and rehearsing shared expressive contingencies helped to ensure that the co-coaches delivered appropriate and coherent performances that also came across as convincingly spontaneous to their audience (Potrac et al. 2012).

Act 2, engaging in performance

Maintaining alignment in the front region involved each coach persuasively enacting their individual roles within the team. Avoiding disruptions caused by forgetting one's part, deviating from the plan, or failing to adapt to the emergent conditions of the context were key. In this regard, the team members exemplified Goffman's 1959 notion of dramaturgical discipline by showing presence of mind and reacting to errors, to avoid derailing the collective performance:

'Look! The pitch is too narrow for that many players!' Danny pointed out as we observed Virgil's group. Danny recruited me to help sort the issue, before it became obvious to the players, by laying out new yellow cones. He then crept around the pitch, behind the players, to speak quietly to Virgil before returning to watch beside me. At the next break in play, Virgil called the players together. Publicly brandishing his session plan, he explained that the pitch boundaries would now extend to the new yellow lines of cones. He urged the player to think about which aspects of the game plan could be exploited using the extra width. It came across as an always-intended progression of the session plan. On resuming, the attacking team immediately played with greater width, forcing the defending team to adapt and explore the outcomes the coaches had originally planned.

The way Danny safeguarded the team's alignment here is a prime example of a protective practice being carried out with micropolitical tact (Goffman 1959). Danny had remained loyal to Virgil by not exposing his error. This contrasts strongly with the work of Potrac et al. (2012), where a concern for self-interests led team members to publicly correct another's perceived faults and errors. Likewise, Virgil's responsive composure 'saved the show'. Indeed, Goffman (1959, 21–22) recognised that 'additions and modifications' to *the show* are inevitable in interaction, and that 'it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken'. Thus, the players remained unsuspecting that any dissonance had occurred.

This example helps to further elucidate the power dynamics of team performance in the Academy. Ultimate responsibility for session planning, delivery and review rested with Danny. In Goffman's (1959) terms, he maintained a position of *directive dominance*, overseeing the coordination of roles, and being principally 'concerned with the smooth running of the show at an aesthetic and sentimental level' (Scott 2015, 114). Equally, however, Danny often ceded control to the other coaches to lead sessions or sections of sessions but ensured that those 'taking the lead' felt comfortable to 'deliver' a disciplined performance. Danny recognised that a lone voice could help meet players' expectations for clear direction. Thus, productive team performance incorporated an etiquette of knowing when to keep quiet, and how to maintain adequate social distance from the audience, so that the coach leading particular interactions was dramaturgically dominant for their audience (Goffman 1959). As Rusty explained:

The players would sense it [mixed messages] and get a bit agitated that they were hearing one thing from one coach and something different from another. Because we're working together, they [the players] receive that clarity from the *lead coach* (original emphasis).

Similar to Becker's (2000) point about the collective performance of improvisation by Jazz musicians, this etiquette helped to resolve tensions that might arise from assumptions that teamwork ought to be egalitarian. Rather, in the messy realities of coaching practice, good collaboration involved discipline and loyalty to strengthen impressions among the audience that a given coach was (temporarily, at least) the authoritative 'star of the show' (Scott 2015, 113).

Generating a backstage in the frontstage, or as Shulman (2017) put it, constructing dramaturgical camouflage to prevent the audience witnessing team collusion, not only helped the coaching staff to reactively deal with performance errors. They also manipulated this region when things were 'going well' to proactively adapt plans and ensure continued alignment that would 'maintain their momentum'. The following fieldnote encapsulates how huddles were skilfully used to screen on-pitch deliberations about how to sustain team performance:

Each group of players gathered around their coach in a ubiquitous rugby huddle. In line with the session plan, the coaches set out a key tactical question for their players to debate before play would resume. As the players began their focussed deliberations, the coaches hurriedly formed a huddle of their own. Shielded by their formation, and out of earshot of the players, Danny explained a tweak he wanted to make to the subsequent activity: 'If they [the players] keep up this level, then we might need to stretch them a bit in the last game ... maybe add some constraints in'. There were silent nods before the coaches dispersed back to their groups, who were none the wiser, still engrossed in the task they'd been set.

Here, huddles acted as a quasi-private back region, serving to gather players in certain locations and occupy them in some engaging activity. Then, sufficiently shielded from their audience, the coaching staff could contrive together, knowing the fragility of their emergent performance was concealed (Goffman 1959). Again, the coaches understood that no matter how well they planned, the inherently dynamic and complex coaching process necessitated emergent, responsive, and co-ordinated practice (Jones and Ronglan 2018). Significantly, however, unlike Goffman's 1959 more material characterisation of physically partitioned back regions (broadly reflected in reference to the 'back stage' in extant coaching research; e.g. Roberts et al. 2019, 114), here it was a coach-created sensory impediment that 'buffer[ed] themselves from the deterministic demands that surround[ed] them'. Thus, beyond notions of a relatively stable 'line dividing front and back regions' (Goffman 1959, 75), these coaches engaged in more liminal control of how a given 'place happens to serve at that time for the given performance' as a front or back region (Goffman 1959, 77). This finding highlights how coaches may manipulate the spatial dynamics of workspaces to account for emergent constraints and opportunities strategically and sensitively, and to productively benefit team performance.

More artful blurring of front and back regions was also evident. Indeed, the coaches carefully attended to and manipulated spatial (and therefore sensory) relations between each other and the players to foster and sustain idealised team performance. For instance, the below is an example of how shrewd, secretive exchanges between coaches occurred in close proximity to their audience:

Steam from the encircled players and coaches dissipated into the freezing night sky after tonight's intense session. Frank urged the players to 'get tight'. As he occupied the players with some superficial observations about the last activity, Danny and Rusty caught one another's gaze over the top of the assembled mass. Without speaking, and with an evident sense of shared meaning, subtle hand signals and facial expressions were exchanged. A nod with a hint of a smile indicated Danny's satisfaction with how the session had gone overall; it simultaneously enquired about Rusty's perspective. Following Rusty's reciprocation Danny turned to look at the stadium clock. Rusty followed his gaze; two minutes until their agreed finish time [from the session plan]. Returning to look at one another, Danny quietly cocked his head towards Frank's position at the heart of the huddle (*Did Rusty want to add anything?*). Rusty drew his lips together and delicately shook his head before softly bowing it towards Danny (*No, it's okay, you take it!*). Another subtle nod from Danny (*Okay, I've got this*). Recognising that Frank was concluding his initial points, Danny slid seamlessly back into both the position and conduct of attentive authority. With a satisfied smile he looked around the group, gathering their eye contact, before gesticulating towards Rusty while he explained why they were *both* happy with their progress tonight.

The careful staging of this scene underlines how team performance involved significant protective co-operation and important paraverbal forms of inter-action too (Goffman 1959). Such backstage work, including Danny and Rusty's initial (visual) connection with one another over the huddled players, relied upon 'deep, intuitive knowledge of each other as actors who have learned the same script, tricks and strategies' (Scott 2015, 211). Careful judgement by the coaching staff of the necessary inattention from their audience was integral to the sense-bounded construction of their back region (Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020). Then, to avoid interruptions to the flow of Frank's nearby interaction with the players, Danny and Rusty used inconspicuous gestures and communication. In this sense, the widely unseen exchanges between Danny and Rusty were part of their ongoing dramaturgical circumspection, prudently agreeing how best to stage the wrap up of the session.

In summary, the perceptive and coordinated management of what was concealed from, and made visible to, their scrutinising audience highlights the participants' expressive control and their efforts in mystification (Goffman 1959). Here, in managing the dynamic complexities of their work, they readily moved between degrees of detachment and engagement with their audience, and routinely built space and time into their session plans to engage in the careful monitoring of team performance (i.e. staging talk and team collusion). They believed these strategies would facilitate loyal, disciplined, and circumspect performances and, relatedly, generate collegial solidarity by addressing personal, shared, and organisational interests (Gale et al. 2019).

Act 3, reflecting on team performance

Following each session, the coaching staff retired to their office, physically segregating themselves from the audience (Goffman 1959). Free from intrusion, they began to step out of character. However, they were still performing for one another. Thus, they could drop some facets of the appearance, manner and props that comprised their front-stage performance (Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020). Indeed, where the back region offered respite from one audience (i.e. the players), the co-coaches' collegial scrutiny remained of each other's continued circumspection, loyalty, and discipline.

Typically, the initial stages of this routine conclusion to the 'show' included symbolic gestures that indicated, to themselves and assembled colleagues, their emergence from a state of dramaturgical immersion (Goffman 1959; Partington and Cushion 2012). Cheeks were audibly puffed out and bodies slouched into chairs, displaying the emotional and dramaturgical strains of their work, as well a sense of release at now being able to engage in easier backstage conduct (Roderick and Allen-Collinson 2020). Often, a period of impromptu, quiet contemplation occurred, showing a mutual regard for those who needed a moment to unwind. During these interludes, in acts of tactful inattention to this unusual silence (Scott and Stephens 2018), the coaches would busy themselves by changing pieces of coaching kit for civilian clothing, check their emails or social media, or consume food and drink. As was typical of the focussing

encounters and access rituals in Act 1, Danny, and sometimes Rusty, were the only ones with legitimate authority to interrupt this lull and refocus attention on their performance. '... Hoo'kay ...' they would declare, in gentle but clear instigation. Recurring post-session tasks included: *post-mortems*, where their on-pitch performance was dissected and consideration given to how any learning might inform subsequent teamwork; the *sharing of secrets*, where inside information was distributed by individuals for the team's strategic benefit; and *judging the absent*, where praise and derogation contributed to ongoing appraisals of players for the purposes, for example, of team selection.

Underlining his status as director of the coaching team, Danny usually led the post-mortem examination of their recent performance. However, while some of Goffman's 1959 original emphasis on directors issuing sanctions or correcting team members' improper actions was evident, Danny also sought to highlight things perceived to be effective in such a way that performance successes productively informed continued circumspection. During a participant reflection Rusty recalled Danny's approach to both sanctioning and congratulating co-coaches:

I can remember moments when Danny told me 'That's not how we do things', and I can remember moments where he'd praise members of staff; Danny's the most skilful coach I've ever worked with like that. One of his skills was saying 'well done'. I remember when Virgil took the lead of the U15's group, we went to play a competition ... , I remember Danny going: 'Well done, Virgil, that was a fantastic day of rugby'. The key was that it was authentic.

Across the fieldwork, it was clear that Danny, with an eye on their ongoing work together, was conscious to maintain and strengthen the morale of his coaching staff. Specifically, he sought to generate a shared 'impression that the show that is about to be presented will go over well or that the show that has just been presented did not go over so badly' (Goffman 1959, 79). Where Danny wanted to bring someone back into alignment, he rarely singled them out during post-mortems. Instead, correction usually came with reference to the team (e.g. 'We need to make sure that ...'; 'When we're doing X, it's essential that we ...'). There was a group sentiment to Danny's approach (i.e. 'We're all in this together'), one that may have helped him to avoid his own estrangement from other members of the team when the reiteration of standards was necessary (Hall et al. 2021).

By more sympathetically and neutrally dealing with errors, Danny contributed to a general atmosphere of collegial solidarity backstage. During post-mortems, he regularly enquired about his colleagues' perceptions before offering his own (e.g. 'How did we find X activity?'; 'What are our thoughts on ...?'). This, resulted in a confessional approach to unmeant gestures, *faux pas*, misremembered scripts, and forgotten roles from his team members (e.g. 'I got the timing wrong there. . .'; 'I was too far away to see Y'). In this sense, coaching teammates were treated as confidants, to whom sins could be confessed (Goffman 1959; Occhino, Mallett, and Rynne 2013). This finding extends Goffman's 1959 own suggestion that confidants are usually outsiders, by showing how insiders too can be understanding, 'wise', and discreet so that no stigma need be felt in sharing one's failings (Goffman 1963). Indeed, to confess in these situations was to show that, although idealised performance had momentarily slipped, you were aware of your transgressions and so your teammates could rely upon you to maintain disciplined self-control when the audience was next present (Goffman 1959). Equally, when confession occurred, co-coaches were usually quick to reassure and offer forgiveness (e.g. 'Don't worry, I don't think the players noticed'; 'It didn't affect the flow ...'). Ultimately, as part of sustaining their ongoing show, *ad hoc* errors and successes were treated as fuel for future performance prudence (Goffman 1959).

The acquisition and distribution of insights about the audience that might aid the future staging of their show were also exchanged in Act 3. As part of the information game (Goffman 1959), such correspondence helped ensure all staff were primed and aligned ahead of their next collective performance. For example, Frank's sharing of 'inside information' he had privately gained from a parent about a player whose grandma was seriously ill meant that all the coaches could then consider what the player might 'expect of them and what they may expect of him' (Goffman 1959, 1)

enabling them to concur on how best to act towards him at the next session. Importantly, this finding brings attention to organisations as larger networks of interrelated actors, in which insights about any one agent need to be circumspectly located within an understanding of their wider historical relations and anticipated interaction trajectories, to safeguard working conditions and team performance (Hall et al. 2021).

During reflective meetings, various secrets of the show were made visible backstage to those 'in the know' that were never intentionally revealed in the presence of their audience (Goffman 1959, 142). The sharing and maintaining of these entrusted secrets of the team formed part of the constitution of the Academy itself. For instance, in the following field notes, auxiliary staff members (Terry and Willy) were welcomed into the team to support a player selection event, commonly known as 'a trial':

From the outset Terry and Willy became 'part of the gang'. Information about the trialling players from the Academy database was shared with them, and their opinions about players were sought as frequently as from anyone else. As we wrapped up the meeting, Danny reminded us of the importance of keeping the selection outcome to ourselves until official letters had been sent out: '... and if anyone approaches you to talk about the decisions, direct them on to me and I'll make sure the feedback is consistent'. It felt like this generally expressed point was really aimed at the two newbies. Indeed, Terry was the only one to directly acknowledge Danny's request as he fiddled with the internal lock on the door. 'Cheers, mate ...' replied Danny, 'I appreciate it! Just twist the lock to the right and it should let you out'.

The above, and many other examples in this fieldwork, were evidently inside secrets in the sense that to possess this information was to mark out insiders from those not part of the team (Goffman 1959). However, rather than the head coach being the 'master' with sole claim to such knowledge (Gearity et al. 2023); here, most secret knowledge – especially that which could inform their collective work – was something to be divulged and held in common. Generally, information shared backstage was implicitly understood to be 'for our eyes and ears only', so discretion was maintained as a matter of course. After all, to breach this unwritten feature of team solidarity could lead to questions about how dependably loyal team members would be in the front region (Gale et al. 2019). In this case, Danny also recognised that increasing the number of people 'in the know' inevitably increases 'the likelihood of intentional or unintentional disclosure' (Goffman 1956, 88). In particular, the disciplined maintenance of the selection secret (above) was related to the Academy's prevailing desire for workplace alignment and player clarity. Moreover, the etiquette of secret keeping, along with their plan to direct curious players or parents to Danny, was a collective work in strengthening impressions of Danny's dramaturgical dominance should clarity be needed (Scott 2015).

A final key feature of this back region work was the coaches' treatment of what Goffman (1959) termed 'the absent'. It was noteworthy that coaches' treatment of their audience, when they could not be seen or heard, was inconsistent with their face-to-face dealings. For instance, during the selection meeting (above), players' strengths and areas for development were robustly compared and debated behind closed doors with little forbearance. As with their deep planning discussions, it was expected and valued when co-coaches challenged each other's judgements in the back region. Once more, aligned front-stage performance was found to be predicated on respectful but thorough deliberation to reach a consensus. In one selection meeting, for example, Rusty solicited counter-points to his own observations of one player:

'I saw Duncan drop the ball twice this evening; both were catchable passes', Rusty asserted. Turk began to type up these notes into a player tracking document. 'Hang on, though...'; Rusty interrupted. '...Dunc must've touched the ball more than twice in the time he's been with us. We can't write him off just on two incidents'. Notebooks were rustled by the other coaches as they searched through records of their earlier observations. Yen (physiotherapist) interjected: 'Duncan popped to see me before tonight's session. He was carrying a bit of soreness in his left wrist. Nothing to worry about, but it might help to explain if his catching was off'. Willy then jumped in, gesturing to his notebook: 'Yeah - in fairness, last week his catching was really good'. Others' notes were in agreement. Rusty looked satisfied: 'So, let's assume it was a one-off!'

In contrast, players' acute errors (e.g. a dropped ball) and more chronic limitations (e.g. a lack of fitness) were never publicly compared to another's in front of the players themselves. Instead, when the coaching staff noticed a player's failings on the training pitch, this typically triggered interactions characterised by sympathy (e.g. 'Good effort'), encouragement (e.g. 'Keep going'), constructive challenge (e.g. 'See if you can spot the space earlier next time'), or technical scaffolding (e.g. 'Dropping your hips will help you stay balanced'). Indeed, 'individuals [were] treated relatively well to their faces' (Goffman 1959, 111). The coaches were rarely unkind or rude in their treatment of the audience unlike the emphasis given to derogation in previous work (e.g. Potrac et al. 2012). In fact, they often stifled particularly exuberant praise for individuals in public (e.g. 'Good offload, Paul!'), which could be construed as favouritism or risk perceptions of unprofessional emotional control (Goffman 1956). Instead, they revelled in enthusiastic celebration of players' performances when safely segregated in the coaches' office (e.g. 'Did you see Paul's offload? It was fucking ridiculous; some of the first team players couldn't have pulled that off!').

Conclusion

Empirically and theoretically this paper provides new insights regarding the dramaturgical features of team performance in a sporting workplace. Importantly, the uniquely extensive fieldwork enabled us to develop the explanatory utility of dramaturgical theorising by showing how focussing encounters (interaction rituals) during the convening and concluding of teamwork enabled team members to immersively step into and out of their roles and characters. Moreover, we have explicated the meticulous, yet respectful critique anticipated between team members when raising ideas or developing plans in the back region, along with the imperative of confessing to performance errors there, so that as close to an idealised collective identity be presented to their scrutinising audience in the front region. Finally, we have shown how the spatio-sensory boundaries between front- and back-regions can be proactively managed, through the manipulation of dramaturgical camouflage, to foster and sustain dramaturgical circumspection, discipline, and loyalty.

While we appreciate that our findings cannot be assumed to automatically apply to the wider population of head coaches and their colleagues in sport, we do, based on our positioning as interpretive researchers, believe that they have some naturalistic and analytic generalisability (Smith 2018). In terms of the former, our focus on the everyday realities and dynamics of teamwork in the workplace provides the reader with a valuable source for reflection on 'how things are, why they are, how people feel about them, and how these things are likely to be [or could be]' (Stake 1978, 6). Likewise, we believe this study has analytic generalisability, because, like others, our findings: a) further demonstrate how central strategic negotiation and collaboration are to the activity of leaders and their colleagues in pursuit of organisational goals; b) illuminate how political behaviour is productively implicated in the collective and complementary efforts of those mobilised in teams; and c) draw attention to the intrapersonal, interpersonal and political skills necessitated by working together towards shared missions (Grills and Prus 2019). Further research along these lines is needed if we are to address pejorative misconceptions that equate the politics of sports work and management only with dysfunction, amoral manipulation, and unfairness (Hartley 2017). Indeed, for researchers, coach educators, and practitioners alike, generating a sophisticated and reality-grounded appreciation of team-related processes is crucial to the successful study and enactment of sports work.

Future inquiry may build upon our findings by further examining the shifting power relations of harmonious and discordant work teams, especially as these relate to dramaturgical and directive dominance (Goffman 1959). Equally, examining *how* (dis)trust, familiarity, unanimity, and solidarity between sport leaders and colleagues are strategically developed and changed across time, in ways that enable or constrain quotidian team performance, is also worthy of focused attention. For instance, researchers may wish to critically examine how sport workers engage with legacy (pre-established) teams, select, form, and engage with mission-oriented teams, and attempt to manage both dark and strategic secrets within teamwork processes (Grills 2022). Finally, the emotional

dynamics of team performance, including how strategic complicity in frontstage emotional control is negotiated, and how mutual support enables emotional release in the backstage, may offer fruitful lines of inquiry. Moreover, Goffman's, Hochschild's and related symbolic interactionists' (e.g. Becker, Blumer, Grills, Mead, and Prus) underutilised concepts have considerable utility for significantly extending our understandings of the inherently social, collective, and emotional dimensions of managing and doing team work together.

In terms of the above, the extended longitudinal nature of this study's ethnographic fieldwork offers particular scope for future research to engage with the temporal dimensions of the suggested topics (Allen-Collinson 2003). Indeed, as the present study concluded at the disbanding of this team and its routine practices of collaboration, further participant observation of transitional – perhaps less coherent or even disruptive (Potrac et al. 2012) – team working arrangements, as members leave and join organisations, could be a fruitful approach to inquiry. Likewise, further critical engagement with the embodied means by which ethnographers draw upon their identities, relational networks, and contextual know-how to enable access to research contexts, and navigate the *doing* of their fieldwork, over such extended periods, is needed (Scott and Moura 2023; Champ et al. 2020).

Disclosure statement

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

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