

**The micro-politics of organisational change in professional youth football:
Towards an understanding of 'actions, strategies and professional
interests'**

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Abstract

Employment within professional football is characterised by high levels of staff turnover, uncertainty, vulnerability and insecurity. This paper aims to investigate the experiences of James, Head of Foundation Phase within an English professional youth academy, during a period of organisational change. Data were collected through field notes, informal observations and meetings, formal academy team meetings, co-worker interviews and four semi-structured in-depth participant interviews, which were subjected to an iterative process of inductive and deductive analysis. Theorising regarding the influence of *professional self-interests* upon the actions and strategies of the social actors was utilised to make sense of James' narrative. The findings highlighted how James strategically managed his relationships with others to further his own *professional self-interests*. Finally, following the findings of this study, we propose that the ability to develop micro-political literacy and a repertoire of micro-political actions and strategies would benefit coaches working within professional football during such periods of instability and change.

Introduction

Recent empirical research in sports coaching has started to explore the political, complex realities of the working lives of coaches within sporting organisations.¹⁻⁴ Early findings have highlighted that coaches have to deal with contradictory goals and conflicting personal agendas, which are often driven by the structural vulnerabilities associated with the working life of a coach.¹⁻³ To date, much of the work in this area has been theoretically informed by a symbolic interactionist, micro-political perspective,^{5,6} which has been used as a 'sense-making' approach to highlight some of

the ways in which sports coaches interpret the situation they find themselves in and how this interpretation influences their future actions.⁷ Central to the micro-political perspective is an understanding that the actions of members of organisations are largely driven by self-interests.⁵⁻⁸ These interests might be similar or shared, which may lead to increased co-operation or even to conflict between individuals within organisations,^{1,2} where members might use sources of power and influence in order to further their own interests.⁷

Whilst professional football is characterised by high levels of staff turnover, uncertainty, vulnerability and insecure employment,⁹⁻¹¹ there is a dearth of useful empirical research from which to understand the process of organisational change and how change is experienced in the day-to-day working lives of coaches within this environment.¹² Indeed, much of the academic work within organisational change literature in sport focuses upon process models and macro-level rationalistic approaches, which lack empirical evidence of the essential embedded socio-cultural interactions upon which such organisational change is premised.¹² Importantly, to further our understanding of the contested social complexities of sports coaching, additional empirical work within this area is required to build a stronger theoretical basis upon which to better prepare coaching practitioners for the realities of employment.¹⁻⁴

To address this paucity, contextually sensitive and detailed ideographic case study methodological approaches have been suggested as a useful means of illuminating the individual and idiosyncratic complexity of the working lives of sports coaches.¹⁻⁴ In particular, researchers have further suggested that nested case studies are well placed to increase our understanding of the *relational* micro-political complexities of the working lives of coaches.⁴ Nested case studies maintain the integrity of the case

(i.e. the sporting organisation as a whole), as compared with the focus of different and contrasting cases in multiple case designs.¹³ Moreover, nested case studies allow for an interpretation of the entangled relationships within each specific case within the wider case.¹³ Consequently, such a methodological approach may assist in furthering our empirical understanding of the influence of self-interests on the inter-relational complexities of co-operative and non-cooperative actions and strategies between coaches within a single sports organisation.^{2,14}

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to build upon our current understanding of the micro-political nature of sports coaching environments through a nested interpretive case study exploration of the experiences of a coach during the process of organisational change in professional football. As part of a larger research project building towards a nested understanding of the process of organisational change within Alder FC (pseudonym), four interrelated research questions have guided this study:

RQ1: How did the participant coach experience the change process, and what changes were evident in the working environment for the participant coach?

RQ2: How did others act towards the participant coach, and how did the participant coach act towards others during the change process?

RQ3: In what sense did the participant coach come to understand the micro-political realities of organisational change?

RQ4: What impact did the change process have on the working conditions and subsequent employment opportunities for the participant coach?

Methodology

Philosophical underpinning and research aim

An interpretive case study research design was rigorously developed, informed by an ideographic relational interpretive research methodology that examined the individual case.^{4,13,15-20} The research project was underpinned by a relativist ontology that recognised that there is no reality independent of perception, and reality is multiple, created and mind dependent.^{4,15-20} Epistemologically, our approach was informed by constructionism, in that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and that the social world is subjective in nature.^{4,15,16,19,20} Such an approach recognises that reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which it occurs.^{4,15,16,19,20}

The participant's narrative has been presented in the manner in which he articulated his experiences to both the primary and secondary researchers through the process of narrative co-construction.^{4,15,16,19,20} An explanation of the validity of such an approach has been provided by Polkinghorne,¹⁵ who stated that:

Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are actually described. The "truths" sought by narrative researchers are "narrative truths", not "historical truths".

The interactionist-interpretive methodology utilised sought to investigate the participant's motives, actions and interests and the meaning that the participant attributed to both his own behaviours and those of others within the professional football environment during a period of organisational change.^{4,13,17-18} Developing such a research design allows for a deeper exploration of phenomena about which little is

known, such as the experiences of employees within professional football clubs during periods of organisational change.²⁻⁴ The aim of the study was to develop a contextually sensitive and rich descriptive narrative that detailed the interrelated nature of the lived experiences of the participant. Specifically, the narrative focused on how the participant interacted in the settings with key characters, during a plotline of critical incidents in his employment at a professional football club during a period of organisational change.^{4,13,15-20}

Research design

The present case study forms part of a larger multiple participant nested project at a professional football club called Alder FC (pseudonym), with academy coaches Richard, George, John, James and Ian (pseudonyms) and the principal author Luke (see Table 1). In this particular study, the findings and rich empirical insights from James are presented. Data collection took place from a retrospective perspective to explore how James made sense of the behaviours of other key actors and himself and consequently the effects these behaviours had on the process of organisational change within the academy. Following an iterative reading of the data and micro-political theorising, this study focused upon the coach's interpretations of the actions and behaviours of staff within the club during the process of change, and the subsequent impact of the change process upon his actions, strategies and professional interests.^{4,15,16}

The case and context

Alder FC is a professional football club competing in Football League One (third tier of English professional football), and following assessment by the English Premier

League will be working at an Academy Category 3 level (see Table 2) within the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). At the point of data collection, the principal author, Luke, was employed as a part-time academy coach at Alder FC working with the U16 squad. During this period as an employee at Alder FC, the author experienced various instances of organisational change at different levels of the football club, and witnessed a number of colleagues leaving the club as a result of organisational change. Alder FC was selected as a local knowledge case derived from the principal author's position within the academy at the beginning of and during the ongoing process of organisational change.¹³ The local knowledge case is a benefit to this case study research in that the principal author's intimate knowledge enhances his ability to read the people who inhabit the arena.¹³ Additionally, this also allows for a "richness and depth of data that would be unavailable to you otherwise" (Thomas,¹³ p. 99). Prior to data collection, institutional ethical approval was granted by the Sport, Outdoor and Exercise Science Ethics Committee at the University of Derby, with the correct protocol and research guidelines followed.

The participant

The participant was selected as part of a purposeful sampling process as he was considered to be a rich source of data in relation to the phenomena under investigation. Significantly, James had recently experienced a process of managerial and organisational change within Alder FC.^{1,4} Following an initial approach to the participant and discussion around the purpose of the research, James (pseudonym) agreed to take part in the study and voluntary informed consent was obtained. At the beginning of the data collection process James had been coaching for a period of 10 years and was Head of Foundation Phase at Alder FC. James holds the UEFA (Union

of European Football Associations) B Licence as well as the English FA (Football Association) Youth Award. At the time of the change process, the club in question was competing in Football League One. In his role as Head of Foundation Phase, James oversaw the technical games programme and coaching curriculum for the U8s, U9s, U10s, U11s and U12s age groups. He was also responsible for 10 part-time academy coaches, academy recruitment scouts, a part-time sport scientist, and a part-time physiotherapist. By the time data collection and analysis were completed, James had left Alder FC to work for another English professional football club.

Data collection

Data were collected by the principal author, Luke, who at the time was employed as the Head Coach of the U16 team. The data consist of ethnographic field notes and observations from informal meetings (e.g. during training and matches, coffee conversations, discussions in the car park and during travel to away matches) and formal academy staff team meetings (i.e. staffing and planning, player assessment reviews and ‘in-house’ training). In addition, there were in-depth interviews with three co-workers regarding the period of organisational change (i.e. Richard, George and Ian; see Table 1) and four in-depth, semi-structured interpretive interviews with James, which were conducted in a quiet and private setting at his convenience.^{1,4,21-24} The interview data with James resulted in around five hours of audio-recorded conversation in total.^{1,4,21}

Prior to the start of the first interview, James was made aware of the nature of the data collection process, the aim of the research project and how the research would be disseminated, and issues surrounding the confidentiality of peers or colleagues within the data was discussed.^{1,4,22} James was also made aware of his right to withdraw

at any point during the study and to withdraw permission to publish the final analysis of his narrative. Throughout the interviewing process, the primary researcher became an ‘active listener’ and encouraged James to discuss his experiences at his own comfort level and discretion.^{1,4,22-24} The focus of the interview topics was guided by the four interrelated research questions (RQ1–RQ4), which were designed to explore James’ experiences of the micro-politics of organisational change.^{1-4,25-31} Specifically, questions focused upon the impact of change upon James’ working relationships with other coaches and his own behaviours at the football club.^{1-4,25-28} Each of the interviews was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher and analysed through a process of iterative analysis to inform subsequent interviews.^{1,3,4,21,23}

Narrative data analysis

Narrative analysis was chosen as an approach to “take us outside of stories themselves to the occasions and practical actions associated with the story construction and storytelling” (Gubrium and Holstein,¹⁹ p. 247). Specifically, “narrativity can contribute to our knowledge of individual and group experience and is often juxtaposed with the typically flat, thin contributions of positivistic methods” (Gubrium and Holstein,¹⁹ pp. 245–246). The rationale for moving towards narrative methods and the *narrative turn* by scholars within the field of social science can be seen as “a consequence of their dissatisfaction with, and lack of confidence in, post-positivism, and what can be called neo-realism” (Smith,²⁰ p. 87). Specifically, post-positivist approaches, by their ontological and epistemological nature, tend to attempt to *control for* and *remove* temporal, emotional, personal, political, cultural, contextual and situated lived experiences of participants’ from the research process.²⁰ However, such relational and complex empirical insights are required for the generation of social theory capable of

adequately understanding the interactions of actors within the social world, and further developing disciplinary fields.

In the light of the above, data were analysed using narrative thematic analysis in inductive (themes within the interview) and deductive (against sources of micro-politics and professional interests as a theoretical framework) approaches.^{4,23,24} Narrative themes were identified in James' data through a systematic coding process.^{1,3,4,21,23} Specific attention was given to data that could be distinguished as crucial in understanding James' relationships and actions at the club during key moments during the period of managerial and organisational change. Upon completion of each interview, theoretical memos were used to make connections to the theoretical framework to make sense of James' experiences.²⁵⁻²⁸

Theoretical framework

This paper explores how the work of Kelchtermans,²⁵ Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ and Kelchtermans²⁷ might be used as an analytical frame to better understand the role of *professional self-interests* as a mediator of micro-political action during the process of organisational change in professional football. This framework is premised upon Kelchtermans'²⁷ subjective educational theory as the "personal system of knowledge and beliefs about education that teachers use when performing their job" (p. 263). Specifically, questions such as "how should I deal with this particular situation?" and "why should I do it that way?" are addressed. Key to answering these questions is the teacher's ability to judge and interpret certain situations prior to the decision making process of which action to take. As Kelchtermans²⁷ states, "this ability to read, judge and then act is essential for competent teaching" (p. 264).

Building on the work of Blasé,⁶ Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ highlighted that understanding *professional interests* is central to micro-political theory. *Professional interests* arise from the characteristics that teachers attribute to their beliefs around effective teaching and the desired conditions for teachers to carry out their tasks effectively. *Professional interests* can be distinguished into five separate categories that may also be evident simultaneously²⁷ (see Table 3). Moreover, the *actions, strategies and tactics* that make up a portfolio of micro-political literacy will also inform the theoretical framework of this study.

The first category of professional interests is that of *self-interests*. Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ note that when self-esteem or task perception is threatened, self-interests tend to emerge. Specifically, *self-interests* protect integrity and identity. To elaborate further, Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ identify the importance of looking for self-affirmation, coping with vulnerability and coping with visibility within the category of *self-interests*. Here, the judgment of significant others plays an important role in searching for self-affirmation. When coping with vulnerability, coaches may feel their social recognition is threatened, particularly within professional relationships.²⁸ Coping with visibility also places a burden within organisational settings. As Blasé²⁹ explained, the professional context can be described as “working in a fishbowl,” where significant others observe and evaluate day-to-day working practices (p. 135).

Material interests relate to the accessibility to materials, funds or specific infrastructure. Within the coaching context, this may be access to facilities and other coaching equipment that can influence the coaching practice. Kelchtermans²⁸ has highlighted the importance of understanding the symbolic meaning attached to material issues within the organisational context if we are to comprehend lived organisational experiences.

Organisational interests relate to the roles, positions, procedures and formal tasks within the organisation. Primarily, retaining a job and choosing among job offers are central *organisational interests* for employees. Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ explain that the longer the time of uncertainty about a job, the more self-esteem becomes threatened, leading to a doubt about professional competencies.

Cultural-ideological interests revolve around the explicit norms, ideals or values acknowledged within a professional football club, for example, and form the make-up of the organisational culture. As Altrichter and Salzgeber³⁰ suggested, these interests also embody the interactions and procedures that define the culture.

Finally, *social-professional interests* refer to the quality of interpersonal relationships with key stakeholders within the organisational setting. Indeed, the work of Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ highlighted the importance of these relationships in allowing for discussions that positively or negatively affect working conditions (e.g. a climate of mistrust, conflict, suspicion and gossip).

Theoretically, the present paper focuses upon the actions, strategies and tactics that inform the micro-political action and literacy of stakeholders within Alder FC. Blasé²⁹ described a continuum of political strategies that consist of reactive and proactive endeavours. Reactive strategies are utilised in an attempt to maintain the situation and protect against external influences. Proactive strategies are aimed at improving the situation and working conditions within the organisation. It is important to understand that micro-political action be recognised as cyclical in nature rather than distinct points on a continuum.²⁷ In reality, micro-political activity becomes evident in a range of forms: talking, pleading, arguing, gossiping, flattering, being silent, avoiding taking sides, accepting extra duties, changing the material working conditions and the use of humour.⁶ Blasé⁶ further noted that “a simple inventory or list, summing up all

micro-political strategies and actions, is not relevant, and probably not even possible, because almost any action can become micro-politically meaningful in a particular context” (p. 11).

Results and Discussion

The following section will present a narrative analysis of James’ story, with a particular focus upon his actions, strategies and professional interests during the process of organisational change. Each section will provide an insight into the highlighted themes, along with a discussion of the data in relation to previous literature. The data indicated that the change process prompted James to reflect upon his own professional interests in developing micro-political literacy to maintain full-time employment during a period of organisational change.²⁵⁻²⁸ The findings revealed the micro-political strategies employed by James to ensure the academy coaches within his department were “onside”. Additionally, James highlighted the relief he felt when he realised he had “passed his test” and was accepted by the 1st Team Manager as part of his academy staff to move the club forward. During this period James also reflected on his experience of choosing sides and “backing the winning horse” when it came to working with other full-time staff that he thought might eventually be sacked by the 1st Team Manager. Upon retaining his employment, James discussed the importance of managing upwards and his relationship with the 1st Team Manager. Finally, the move to a new and improved training ground brought about a change in culture and day-to-day working practices as part of the change process.

New Chairman, Board of Directors and 1st Team Manager

After a year of employment at Alder FC as Head of Foundation Phase, James experienced large-scale organisational change on both football and organisational levels. As James stated:

When the new Chairman and Board of Directors came in, there was a lot of change around the club; all of the press releases were about developing and evaluating the academy. When the 1st Team Manager came in initially, you got the impression that there were going to be big changes with the staff so that was a bit of a testing period. You are a little bit guarded in terms of what you spoke about.

Such periods of uncertainty brought about micro-political action and strategy from James in an attempt to negotiate an environment where colleagues became “guarded”. Similar to the work of Kelchtermans and Ballet,²⁶ who describe the importance of becoming micro-politically active to protect against vulnerability, James stated that you wanted “to show what you can do and keep your job, but on the other hand you don’t want to be seen as if you’re sucking up to him [1st Team Manager]”. Furthermore, James elaborated on the rationale behind his actions:

I suppose I was trying to be a bit tactical and play it the right way. You wanted to side with the right people, but not get on the wrong side of people by sucking up or making others look bad to make yourself look better. A few times, the [1st Team] Manager would get you on your own and you’re thinking, “this is my opportunity to show myself in a good light”. He’s trying to work out who he wants to get rid of or keep. You’re also thinking, “what’s everyone thinking

whilst I'm with him on my own?", "what are they thinking I'm saying to him?" Obviously, when you go back, everyone is asking "what's he said?", "what did you discuss?" Everyone is a bit cagey ... at the end of the day; you're trying to protect your job and your livelihood.

Indeed, such micro-political action has previously been reported as important to maintain employment in order to protect *professional self-interests* (i.e. employment and career progression) within the culture of football.¹⁻⁴ James' decision to become "guarded" resonates with the suggestion that the continuum of both proactive and reactive micro-political action, strategies and tactics takes different forms in reality.⁶

Getting people onside

As Head of the Foundation Phase within the academy, James was responsible for six part-time coaches who worked with the age groups within that phase. James discussed his continued approach to engaging with micro-political action, strategy and tactics in an attempt to "protect his job and livelihood" and stated, "I suppose I was trying to be around their [the coaches] sessions more, be constructive and make them feel a part of the team. I've been there myself, and I didn't want them to be a cog in the wheel." James reflected upon his reasoning behind this approach:

I was new to managing staff so I was learning as I went along. I found that involving people and making people feel a part of the change got them to buy into you a little and made them feel welcome and you wanted them to be there and be a part of it. And in turn, you were trying to get the coaches onside so that if people ask questions about you, like "what's he like as a boss?", "what's

James like?”, “what’s he like as a coach?”, then they will probably be more inclined to say that you’re alright and that they don’t have any issues with you.

As Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ explained, self-interests tend to be at the heart of micro-political action. The strategy of “getting coaches onside” meant that James engaged in “proactive” action aimed at changing the situation and changing the conditions. Blasé⁶ describes how such proactive actions can take the form of “pleading and flattering”; however, it must be noted that “any action can become micro-politically meaningful in a particular context” (p. 11).

Passing the test

Subsequently, after the organisational and managerial change within the club, James discussed moments where staff were “put on the spot and put under pressure and that was your test and you may or may not pass. I know exactly what mine was and I was lucky enough to pass it at the time.” James recalled the moment he became aware of his test:

He [the Academy Manager] rang me up later that evening ... “I’ve got some bad news for you” ... “what?” ... “1st Team Manager is going to take a team, he wants to play your team tomorrow night at training. He’s rang me up now and said I need to arrange it. He wants to see you working with a team, how you set a team up, what you’re like.” So that night, I’m sat on the laptop looking for other jobs! My first thing was that if he wants to put me under this test then he must not be having me so I’m gonna be going.

Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ have highlighted how prolonged uncertainty regarding employment can lead to self-doubt regarding professional competency. As James states, the uncertainty brought about by his “test” had a negative influence on his professional competency and “social status and recognition” (Kelchtermans and Ballet,²⁶ p. 114). Upon reflection, James gave this explanation:

I’ve probably never been in that situation before where you’ve been in employment but then put on the spot. You become a bit vulnerable in trying to prove your ability. The fact that you have to go through that process puts a bit of doubt in your mind. You start to think, “what has he seen to make him think this, to make him think that he needs to put me under this pressure?”

James went on to explain his feelings at that point and the day leading up to his “test”:

I was pretty defensive really, I wanted to just be left to it. I was comfortable with what I was going to do. Richard [Academy Manager] went “right, alright, whatever”. It was as if he was thinking “right, go and hang yourself”. On the night [academy training session], if somebody from above [e.g. the 1st Team Manager or Academy Manager] comes to watch your team, if they stand away from you I think that is a visible thing that they want to detach themselves from you or they want to say something that they don’t want you to hear, which was striking on that night with Richard standing away from me. The better we did, the more he drifted back towards me. I think he was being a little bit tactical and thought “these are going to get beat here so I’ll stand away, but when they start doing well, I’ll attach myself”.

Physical space between social actors can also be seen to represent support through close proximity or a lack of closeness through both physical and social distance. Indeed, Blasé's⁶ emphasis on the importance of *coping with visibility* provided an interpretation of James' story, with professional activities reflecting "living in a fishbowl".²⁹ Specifically, coaches become subjected to observations by colleagues, parents and other stakeholders within professional football clubs and at academy training sessions.²⁵ In an attempt to cope with such visibility, James developed a range of strategies, actions and tactics to proactively manipulate the situation in his favour and change his working conditions.^{26,27} James further explained:

It was a case of "listen, we're here to win tonight. I need you to play well and win for me". I had quite a good relationship with them all and looking back now it probably wasn't the right thing to do but it probably saved my job. I was a lot more vocal, more tense than usual.

Indeed, James' team won the game, with his players producing a convincing performance. Subsequently, James found out that he had passed his "test". In his words:

It was the day after, I got called out and probably had a 45-minute chat with the 1st Team Manager and we went through everything and we started talking about the game and he was quite complimentary. He told me his plans and where he saw me within that. That gave me a bit of confidence to then say "right, let's get on with my job and start doing what I'm supposed to be doing" rather than panicking about whether I'm going to be here or not.

Following his discussion with the 1st Team Manager after his “test”, James became less concerned about his job prospects and competence as a coach, leading to a sense of decreased vulnerability. This was highlighted as James described the “assurance and relief” he felt after the conversation with the 1st Team Manager. James went on to state that “it also proved that your initial thoughts about the reason behind the test being to see how good you were, were right”.

Back the winning horse

Upon passing his “test”, James witnessed the experiences of other staff within the academy that did not pass their own “tests”. As he explained, “there were four of us [full-time academy staff] at the time and it was split two and two. There was me and Richard who ended up staying and Mike and Jim (pseudonyms) who ended up leaving.” James highlighted the difficulties around the interpersonal relationships with his colleagues within the academy during this period of change:

We [James and Richard] sort of passed the test and got some assurance that we were going to be part of the team and it became clear that they [Mike and Jim] weren’t going to be. Obviously, we were in the same office so it was a bit tense. There was one afternoon where Richard and me got invited to go down and play 5-a-side with the 1st Team Manager and all the staff and the Chairman, but they didn’t ask Mike and Jim. So there were alarm bells ringing for them. But you’re thinking, “we have to go with the flow a little bit and look after ourselves in terms of keeping our job”.

Again, the choice made by James to take part in the 5-a-side game represents the actions, strategies and tactics^{1,2,3,27} he employed, with the rationale of doing what he had to do to keep his job. James went on to elaborate this point:

It was horrible really; these are your work mates who you work with every day, you build relationships with them. It got to a point where you had to back the winning horse and go with that one. We had discussions about it in the office at the time and Jim just said “that’s football, that’s the way it is. Just do what you have to do”.

Similar actions and strategies have been highlighted elsewhere as micro-political actions that sports coaches, have used in an attempt to maintain and advance their employment, particularly within the culture of football.^{1,2,3,4} James further explained the rationale behind his tactic of “backing the winning horse” in the following manner:

I think for Richard and me we probably realised each other’s strengths and realised that we were better together than apart, if that makes sense. He struggled with certain things and I’d help him because it suited me better. For example, the EPPP audit was coming up and getting everything sorted for that lent itself to my skills really. The other two [Jim and Mike] were like “these two are teaming up together”. It wasn’t like that, but obviously you can see why.

In relation to the *professional interests* outlined by Kelchtermans and Ballet,²⁶ James’ decision to “back the winning horse” positively affected his *social-professional interests*. Specifically, Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ found that “several respondents told

how they silently endured negative situations because the risk of troubled relationships with colleagues was not outweighed by the potential gains of improved working conditions” (p. 115). In the context of James’ story, his decision to sacrifice elements of his personal relationship with Mike and Jim was outweighed by his desire to maintain his position within the club. James’ decision to take such action was vindicated, as he explained:

Mike and Jim lost their jobs and then George [Jim’s replacement as Youth Team Manager] came in. George had come in and he was chosen by the manager so you’re thinking “I probably need to be in with this person and make sure I make a good impression on this person because he’s got the manager’s ear”. So there was that period where you were trying to form a positive relationship with George. I’ve been lucky with George in that he’s been bringing his lad down to train with the team that I’ve been mostly involved with in my department. So he’s seen me work first hand, and it seems to have made a good impression on him.

James’ strategy of forming a positive working relationship with someone who “has the manager’s ear” demonstrates the social nature of professional interests. Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ state, “*social-professional interests* often appear to weigh more heavily in decisions than other interests” (p. 115). Indeed, the analytical power of the greater understanding the importance of *professional self-interests* has significantly improved our understanding of the motivations that underpin the actions and strategies of football coaches in dynamic and complex environments to secure and advance their employment.¹⁻⁴

You want to be a part of it

After changes within the staff at the football club were made, changes to procedures and formal tasks began to take place, affecting James' *organisational interests*.²⁶ Specifically, as James discussed, "the technical board meetings that happened prior to the change would just consist of the Academy Manager and Youth Team Manager going off with the 1st Team Manager and they would come back and you weren't told anything. Whereas now, we're all involved." James outlined the positive effect that the above changes to procedures and tasks had, not only on James' *organisational interests*, but also on the manner in which he now perceived his role:

It's having that responsibility and being a part of something and that you're needed, I suppose. The feeling around the place at the time was that you wanted to be a part of it and a lot of the stuff needed doing required me to be at these meetings and that was good. You got more ownership, I suppose. You feel a part of something and you're about it a little bit more and you want to do a good job because it's a reflection on yourself in how well you're doing your job. You felt a part of something that was moving forward so to be able to contribute to it was really good.

Previous work has highlighted that value of discussing the interrelated nature of "professional interests" simultaneously as opposed to in isolation.²⁶ This is evident as the changes to the *organisational interests* indicated above positively affected James' self-interests "and in particular their self-esteem and task perception" (Kelchtermans and Ballet,²⁶ p. 110). Furthermore, James highlighted the change in *cultural-ideological*

interests and the “norms, values and ideals” (Kelchtermans and Ballet,²⁶ p. 114) within the football club. James explained:

The 1st Team Manager and the Chairman are very demanding of everybody so I don't think anybody would be allowed to become comfortable or complacent because you get found out straight away because there is that much scrutiny placed on the academy. When we go to the Football League meetings, people are amazed at how much attention we get from above. When you first come into it you have ideas about it all being about development. But going through that initial period of change and seeing what a football environment is like at that time, and you sort of go from being a player-centred coach to a coach-centred coach because I want my teams to do well because that reflects on me. So people will then be going “who's the coach?” I'm not trying to come across as selfish or say that it is all about me, but you do realise and learn about the environment then you have got to be like that if you want to get on.

Indeed, such a sense of organisational socialisation is increasingly apparent within the sports coaching literature (i.e. learning how to behave within the context). The micro-political frameworks utilised here, and elsewhere, have started to further explain the motivations, actions and strategies of sports coaches working politically to survive and thrive within highly competitive and complex coaching contexts.¹⁻⁴ That is, the often espoused task perception of working within a professional football academy to develop individual players may be sacrificed for compliance to align with *cultural-ideological interests* (i.e. winning football matches), in an attempt to cope with employment vulnerability.²⁸

Managing the gaffer

James explained that central to maintaining and further promoting his position within the academy was the relationship that he developed with the 1st Team Manager through a range of micro-political actions. James gave this example:

It's probably reading what he is about, what he wants, what type of person he is. He wants your opinion on stuff. Initially you were a bit nervous and you just say what he wants to hear. But as you get to know what he's about, he wants your honest opinion. He has asked me questions and I've gone back with what I think rather than what he wants to hear, and he's gone "why don't you speak to me like this all the time?"

The above example highlights the development of James' micro-political repertoire in reading the 1st Team Manager and James' perceptions of the 1st Team Manager's behaviours and actions. Furthermore, James conveyed other instances that have aided the development of his micro-political literacy:

There have also been occasions where I've been honest in meetings after he has criticised the academy and I've defended us. You can tell that others in the room are agreeing with you but not saying anything. There has been a time where I think I have been punished for what I've said. There was one particular time where I booked games against Milton [pseudonym] on the Saturday for my teams and everyone was well aware of it. But there was a daft event going on at the training ground and he made me stay to look after the event and lock up

where there were loads of others he could have asked. It was one of them, but the way it was at the time after that meeting, it was a little bit like, “I’m the boss, don’t question my authority or this is what happens”. The fact that there was other people in the meeting ... if it’s one-to-one between the two of you it’s like he’ll be happy to take your opinion but if it’s in front of people, he can’t be seen to be shot down by someone like me. So it’s about understanding the hierarchy and what they want in certain situations.

James’ discussions here demonstrate *the knowledge aspect* of micro-political literacy in that James began to interpret and understand the micro-political character of the situation and what the 1st Team Manager wanted in different circumstances.³¹ Subsequently, James developed an instrumental and operational repertoire of actions and strategies to proactively or reactively “tell the gaffer what he wants to hear” or give the 1st Team Manager his “honest opinion”. Finally, James reflected on the experiential aspect of his micro-political repertoire and the “degree of satisfaction” he felt about his repertoire by stating that “I have developed the confidence over time, though I wouldn’t have said it in those initial periods.”

The new training ground

Finally, James discussed the improved *material interests* brought about the managerial and organisational changes and subsequently the move to the new training ground.

James stated:

Being here has brought a higher level of professionalism I suppose. For one, I think Alder FC from the outside is an attractive place to work and people see

Alder's academy as one that is improving all the time. It's attractive for people who want to be in football to come and work. Beforehand, everyone's opinion of Alder FC was that we're the lowest of the low, the teams aren't very good, and the facilities aren't the best. Now, I think we're held in quite high regard with people. When people visit, they expect a certain level of professionalism and we have to match that.

Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶ identified that it is important to understand material issues from their symbolic meaning in the organisational context. The move to the new training ground and the improvement of material aspects of the football club have influenced the change in *cultural-ideological interests* brought about by the "higher level of professionalism". The use of visibility as a political strategy to "advertise" professional competence ensured that James met the new levels of professionalism.²⁸ Specifically, James highlighted that "it provided me with the opportunity to step up and take things on and contribute more than I had before. So, the more responsibility and people saying, 'James can you do this for us', or 'James any chance you could help me with this?' was good for me at that point."

James reflected on the improvement in material aspects of the organisation and how this affected his self-interests in terms of his self-esteem and identity,²⁶⁻²⁸ as a coach working within professional football and his "future prospects".

It was always ... probably before all the change, Alder FC was always a stepping-stone ... do what you need to do, but you're always looking to move on and do something else. But then you suddenly started thinking, "well actually, this place is going somewhere, I wanna be a part of it". So that was the

main difference, you were thinking, “I’m really gonna apply myself here and do a good job and be a part of something moving upwards.”

Conclusion

In an attempt to address the aim of this paper and the subsequent research questions posed to examine organisational change within professional youth football, this study provided novel and rich empirical insights into how the participant coach negotiated the relational social complexities of the change process. Specifically, the participant highlighted how others acted towards him and how he then acted towards others during the change process. During this period, James’s central concern was his *professional self-interests* (i.e. to maintain his employment and enhance his professional progression), which drove his motivations, actions and strategies in the workplace.

Importantly, for the first time, this research project has provided rich empirical and theoretically informed insights into the importance of understanding *professional self-interests*, and the specific actions, strategies and tactics utilised during the process of organisational change in professional football. For example, James engaged in additional social activities with new senior members of staff such as 5-a-side football games and informal conversations, ensured his own staff were “onside,” and created a *social distance* from existing staff who he perceived as being viewed in an unfavourable light. Whilst we are not suggesting that these strategies were the only courses of action available to James, or the best courses of action, the findings of this work highlight how James used these approaches to successfully manoeuvre himself in a way that protected his *professional self-interests*. Such findings add to the existing work¹⁻⁴ that has started to provide much needed rich empirical insight into the social complexities and micro-political realities of semi-professional and professional football coaching

environments, characterised by structural vulnerability, with coaches and key stakeholders working in conflict with contradictory personal agendas. Specifically, the present study furthers our empirical and theoretical understanding of the effects of *professional interests* upon the actions and strategies of a professional football coach during a period of organisational change.^{25–28}

In further support of previous findings within the field,^{1–3} we propose that the ability to develop micro-political literacy and a repertoire of micro-political actions, strategies and tactics would benefit coaches working within professional football during such periods of instability and change. Specifically, coaches should consider, and be able to answer, the following four interrelated questions: (1) Who are the key individuals and groups that influence your practice, environment, resources, employment, reward, retention and progression? (2) How do these individuals and groups view your competence, capability and role performance? (3) What are the best ways of positively influencing these key individuals and groups to align with your *professional self-interests* to reduce vulnerability and increase progression in the coaching workplace? and (4) From an ethical perspective, what are the consequences of the actions, strategies and tactics that you have chosen to employ within your context?³² Once coaches are better able to clearly analyse, understand and articulate the coaching workplace (i.e. the development of micro-political literacy), their own actions, strategies and tactics may be developed to align with their career goals. Furthermore, in an attempt to develop micro-political literacy, Gibson and Groom⁴ suggested that such findings may be developed into a problem-based learning approach to support the education of practitioners and assist them in dealing with the complexity of organisational change and organisational life in sport.

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Table 1. Key social actors with Alder FC Academy

Key Actors	Organisational Role Within Alder FC Academy¹
Richard	Academy Manager ²
George Coach	Head of Professional Development Phase (PDP) ³ and U18s
John	Head of Youth Development Phase (YDP) ⁴ and U13s Coach
James	Head of Foundation Phase (FP) ⁵ and U11s Coach
Ian	Academy Coach U12s (FP) ⁵
Luke	Academy Coach U16s (YDP) ⁴

Notes

¹ Within the Youth Development Rules, an Academy is an establishment for the coaching and education of Academy Players operated by a Club in accordance with the requirements of the rules of the Professional Game Board of the Football Association (PGB).

² Within this structure, the Academy Manager is the person responsible for the strategic leadership and operation of a Club's Academy. An Academy Player is a male player (other than an Amateur Player or a Trialist) who is in an age group between Under 9 and Under 21 and who is registered for and who is coached by or plays football for or at a Club which operates an Academy.

³ Professional Development Phase (PDP) players aged 17–21 years of age.

⁴ Youth Development Phase (YDP) players aged 13–16 years of age.

⁵ Foundation Phase (FP) players aged 6–12 years of age.

⁶ Under the Youth Development Rules, each club is required to prepare a Coaching Programme that states (a) the Club's Football Philosophy, (b) the Club's Academy Performance Plan, and (c) the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which stipulates the minimum hours of coaching across each level in the Academy.

Table 2. Minimum hours of coaching to be delivered by Academies each week to Academy Players within the EPPP Category system

Coaching hours per week by EPPP Category	Foundation Phase (Players aged 6–12 years of age)	Youth Development Phase (Players aged 13–16 years of age)	Professional Development Phase (Players aged 17–21 years of age)
Category 1	4 rising to 8 for older Academy Players	10 rising to 12 for older Academy Players	14 reducing to 12 for Academy Players who have commitments to the professional squad during the Professional Development Phase
Category 2	3 rising to 5 for older Academy Players	6 rising to 12 for older Academy Players	14 reducing to 12 for Academy Players who have commitments to the professional squad during the Professional Development Phase
Category 3	3	4 rising to 6 for older Academy Players	12
Category 4	N/A	N/A	14 reducing to 12 for Academy Players who have commitments to the professional squad during the Professional Development Phase Games Programmes

Table 3. ‘Professional self-interests’ categories as defined by Kelchtermans and Ballet²⁶

Categories	Definition
Self-interests	Issues of professional identity and its social recognition
Material interests	Availability of and access to teaching materials, funds, infrastructure and structural time facilities
Organisational interests	Issues concerning roles, positions or formal tasks in the school as an organisation
Cultural-ideological interests	Normative values and ideals about ‘good’ teaching in the school
Social-professional interests	Issues on the quality of interpersonal relations within the school