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“You never played the game so what do you know?”: An exploration of the lived experiences of British South Asians in management and governance positions in English football

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ABSTRACT

Rationale: This paper aims to critically explore the lived experiences of British South Asian people working in managerial and governance positions in English football; critique cultures of Whiteness in football; consider ways to resist/challenge racism in football; and offer data-informed recommendations to help increase British South Asian representation in leadership positions across football.

Methodology: This research draws on the testimonies of 21 British South Asian leaders working in English football (5 women and 16 men).

Findings: Participants used racialised performances to “fit in”; commonly encountered racist “banter”, microaggressions and microinsults; and routinely experienced examples of implicit and explicit “othering”.

Practical Implications: Stakeholders and policy makers must commit to the (1) development of inclusive and diverse recruitment strategies; (2) supporting minoritised ethnic staff members through programmes such as mentoring schemes; (3) implementation of mandatory race equity education for the workforce.

Research Contribution: While British South Asian experiences as players, and to some extent coaches, have been captured, the experiences of British South Asians in managerial and governance positions have been overlooked. This article treads new ground by highlighting experiences in off-field roles, thus adding to the wider body of work.

Originality: This work has used new and original data to cultivate a series of measures designed to boost the recruitment, retention and progression of British South Asian people working in English football.

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1. Introduction

On 17th January 2023, former Crawley Town manager John Yems was found guilty of 11 charges of discriminatory conduct (MacInnes, 2023). An independent panel was commissioned to assess the charges brought by the Football Association (FA) that related to Yems’ use of racist rhetoric at Crawley Town between 2019 and 2022. Yems’ charges included repeatedly labelling Muslim players “terrorists” and using the “n-word”. Although banned from football for 18 months, the written reasons produced by the King’s

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Council who chaired the panel, determined that Yems was "not consciously racist". This bizarre finding equipped Yems with some ammunition to repudiate the ban. Indeed, in the days following the ban, Yems appeared on TalkSport radio, seemingly playing the victim, and demanding an apology for the attack on his character (Fordham, 2023). By being described as "not consciously racist", Yems attempted to absolve himself of any wrongdoing. Cases like this clearly help expose problematic organisational cultures and institutional failings around racialised forms of discrimination within football. Moreover, verdicts such as this will likely deter future whistle-blowers from speaking out against discrimination and/or sharing their lived experiences.

The lived experiences, and exclusion, of British South Asian men/boy's footballers (Bains & Patel, 1996; Burdsey, 2004; 2007; Farooq, 2011; Johal, 2001; Kilvington, 2013; 2016) women/girl's footballers (Ahmed, 2011; Kilvington, 2016; Ratna, 2007; 2010; 2011; 2013), and fans (Burdsey & Randhawa, 2012; Kilvington, 2016; 2017; Ratna, 2014) have been investigated. Similarly, off the pitch, concerningly low levels of representation also persist in coaching and management positions (Bradbury, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2021; Kilvington, 2018). A British South Asian person has never managed in English professional football while there are only three holders of the highest coaching award, the UEFA Pro-License, from a British South Asian background (Kilvington, 2018). Cleland and Cashmore (2011, p. 1606) use a circus metaphor to help articulate this absence. They argue how minoritised ethnic football communities, largely Black players, tend to be thought about as the main attraction, "like lions, perhaps, but rarely liontamers and never ringmasters". Taken together, this has led to a view that, within football, minoritised ethnic groups are generally fit for playing/doing, but not for organising/leading (Bradbury, 2021). Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its core tenets, including Whiteness and storytelling, allows us to critically grapple with, and make sense of, the social, cultural, political, racial and economic composition of contemporary English football (Fletcher & Hylton, 2016; Hylton, 2010) and cogitate the British South Asian exclusion both on and off the pitch.

English football, in off-field roles, remains predominantly male and "Whitewashed" (Puwar, 2004; Ratna, 2011; Reitman, 2006). The Szymanski Report (2023), which was commissioned by the Black Footballers Partnership (BFP), revealed that although 43% of English Premier League (EPL) players and 34% of English Football League (EFL) players are Black, respectively, only 4.4% of managers are Black, and only 1.6% of executive, leadership and ownership positions are occupied by Black people. When we consider that the British Asian population in England and Wales is more than double that of the Black British population – 9.3% and 4%, respectively – one may expect that British Asian groups may be more visible on and off the field (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

This research treads new ground through its focus on the lived experiences of British South Asian men and women in governance positions within English football. Bradbury et al. (2014) reported that less than 1% of senior governance and operations positions at professional clubs, league associations and national federations across Europe and at the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) are held by minoritised ethnic staff. And, more recently, Sport England (2021) revealed that 93% of board members across Sport England and UK Sport funded bodies are White. Anecdotally, there has been a small rise in the number of British South Asian people working at managerial, administration and governance levels of English football. However, academic research has, to date, qualitatively and quantitatively overlooked the experiences of British South Asians in senior governance and managerial roles. Therefore, this article will be the first to do so. This research aims to: (1) critically explore the lived experiences of British South Asian people in managerial and governance positions in football; (2) provide an overview, and critique of, the cultures of Whiteness embedded in the football system; (3) highlight strategies to resist/challenge racism within football and (4) propose a series of data-informed recommendations focusing on race equity to help increase British South Asian representation and inclusion in leadership positions.

2. Critical race theory

There has been a noticeable development in the application of CRT to sport, physical education and leisure – in particular the study of Whiteness and White privilege (Burdsey, 2011a; Carrington et al., 2016; Fletcher & Hylton, 2016, 2018; Hylton, 2010; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Lawrence, 2016; Lawrence & Davis, 2019). CRT has been used by sport and leisure scholars to apply a new lexicon to the study of racialised relations in sport and leisure arenas. CRT encourages scholars to consider their approaches to the sociology of sport and asks simple but vital questions such as "has 'race' been considered in this context?", and "whose knowledge and experiences are valued in these exchanges?". CRT is therefore "a critical framework through which to examine and explain the pervasiveness and character of racism(s) across and within social institutions" (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022, p. 2). Rollock and Gillborn (2011, p. 2–5), who acknowledge its flexibility, note that CRT and CRT-related scholarship shares several characteristics and common themes: (a) an agreement that racism is pervasive; (b) an understanding that White supremacy and systems of Whiteness, privilege White people while simultaneously subordinating minoritised ethnic groups; (c) a belief that minoritised ethnic groups and/or voices should be privileged in scholarship; (d) an understanding that positive transformations in racial equality are largely enacted when there is an interest convergence with those occupying dominant discourses of Whiteness and (e) a recognition that intersectionality enables a deeper understanding of inequality. In sum, the goal of CRT is to challenge these dominant racial ideologies, promote social justice and transformation, and eschew disciplinary structures through transdisciplinarity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

Operationalising Whiteness as an analytical modality, and specifically Feagin's (2006) notion of the White racial frame, builds on CRT inasmuch as it understands how minoritised groups are imagined within White dominated spaces such as football. The White racial frame "refers to Whites' collective memories and histories" and has "long included not only negative racial images, stereotypes, emotions, and interpretations, but also distinctive language and imaging tools to describe and enforce the racial hierarchy" (Kilvington, 2019, pp. 143–144). Systemic racism foregrounds myriad ways that "White-controlled material conditions and White-dominated structures constantly generate, reproduce and utilize pervasive racial meanings and understandings central to the dominant White racial frame" (Feagin & Elias, 2013, p. 945). The racialised, and often problematic, framing of minoritised ethnic groups within the system of Whiteness works to place White people atop of racialised hierarchies, while also rendering racism invisible (Feagin, 2006; Lusted, 2009; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). The pervasiveness of the system is such that it allows the likes of John Yems to negate blame, while the recipients endure racial microaggressions, and racist bullying.

3. Whiteness, racialised performances and football culture

As we have noted, Whiteness – and the simultaneous privileging of White people and exclusion of minoritised ethnic people, is a critical tenet of CRT. In order to refine our theoretical framework for this paper we follow Patel

(2017, p. 16) who states that "Whiteness refers not simply to phenotypical characteristics and origin, but rather represents complex structures of power, entitlement and status". It epitomises "our way of life" and dichotomises "us" and "them". Dyer (1997, p. 9) argues that, across Western liberal democracies, Whiteness is the norm and White people are often deemed to be unraced which in terms of its social value becomes "a hidden privilege". This White supremacy privileges White people in a football context too. If we adopt McIntosh's (1989) metaphor of Whiteness operating as an invisible knapsack, full of privilege, within a footballing context, we can see how Whiteness enables White people to, among other things, walk into a stadium or meeting room without being met with suspicion or surprise (Bradbury, 2018, 2021; Bradbury, 2018; Kilvington, 2018); offer opinions without speaking on behalf of an entire ethnic or religious group (Hylton, 2008); and share football insights without having one's knowledge or credentials questioned (Bradbury, 2018; Kilvington, 2016, 2018).

As a result, football, as a cultural field, which is overwhelmingly governed by rules and rituals, racialised as White and male, leads to historically underrepresented groups offering "racialised performances" to "fit in" (King, 2004, p. 19). Puwar (2004), for instance, posits that such is the pressure in predominantly White spaces to adhere to dominant racialised discourse, the performance of Whiteness is a necessary strategy for navigating the everyday challenge of being in the constructed ethnic minority. Nayak (2006, p. 426) explains, "race is something that we "do" rather than who we are, it is a performance that can only ever give illusion to the reality it purports". Inherent to Nayak's understanding of "race", racial identity and racialised processes is Butler's (1993, p. 12) notion of performativity, which she defines as "not a singular "act", for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition". In other words, performativity is the perpetual repetition, reproduction and re-enactment of dominant discourse which serves, paradoxically, to conceal the fictiveness of social identities, such as "race" and gender.

Nayak (2005, p. 153) sees the performance of Whiteness as a process of (dis)embodiment in the sense that "doing" it "involves an intrinsically different body schema than those adopted by African Caribbean or Asian" people. This is not a simple allusion to skin colour; rather, it is a reference to a way of conducting, acting, dressing, speaking – effectively, *being* and *living* – with and through a racialised body. Puwar (2004) furthers this conception and warns that although minoritised ethnic people cannot change their "their bodily appearance, they can change or slowly 'Whitewash' bodily gestures, social interests, value systems and speech patterns". In this way, understanding Whiteness, as performative, constituted points to the possibility that anybody can "do" Whiteness (or Blackness or Asianness, for that matter). And so, for Gillborn (2005, p. 489) "[d]escribing Whiteness as a performance rejects the simplistic assumption that 'Whiteness' and 'White people' are one and the same thing". From this standpoint Whiteness can be likened to a copy without an original since, as there is no White "race", it cannot be permanently tied to bodies that are racialised as White in search of some singular, authentic performance (Foster, 2003).

Recognising that Whiteness is not linked to phenotype enables us to understand how racialised performances are a particularly important feature of White supremacy. That is, because Whiteness can be "done" by any body, if it is performed successfully, certain "deserving" "non-White" bodies can also "cash in" on White privilege. This further helps support the notion of a just and colour-blind society and enables Whiteness, as discourse, to remain allusive and invisible (Foster, 2003). In turn, it acts as a measure of "who is worthy of inclusion in the circle of Whiteness" (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008, p. 68). In the same way, Black and Brown bodies might be included within Whiteness circles, it is also the case some White people refuse to "do" Whiteness. The consequences of not doing Whiteness position those people as "race traitors" (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996).

Performances of racialised identities are thus constantly challenged, inscribed and confirmed and undermined by an individual's involvement in sport and leisure activities, in a myriad of ways, in a plethora of contexts, and by countless different bodies (Fletcher et al., 2023). This serves, once again, to reveal further that there is no correct, authentic way or "doer" of Whiteness/Blackness, only differing bodies' reiterations, and interpretations of the racialised discourses they associate with it. Such a view is reminiscent of Fanon's (1986[1967]) conceptualisation of the "White mask". Fanon conceived that for Black and minoritised ethnic people to succeed in areas of life dominated by White people they have to adapt their image, behaviour, language and culture to better reflect those of the White majority.

4. Methodology

We were interested in exploring the lived experiences of British South Asian people who occupy positions in management and governance across the football industry. Before we outline our methodological procedures, it is important to illustrate that, throughout this research, "the football industry" is being defined as a collective of private and charitable organisations, of varying magnitude and turnover, including the County FAs, national FA as well as professional clubs from across the English Premier League (EPL), English Football League (EFL) and Women's Super League (WSL). Further inclusion criteria used to identify suitable participants were provided by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification system (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This meant that only those people who were, or who had been employed, in "lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations" and/or in "higher managerial and professional occupations" within football were suitable for interview. In a football context, then, the former refers to, for instance, specialist managers with line management responsibility and/or input at the executive board level in, for example, marketing, human resources, commercial, community, player/coach development and recruitment, legal and medical departments, while the latter includes executive and non-executive members of boards of directors at county level, national governing bodies and professional clubs.

The empirical data utilised in this article derives from 21 semi-structured interviews with British South Asian participants. We used these interviews as a critical space to allow participants to tell their stories on their terms. Delgado (1995, p.xiv) illustrates the power of storytelling as it provides a platform to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down". For Singer (2005, p. 370), these oral testimonies help us to "uproot the dysconscious racism or uncritical and distorted ways of thinking about race that have led to tacit acceptance of the dominant White norms and privileges". Over time, strong and persuasive arguments for change emerge out of the weight of evidence from mutual narratives. Simply put, counter-stories can inform positive transformation in racial equality.

We gathered approximately 36 h of recorded testimony from five women and 16 men, all of whom identified as British South Asian, and actively claimed a birth and/or historical familial link to the countries of South Asia. All of the participants were granted anonymity, but details such as their role, years of involvement in the football industry, and ethnicity are

Table 1. Research sample.

Interviewee number	Role	Years in the football industry	Ethnicity (self-ascribed)	Gender
1	EDI professional and former professional player	25	British Asian, Bangladeshi, mixed heritage	M
2	Governance, professional football club	37	Indian Punjabi	F
3	EDI professional, County FA	13	Indian Punjabi Sikh	M
4	EDI professional, PFA	12	Pakistani Muslim	M
5	EDI professional, The FA	25+	Muslim South Asian	M
6	EDI professional, The FA	7	Mixed race	M
7	EDI professional, The FA	5	Sikh Indian British	M
8	FA employee	18	British Indian	F
9	EDI consultant	27	British Asian Indian Sikh	M
10	EDI professional, professional football club	18	Asian British	M
11	Sports lawyer	13	Indian Punjabi Sikh	M
12	Leader of football charity and professional football club Board member	9	Indian	F
13	EDI professional and board member, professional football club	5	British Asian	F
14	Professional football club Board member	6	British Indian	M
15	Leader of equalities sport charity	14	Sikh British	M
16	EDI advisor, The FA	18	British Indian Muslim	M
17	EDI professional for football charity	20	South Asian	M
18	FA Board member	5	Asian	F
19	EDI professional, equalities organisation	3	British Asian	M
20	Medical professional, professional football club	7	Indian Punjabi Sikh	M
21	EDI professional, professional football club	25+	Asian British	M

included in Table 1. We are aware there is a gender imbalance in our sample, however, this is reflective of the small number of British South Asian women meeting our inclusion criteria, which is a finding in and of itself. It is also worth pointing out that despite utilising a snowball sampling approach, in order to prevent the sample from being simply reflective of the personal and professional contacts known to the research team, 14 out of the 21 interviewees work within equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). To some extent, this is because the research team itself works primarily within social justice in football, as well as other sports, and thus the initial participants contacted were predominantly situated in an EDI role. And, as one might expect, those working in EDI in football are more likely to nominate other interviewees that work in a similar capacity. As a result, our sample may include an over-representation of British South Asian people working specifically within football-related EDI roles. Yet, participant 15, who reflects on the ethnic backgrounds of people working in EDI in football, said: “More often than not, the EDI leads are not White, male and middle-class”, suggesting that EDI is a space where ethnic, gender and class diversity thrives. Nonetheless, no study has documented which off-field sectors are the most, or least, diverse in English football. It would be remiss not to acknowledge therefore, that our sample includes an over-representation of participants working in a particular facet of football leadership. It is coincidental that, in occupying these roles, these participants are likely to have a heightened awareness and understanding of systemic racism, racial micro-aggressions, and racialised stereotyping, compared to those working in other leadership roles. That being said, during the interviews, many similar experiences and reflections were recounted by participants, regardless of their role and, indeed, ethnic background; although British South Asian women in the sample often described another layer of gender-based disadvantage.

The data were collected over a period of six months in 2020 and spanned several lockdown periods and a variety of restrictions imposed by the UK government. The interviews were generally between 60 and 90 min long, recorded via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and transcribed verbatim. The research team then conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts, sharing emerging codes between the team. This allowed the team to identify and create themes "through careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). Cleland et al. (2019, p. 132) add that "Themes are often identified if there is reoccurring content across data sets (the data sets share common characteristics), or more simply when it captures something important in relation to the research question". Thematic analysis is flexible and can be either inductive or deductive with the research team adopting the latter approach as the analysis was informed/guided through the lens of CRT, and with a critical understanding of the Whiteness that engulfs "the football industry".

An important methodological and epistemological consideration was that the research team consisted of White men researchers (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022); thus, regardless of how results were analysed and presented, it would be White men researchers doing this. To account for this, we worked with contacts across the football industry and with charitable organisations specialising in race/ethnicity in sport, to identify and access our sample. Hence, despite the aforementioned critiques of our sample, we opted for a snowball approach for three reasons: (1) to empower our participants to shape the research via the inclusion of those voices and people our interviewees believed should be heard and represented; (2) to ensure the sample went beyond the research team's immediate professional networks and (3) given the lack of available data documenting ethnic diversity across football, snowball sampling was key in enabling us to be sure that we had gathered a purposive and meaningful sample of voices at the point when the same recommendations for interviews were forthcoming from our participants. At this point, and at the point where no new themes were emerging, theoretical saturation had been reached and the data generation phase ceased.

In order to analyse data, a deductive approach was taken to thematic analysis, and CRT was employed as a guiding analytical framework. Adopting a framework pioneered by people of colour proved a useful way to account for the researchers' Whiteness (Fletcher, 2014; Lawrence & Hylton, 2022). CRT also inspired a further co-production stage for the research; the intention of which was to reveal preliminary findings to a purposively constructed audience via Zoom. This approach very much follows Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2021, pp. 465–466) who note:

> The challenge is to stand back and suspend researcher assumptions, and in turn, this leads to the co-creation of research findings that in some way enables the agency of the researched, rather than the over-determination of the researcher. It is thus through *critically*, "not knowing", that produces ways of knowing.

The event was advertised publicly and, given data generation took place amid the COVID 19 pandemic, took place online. Delegates were required to register in advance, which allowed the researchers to authorise and control those who joined the event; thus entry was permitted only to those people who had a personal, academic or professional interest in "race" equality work. The audience was, therefore, suitably positioned and actively encouraged to be critical of our findings. After a short presentation of preliminary findings, each researcher then led breakout groups of no more than five people to record reactions to the emergent themes and how we presented them. Notes from each breakout group were then collated and used to further shape and inform the research findings, analysis and the staging of data.

The interviews, alongside our online event, were not only enlightening, informative and rich with detail, but they also showcased common experiences which can be used to challenge master-narratives and help inform/build inclusive, welcoming and belonging organisational cultures. There were 15 overarching themes in total. The key themes, which most appropriately and accurately speak to the aim and purpose of this paper, are as follows: (1) behind the mask; (2) banter, microaggressions and microinsults; (3) the outsider within: the limits of racialised performance.

4.1. Behind the mask

One of the primary ways through which racialised organisations construct racial hierarchies and exclusions is by operationalising Whiteness as a resource that provides "access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies and expanding White agency" (Ray, 2019, p. 41). As Puwar (2004) states "Whitewashing" one's presentation not only facilitates entry it also enables progression too. Reitman (2006), in her examination of White workspaces argues similarly that Whitewashing simultaneously denies race and superimposes culture(s) racialised as White. The Whitewashed workplace, she argues, like a Whitewashed wall, is seen as colourless. Lind (2019, p. 4), however, argues that "we are never truly one thing". It is paramount that British South Asian identities must be understood in a nuanced fashion:

> There's a distinct difference between a Punjabi Sikh and a Muslim for example, and I think even as Muslims we've got Pakistanis, we've got Bengalis, we've got Indians and they are all Muslims. So distinctly there's different cultures within them, that only comes though if you start with South Asian and then you ask further questions and then you unpick the journeys of the people that you are working with. Then you'll understand that, and then it becomes even more nuanced. And then you need to contextualise the backgrounds that they come from and understand their experiences within football from that point. (Participant 5)

This complexity contributes to a rich tapestry of South Asian diasporas, each with unique stories, traditions and cultures. Yet, British South Asian people constantly have to negotiate a system of Whiteness and essentialist frameworks designed to reduce such complex identities to narrow frames of being. In line with Saeed's (2003) supposition that South Asian people are frequently conflated as Muslim within the British context, some of the non-Muslim participants in this research commented that they would be asked about Islam, or wished a happy Eid Mubarak, exposing the perceived religious homogeneity of British South Asian identities.

Participant 11's oral testimony, which is worth quoting at length, demonstrates how he often feels conflicted when displaying his true, authentic, cultural self within a system of Whiteness:

> I come from a Punjabi background … we're quite loud, we're quite vivacious, we like to have a good time, we work very hard but we like to have fun as well … we're very warm, hospitable people. If you ever come into our house we treat you like gods; this is our personality, right, and I love that part of our personality and our culture. So when I was negotiating deals [with football stakeholders], sitting at a table and negotiating, there might be a tense situation and I might crack a joke, nothing contentious, nothing at anyone or against anyone, but just something to kind of ease the tension in the room, and bizarrely, whenever I would do that, and bring out my own personality, my own people [colleagues] would respond really awkwardly to that. But they're not understanding what I'm trying to do in that situation to help us. For them, it's like: 'This is not the way it's done', you know, 'This is a very serious situation, we're not cracking jokes'. So I think the culture they have is very set, it's what everyone understands and if you come and bring something else in, even if it is a positive, it's misunderstood, and that basically then reflects badly on this person. But, look at my CV, right, you don't get to negotiate deals worth billions of dollars if you're a joke!

Participant 11 often feels conflicted in professional (White) environments because he perceives that his ability to articulate his Punjabi cultural identity - his true self - is being held back by a culture of Whiteness. He continues, noting that in order to progress, he has to play the "expected" role. Whitewashing further resonates with participant 7, who often "code switches" (see Lo, 1999; Molinsky, 2007) and adapts his communication styles depending on who he is speaking with:

> at times I've probably diluted my personality … you have to flex your communication style in order to suit the environment you are working in. (Participant 7)

In similar research, this has resulted in some British South Asians working in sport feeling as though they are "caught between two cultures" (Burdsey, 2007, p. 24). This was also typified in our research by participant 9:

> In the Indian culture, to look someone in the eyes is seen as rude, you have to respect authority … if I was speaking to someone elderly I'd look down, I wouldn't stare at them and so culturally I'm navigating two sort of cultures [in football].

Participants shared stories of downplaying their "Asianness" to better conform to the White male-dominated culture, rules and rituals associated with the football industry. Returning to Fanon (1986[1967], p. 12) and the "White mask" is pertinent here, whereby he argues that: "for the black man there is one destiny. And it is White". That is because offering a "racialised performance" in which "othered" identities are muted or suppressed, Whiteness prevails, coercing minoritised ethnic groups to "pass" as White (see Bell, 2009; Rottenberg, 2004). In their attempts to "pass", minoritised ethnic groups are often placed in difficult and uncomfortable positions in how they responded to racism. Participant 9 felt he had been complicit in racism directed at himself and other South Asian colleagues:

> I was agreeing with [racist comments] in boardroom meetings and they'd say certain things, certain cultures do this and that and I was agreeing with it.

Founding CRT theorist Derrick Bell's (2018) concept of "superstanding" is evoked here given participant 9 appears to emote that, despite his achievements and ascendance to the executive board of a professional football club, he is cognisant that his position is contingent upon his acceptance by his White male peers.

Attaining superstanding however, does not protect individuals bestowed with the status from the effects of racist systems. Participant 9 explained that he had never shared these stories before. Recounting these memories was visibly challenging, and the interview had to be paused while they gathered themselves. Upon resuming the interview, they shared their feelings of guilt and spoke of their shame of failing to challenge racist behaviour within the workplace. The participant added that they had even "led the jokes" because they felt it was "the only way to fit in". These examples provide empirical support for the notion that membership and leadership in football is a complex, tiring, and often painful experience.

Indeed, while it would be remiss to deny the existence of hybrid body projects and identities which draw upon multiple racialised discourses (Lawrence, 2019), equally the performance of racialised identities cannot always be assumed to be evidence of a resplendently liberating post-race lingua franca. As with any performance, and as participant 9 demonstrates, it comes at an emotional cost.

Often omitted from post-race theorists' accounts of racialised performativity in which performances of Whiteness are often portrayed as something of a postmodern quirk, or as an act of self-liberation, participant 9's stories detail the more sombre side of racialised performativity. Their analogies of a mask, a reference to Fanon, is not to allude to the essence of who these individuals "really" are, but does document how their performances of Whiteness are a strategy of survival.

4.2. Banter, microaggressions and microinsults

Elite football cultures have a history of marginalising instances of overt racism in its crudest of forms as banter (Burdsey, 2011b) and, as we evidence above, a way of passing in these environments is to refrain from challenging it. For Burdsey, however, racist banter is now most commonly experienced, not as crude and bigoted, but as subtle, and often unintentional, in the form of racial "micro-aggressions" and/or "micro-insults". While the former is understated, often unconscious, and non-verbal, the latter is characterised as an insensitivity that diminishes the racial heritage or identity of a person. Either way, this so-called banter often evokes "mitigation strategies", which refer to the processes through which individuals "seek simultaneously to downplay or deny incidences of racism and to exonerate those accused of engaging in such acts (whether that be themselves or others)" (Burdsey, 2011b, p. 268). Racist banter is often articulated through humour (see Black, 2021). Indeed, navigating the inevitable racist "joke" was a key aspect of how participants negotiated, resisted and performed Whiteness in executive cultures. This comment from participant 9 is illustrative:

> We had an Asian Muslim lad working with us. We went on a day out for the football club and it was at the dogs. One of the dogs was called Bomber, and a staff member went up to the Muslim lad and said: "I take it you'll be putting money down for him, for Bomber?" He came up to me and said: "You're not going to believe what she just said to me?". He told the Commercial Director, who had a word with this lady and she denied it and said it wasn't racist, and just a bit of fun.

Feagin and Vera's (1995) discussion of "sincere fictions" is pertinent here. They refer to processes through which individuals harbour a societal view which refutes racism and positions themselves as non-racist, while simultaneously engaging in performances that maintain racism. In maintaining the fiction of a mythical post-racial world, those who challenge, or who offer counter fictions, are often viewed to be "too sensitive", or unable to "take a joke" (Black, 2021). Participant 12 provides an example of the subtlety of this racist "banter":

> There are things that happen that often fall under banter … I think they are micro-aggressions and they frustrate me because it's that layer of disadvantage … I'm extremely passionate, especially when I speak about things that I care about. I get told a lot when I'm in the middle of a passionate rant or conversation that "Oh it's so funny, your accent gets really Indian when you get excited" and that happens to me all the time, I'm right in the middle of arguing my point, what do you think that is going to do to my point (?) because immediately I stop and I'm like "Right, okay, where was I?". That is a micro-aggression.

The casual "othering" of British South Asians serves as a stark reminder of their marginalised position in systems racialised as White (Ray, 2019). Although the lived experience, as recounted by participant 12 above, may at first appear non-threatening, convivial, even jovial, their "Indian" heritage is marked out as different; a subtle form of denigration and exclusion. The interaction is undeniably a microaggression, and was recognised as such. Other participants reflected on the microaggressions they had encountered. Participant 14, for example, notes that he is commonly praised for being "good with numbers" – a quality that is attributed to his Indian heritage, as opposed to having worked hard to have a professional background in banking. Participant 19 commented that they often feel their knowledge of football is judged and scrutinised more aggressively compared to their White counterparts and, as a result, they avoid sharing what they really think. Crucially however, despite often recognising the existence of microaggressions and racist treatment, some participants spoke of their reluctance and hesitancy to challenge these behaviours and practices:

> If I make a big deal about it (racism) I'm emotional and I'm taking it personally, so you are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Well, I'm not going to say anything, but then if you don't say anything it keeps happening and then it's too late. It's like "why didn't you say it the first ten times it happened?" (Participant 12)

> I'm always worried about being outspoken. (Participant 9)

The former testimony illustrates the internal struggle that minoritised ethnic workers grapple with in the workplace. If racist and micro-aggressive/insulting comments are made and left unchallenged, it contributes to a perception that they are acceptable. Challenging comments, and the workplace culture, retrospectively place minoritised ethnic individuals in a precarious and uncomfortable position. Such precarity was further exacerbated because of gender inequality too. Participant 12, a British Indian woman, spoke about how, when she speaks out about issues that matter to her, she is often referred to by her male counterparts as "emotional" and "sensitive" – descriptions she finds disrespectful and delegitimising. Unsurprisingly, this was not something the men in the sample considered or encountered. Within the male-dominated and hyper-masculine realm of men's football, we can see that gender as well as ethnicity plays a role in the suppression of anti-racist action. As the latter interviewee notes, minoritised ethnic people live in fear that speaking out about workforce injustices will contribute to a view that they deviant, troublemakers and not team players. The experiences of participants in this research therefore, illustrate the pervasive Whitewashing of football organisations wherein race is simultaneously denied, through lack of overt discussion and action, and White hegemony superimposed, through enforced adherence to the norms and values of dominant Whiteness discourses (Ray, 2019).

4.3. The outsider within: the limits of racialised performance

Former FA Chairman Greg Clarke faced a backlash, and later resigned after making a series of racialised gaffes during a 2020 parliamentary appearance before MPs on the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee. In addition to referring to minoritised ethnic people as "coloured", he suggested that "different career interests" led South Asian people to choose careers in IT: "you go to the IT department at the FA, there's a lot more South Asians than there are Afro-Caribbean's. They have different career interests" (MacInnes, 2020). For Clarke and others therefore, lack of representation of minoritised ethnic individuals across the industry, and particularly at senior levels, can be understood as either limited interest or underperformance from those groups and individuals, rather than the outcome of a closed and racialised workplace culture. This illustrates how stereotypes can influence the experience of minoritised ethnic individuals and groups inside football.

Our participants' articulation of underrepresentation, however, was very different than Clarke's hypothesis. Participant 14's rebuttal to Clarke is as follows:

> The reason why there aren't Asian people who are investing a lot of time and energy into football, both on the playing side, the coaching side or the administration side is because at the moment it doesn't seem like it's feasible … Asian people know that football is not designed to allow them to succeed in their career there … we know it because we don't see people like us getting big opportunities.

Clarke's comments represent a powerful example of the White racial frame as a worldview that cogitates society based upon racial and ethnic stereotypes, narratives and interpretations (Feagin, 2010). Such views were vehemently rejected in our research. Rather, participants identified patterns of exclusion, which we expand on further below, that went beyond Clarke's contention that British South Asian people were simply mobilising their own agency by not pursuing careers in football governance.

One of the primary ways through which British South Asian people in this research felt excluded was in having their legitimacy in football questioned. Being perceived to lack football knowledge, and/or even a passion for football, was a common experience for our interviewees, and offers a further example of the White racial frame in operation:

> [It's been said] "'Well, you never played the game so what do you know?' Which is true, I've never played the game at the highest level … if I had not been Asian I don't believe that this would have been thrown at me. I did qualifications, I did some FA talent ID qualifications, but none of those seemed to kind of change the perspective of, 'Well you're not from this environment'. I felt that quite regularly". (Participant 14)

Further undermining British South Asian peoples' legitimacy and/or right to, occupy football boardrooms, was persistent, and is what we call here the "Asian-cricket couplet":

> I've met people socially who were in the football network who've gone to me: 'Do you like cricket?' and I'm like 'No, not at all, I've got very little interest in the sport', but I'm mad for football, literally ask me anything about football because I'll know the answer to it. (Participant 10)

> After I'd left [organisation] the rumour that went very quickly around was apparently that I was working in cricket now. I mean how much more stereotypical can you get, right, which is not true at all. I mean, I'd be happy to be working in cricket, but it's not true and I haven't even applied for a role in cricket, so God knows how that started. But in my absence, that's the common conclusion somehow somebody came to and then that spread. (Participant 12)

However, positioning homogenised British South Asian communities as cricket lovers denies progressive generational differences (Fletcher, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2021). For Hylton and Lawrence (2016, p. 2741), such a "frame is … a device to share cultural information in the form of discourses that reinforce subordination and oppression in society".

Utilising very powerful language, Participant 9 added:

> I almost felt subservient to everyone, just to be there, yet I'd look at some of those people and I think: "You can't do half of what I can do".

One of the primary ways through which racialised organisations construct racial hierarchies and exclusions is through positioning Whiteness as a credential "providing access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies and expanding White agency" (Ray, 2019, p. 41). Subtly, often unconsciously, White professionals find it easier to access organisational resources, to have their performances positively rated by managers and clients, to network and make connections with influential peers (Fletcher et al., 2023). In contrast, minoritised ethnic individuals often experience discrimination, which leads to exclusion. One of the primary ways through which British South Asians in this research felt excluded was in having their legitimacy in football questioned. The racialisation and positioning of British South Asians working in football relating to knowledge/experience, cricket and religion provides further reminders of being the "outsider within". This leaves some to feel ostracised in the system and once again demonstrates the normalisation and naturalisation of Whiteness. With greater diversity, however, it is likely that such "othering", micro-aggressions and micro-insults will be reduced.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Using CRT and paying close attention to the racialised performance of Whiteness, this article has illustrated some of the ways in which British South Asian people continue to navigate football's White-dominated managerial and governance spaces. Participants' experiences ranged from subtle "othering", to more overt examples of racism and "racist banter". Language, as well as gestures and looks, serve as frequent reminders of being the "outsider within". Racialised performances, including "code switching" and downplaying one's "Asianness", were thus utilised in an attempt to "fit in" and progress. However, we also uncovered examples of how attempts to fit in placed participants in uncomfortable positions. This was particularly articulated in the context of racist jokes, for instance. Our research therefore builds on other scholarly work (see Bradbury, 2018, 2021; Burdsey, 2006, 2007; Cunningham, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2022; Hylton & Lawrence, 2016; Kilvington, 2016; Love & Hughey, 2015; Regan & Feagin, 2017) which demonstrate the plethora of ways in which minoritised ethnic people experience racial barriers, racial microaggressions and lack of collegiality and support across the sport industry. Ignoring how institutions help to preserve racial harms essentially guarantees that these harms will persist. Ray (2019) argues that it is perhaps safer to assume that organisations are contributing to racial inequality unless there is clear evidence to the contrary. If football is to make progress towards becoming truly inclusive, it is important to acknowledge the racialised nature of the industry and the ways in which Whiteness is taken for granted; marginalising those who do not "fit" and often positioning them as unprofessional and outsiders (Ashcraft, 2013). Acknowledging these problems is a necessary first step, and subsequent efforts will be needed to try and address these structural and symbolic barriers to inclusion. By sharing the voices and lived experiences of British South Asian people working in football's managerial and governance positions, this article provides important evidence for the industry to begin to face up to issues related to racialised inequalities. Informed by these lived experiences, we are able to offer a series of recommendations that have the ability to aid British South Asian inclusion within football's managerial and governance roles, in the critique of Whiteness. These recommendations centre race equity which Rankin-Wright et al. (2019) argue is an often deprioritised area of focus within EDI legislation and practice in sport.

First, football's key stakeholders including the FA, EPL, EFL, WSL, professional clubs, and the like, should commit to *inclusive and diverse recruitment strategies* with a clear focus on helping destabilise racialised networks. This is particularly important considering our participants highlighted that positions were often secured via personal networks. We would suggest searching for talent beyond traditional routes and value potential achievement over university degree classification. Moreover, it is fundamental that selection committees and interview panels are balanced and suitably ethnically diverse to avoid the process of "White-cloning" reproduction (Regan & Feagin, 2017). Bradbury (2018, p. 22) notes that professional football clubs tend to overlook "potentially problematic" minoritised candidates, instead favouring the "safe" White option with whom "club owners and senior executive staff have greater levels of social, cultural and professional familiarity and comfort" with. Ethnically diverse selection panels are thus less likely to make decisions based on centuries old, White-crafted narratives which have been found to disadvantage minoritised ethnic groups within the hiring process (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Finally, an array of studies, not to mention, some participants in this study, concluded that candidates with so-called foreign names are less likely to be called for interviews despite having identical

CV's to their White peers (Adesina & Marocico, 2017). A simple, quick and effective rebuttal to this institutionally racist practice is to introduce processes including open selection, "blind CVs" and other anonymised selection tools for senior roles to the recruitment process to mitigate against forms of racialised bias. The rules, rituals and conventions manifest in hiring and firing are constructed to benefit White people within this system, with racism remaining a hidden and invisible privilege for those who benefit. The above approaches seek to make "race", ethnicity and racism visible - only then can they be addressed. Ensuring there are ethnically diverse panel members on selection committees, for example, seeks to destabilise systems of Whiteness that work to ostracise and omit British South Asian candidates. These policies, practices and processes should be adopted across the football industry, for all roles, at all levels, if Whiteness is to be challenged when recruiting staff.

Second, participants in this research often felt alienated and marginalised as a result of their real and perceived ethnicity and religion, while some women in the sample reflected on their gender as an additional obstacle to circumnavigate. Therefore, football's key stakeholders should commit to retain and support staff from marginalised backgrounds. Highlighting role models from similar racialised and gender backgrounds where possible, and formalising mentorship schemes can help in the recruitment and retention of under-represented staff. For Pless and Maak (2004, p. 138), "The role of mentor and coach involves supporting employees in their development, thus, giving them advice, opening up new developmental perspectives and opportunities as well as discussing and weighing alternatives". The mentor attempts to cultivate a working environment whereby ethnic diversity flourishes and creativity is encouraged. Hennekam and Syed (2018, p. 561) add that racial affinity groups, where people of the same racial group meet regularly to discuss institutional racism, oppression and privileges within their institution, "provide forums for communication and group members can offer insights to help move changes forward". Stakeholders could help in organising/facilitating such groups and provide formal/informal opportunities for group members to feed into the institutions' race equity policies and processes in a bid to further challenge Whiteness in football.

Third, football's key stakeholders must agree to comprehensively educate their workforce, and themselves, in all things EDI without shirking Whiteness, systemic racism and policies and practices designed to achieve race equity (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Education in this space must be mandatory for the entire workforce of an organisation, including senior leaders, which mandates everyone with responsibility for EDI, which encompasses race equity work – not simply a few people or a department (Calver et al., 2023). In order to enhance staff engagement and cooperation, EDI, and more specifically race equity, targets and duties should be embedded across all employees' job roles (Dashper et al., 2019). These targets and responsibilities, which effectively hold people to account, can then be discussed during staff appraisals or in mentorship meetings. Education is a necessary first step, however, in order to achieve positive transformative change concerning race equity, it must be enforced and embedded within the organisational culture. For instance, the workforce should be made to feel safe and empowered to highlight and report non-inclusive and discriminatory racialised practices. Moreover, systems should be developed to ensure accountability for race equity at the highest levels of an organisation. As noted, then, this would entail every manager or leader being made accountable for race equity in their specific area of work (Fletcher et al., 2022).

When it comes to positive transformative change in regard to race equity, there is no such thing as a quick win – it takes time and effort. However, some of our empirically-informed suggestions may help in transforming organisational cultures within football. By committing to inclusive and diverse recruitment strategies centring race equity; retaining and supporting staff from minoritised ethnic backgrounds; and educating workforces around race equity, it may prevent future conduct similar to that of John Yems, or reduce/eradicate future experiences like those presented in this work.

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