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**Meaningful change or ‘more of the same’: The voluntary recruitment code in men’s professional football coaching in England**

**Abstract**

This article offers an original empirical and theoretically grounded examination of the English Football League’s (EFL) Voluntary Recruitment Code (VRC): a positive action intervention designed to establish inclusive practices of coach recruitment and increase the representation of minoritised coaches in first team coaching operations at men’s professional football clubs in England. In doing so, it draws on semi-structured interviews with Chief Executive Officers (CEO’s) at clubs (n=5), football stakeholder representatives (n=14), and minoritised coaches (n=26) to ascertain their perceptions, experiences, and reflections in relation to three inter-connected areas of focus. Firstly, the operational and attitudinal *implementation* of the VRC at clubs. Secondly, the *effectiveness* of the VRC in engendering its intended operational and representational impacts at clubs. Thirdly, *critical reflections* as to the ways in which the VRC might be reformulated and reimplemented to stimulate the conditions through which equality of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for minoritised coaches might be better realised. Finally, the article will conclude from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective that racial equality measures of this kind should be strongly interventionist and transformational in their policy intentions and ideological scope, and seek to challenge and disrupt dominant liberal discourses of meritocracy, race-neutrality, colour-blindness, and the normativity of Whiteness in professional football coaching contexts. In doing so, the article calls on the EFL to work consultatively with member clubs, football stakeholders, and minoritised coaches to develop a holistic legislative

and pedagogical approach to tackling racialised inequities in football coaching, which incorporate strongly regulated and reformatory positive actions.

### **Key words:**

Racialised, Inequities, Minoritised, Football, Coaching, Policies

### **Introduction: representation and barriers for minoritised coaches**

Over the last 50 years, the higher echelons of **men's** professional sports in Western Europe and North America have become increasingly characterised by the **racial**, ethnic and cultural diversity of its playing workforce. However, during this period, there has been a limited throughput of minoritised<sup>i</sup> players into the senior coaching tiers of men's professional sports across a range of national contexts (Bradbury et al., 2014; Cunningham, 2020; Lapchick, 2019). Further, where such transitions have occurred, minoritised coaches seem disproportionately restricted to peripheral support positions with lower levels of formal authority and decision-making powers (Braddock et al., 2012; Day, 2015). A number of scholars have argued these representational disparities are underscored by a series of deeply embedded racialised barriers at the macro (societal), meso (organisational) and micro (individual) level (Cunningham, 2019, 2020; Gearity and Henderson-Metzger, 2017; Regan and Feagin, 2017; Sartore and Cunningham, 2006; Singer et al., 2010). At the macro level, in relation to the broader racialised structural conditions which underpin existing social arrangements, constraints engendered by dominant political and legislative climates, and the role of powerful internal and external stakeholders in the coach hiring process. At the meso-level, in relation to the institutional manifestation of mono-cultural processes, practices and

cultures, and the existence of racial bias within senior decision making tiers of sports organisations. At the micro-level, in relation to the often inequitable interactional spaces of sports coaching environments where the existence of racialised micro-aggressions and stereotyping has problematised minoritised coaches and inhibited opportunities for upward social mobility.

**Similar patterns of under-representation and occupational segregation are identifiable at men's professional football clubs (hereafter referred to as 'clubs') in England: the heavily masculinised sporting and cultural domain which constitutes the empirical and analytical foci of this study.** For example, between 1960 and 2018 just 34 minoritised coaches<sup>ii</sup> held head coach positions at all 92 clubs competing annually in each of the four professional leagues of English football, inclusive of just 7 minoritised coaches who held positions of this kind at clubs in the 'pinnacle' English Premier League (LMA 2018). Further, between 2014 and 2017 the levels of minoritised coaches holding senior coaching positions at clubs remained stubbornly low at around 4% of the overall coaching workforce (SPTT, 2017). Whilst recent research has identified higher levels of minoritised coach representation at club youth academies (around 17%), these coaches tend to be employed in lower status part-time positions (Bradbury and Conricode, 2020). **In recent years, a number of UK based scholars have drawn on the experiential testimonies of minoritised coaches and other key stakeholders in the men's professional game in England to help identify and examine the factors which underpin these residual representational trends (Bradbury et al., 2014, 2018; Bradbury, 2018; Cashmore and Cleland, 2011; Kilvington, 2019, 2020). Broadly speaking, they have alluded to the historical and continued existence of multiple and multi-levelled practices, experiences, and**

impacts of access and treatment discrimination in men's professional football coaching contexts. Firstly, in relation to the manifestation of overt and inferential racisms and ongoing practices of racialised stereotyping and cultural 'othering' within some elite level coach education and coach workplace environments. Such behaviours have been argued to be evident in the racially inequitable interactions between some (White) senior operations staff and minoritised coaches, and to have marked out some culturally contingent parameters of inclusion and belonging within such settings. They have also been argued to be apparent in the racialised assessments enacted by some (White) coach educators and senior decision makers at clubs, which have problematised differently minoritised coaches in different ways but with comparable negative developmental and vocational outcomes. That is, in relation to enacting processes of performance evaluation based on a series of assumed racial, ethnic, cultural (and religious) traits and behaviours, rather than through consideration of relevant technical abilities and competencies, and in such ways as to conceptualise minoritised coaches as lacking the relevant attitudinal, intellectual and leadership skills to coach and manage elite level players and teams. Secondly, in relation to unshifting practices of racialised institutional closure embedded in the continued reliance on networks based mechanisms of coach recruitment at clubs. These commonly practiced 'head-hunting' approaches have been argued to be exercised by key power brokers such as club owners, chief executives, and head coaches and to sustain patterns of homologous reproduction in the coaching workforce. Recent research has echoed and extended these UK based findings in drawing attention to the relatively commonplace operation of comparable practices of coach recruitment and ensuing experiences of racialised exclusions and marginalisation in professional football coaching contexts in

**Belgium, the Netherlands, and Europe more broadly (Bradbury, 2020; Hiem et al., 2020; Van Sterkenburg, 2020). Taken together,** such practices have had deleterious impacts in limiting equality of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for minoritised coaches and positioned them disadvantageously in the football coaching market-place. For some scholars, these practices are underscored by the normative and relational power of Whiteness embedded within the senior decision making tiers of the professional game, which has allowed racialised inequities to be perpetuated and for the dominant (White) hegemonic structures and cultures which underpin them to remain unchanged over time (Bradbury et al., 2018; Hylton, 2018). As a result, it has been argued that measures designed to address these racialised inequities should seek to disrupt and dismantle the routinised practices and normative arrangements of coach recruitment in the professional football industry (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020).

This article offers an original empirical and theoretically grounded examination of one such measure: the English Football League’s (EFL) Voluntary Recruitment Code (VRC). The VRC is a positive action intervention designed to establish inclusive practices of coach recruitment and increase the representation of minoritised coaches in first team coaching operations at men’s professional football clubs in England. In doing so, the article will draw on the experientially informed narratives of club CEO’s, stakeholder representatives and minoritised coaches to examine the operational and attitudinal *implementation* of the VRC at clubs and evaluate its *effectiveness* in engendering its intended operational and representational impacts. It will also draw on the *critical reflections* of research participants as to the ways in which the VRC might be reformulated and reimplemented to stimulate the conditions through which equality of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for minoritised coaches might be better

realised. Finally, the article will conclude from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective that racial equality measures should be strongly interventionist in their policy intentions and ideological scope and seek to challenge and disrupt dominant liberal discourses of meritocracy, race-neutrality, colour-blindness, and the normativity of Whiteness in the **men's** professional football coaching contexts **under review**. Prior to the presentation and analysis of findings, this article will begin by examining the broader racial equality policy context and the use of positive actions in men's professional football coaching in England, before outlining the theoretical informants and methodological considerations underpinning this study.

### **Policy context: Positive actions and the EFL Voluntary Recruitment Code**

Over the last 10 years, a number of governing bodies in professional football in England have gradually responded to external pressures from national equality campaigns, media sources and high profile minoritised coaches, and have developed new interventions designed to address racialised inequities in football coaching. **These bodies include; the Football Association (FA)<sup>iii</sup>, the English Premier League (EPL)<sup>iv</sup>, the English Football League (EFL)<sup>v</sup>, the Professional Footballers Association (PFA)<sup>vi</sup> and League Managers Association (LMA)<sup>vii</sup>.** This recent impetus is arguably reflective of the gradual shift from more formal to liberal approaches to engendering substantive equality in the UK political and sporting context over time, and a steadily growing (but not full) recognition as to the systemic underpinnings of multiple forms of exclusion and disadvantage (Hepple, 2010). In some cases, proponents of these approaches offer support for the use of contextually proportionate positive actions to promote equality of opportunities and actively stimulate the conditions under which equality of experiences

and outcomes might be realised. Whilst positive actions can differ significantly in their design and intentions across a continuum from softer to harder variants, their promotion and usage is intended to redress structural, operational and cultural informants of under-representation experienced by marginalised groups (Davies and Robinson, 2016). Support for the use of positive actions is evidenced in Section 158 and 159 of the 2010 UK Equality Act which allows for employers to implement targeted practices of advertising and interviewing for vacancies in order to redress patterns of under-representation on the basis of nine 'protected characteristics', including ethnicity (Government Equalities Office, 2010). The use of positive actions is also encouraged in principle within the advanced levels of the UK Sports Councils 'Equality in Sport Framework' and in some UK National Governing Bodies of Sports 'Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plans' in order to increase opportunities for under-represented groups in the playing and non-playing arenas of sports (Lusted, 2014).

Targeted interventions to address racialised inequities in men's professional football coaching in England have tended to utilise softer variants of positive actions. In particular, through the provision of financial and mentoring support to minoritised coaches to enable them to achieve high level coaching qualifications and to enhance their employability in the football coaching marketplace. **High level coach education qualifications such as the FA UEFA B, FA UEFA A, FA UEFA A Advanced Youth Awards, and the 'pinnacle' FA UEFA Pro License, are administered and awarded by the FA, and their completion is a regulatory pre-requisite for accessing senior coaching positions at the youth academy and first team level of men's professional football clubs in England.** For example, the FA Coach Inclusion and Diversity programme has since 2015 supported up to 100 minoritised coaches per annum to



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3 achieve FA UEFA B coaching awards, and around 20 minoritised coaches per annum to  
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5 achieve FA UEFA A and FA UEFA Advanced Youth Awards. Similarly, the EPL Elite  
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7 Coach Apprenticeship Scheme (ECAS) which supports coaches to complete the FA  
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9 UEFA Pro License has ensured that at least 20% of participants are from ‘marginalised’  
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11 backgrounds. The FA has since 2018 also established year-long placement opportunities  
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13 for 15 elite level minoritised coaches at age specific national team training camps.  
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15 Further, in 2020, the EPL in conjunction with the EFL and PFA launched the ‘BAME  
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17 Player to Coach Scheme’: a two year salaried internship at clubs for six minoritised  
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19 coaches. **Additional learning opportunities have also been provided during this**  
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21 **period by the PFA in conjunction with the LMA, and with respect to professional**  
22  
23 **development masterclasses, coaching clinics, and interview preparation support**  
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25 **for minoritised coaches from former professional playing backgrounds (LMA,**  
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27 **2018).**  
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35 Whilst some of these interventions are at a relatively formative stage of their  
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37 implementation, the apparent lack of any identifiable and/or transparent mechanisms for  
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39 measuring or reporting publicly on their progress has rendered their effectiveness  
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41 difficult to assess. However, where independent evaluation has taken place, it has  
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43 indicated some mixed outcomes. For example, evaluation of the FA Coach Diversity  
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45 and Inclusion programme indicated some initial success in unblocking the early  
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47 educational phase of the pipeline of progression into coaching and in engendering key  
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49 developmental benefits for minoritised coaches (Bradbury, 2019). However, there is  
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51 little empirical evidence to suggest this and other interventions have enabled transitions  
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53 into positions of paid employment at clubs for significant numbers of minoritised  
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55 coaches (SPTT, 2017; LMA, 2018). In this respect, whilst the use of softer positive  
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actions has exhibited some effectiveness in ‘levelling-up’ the competencies and experiences of minoritised coaches, it has arguably offered only a partial and conceptually limited response to addressing the under-representation of minoritised coaches in the professional game more broadly. In particular, in operating an individualised deficit based approach to addressing racialised inequities and encouraging the incorporation of minoritised coaches into existing sporting structures, rather than seeking to reform the normative institutional arrangements and prevailing practices and cultures which underpin and perpetuate the racialised status quo within these environments.

In contrast, other policy interventions have sought to utilise potentially harder positive actions to address institutionalised barriers embedded in normative processes and practices of coach recruitment. Interventions of this kind have been informed by the Rooney Rule which was first implemented as a strongly regulated approach to head coach recruitment in the US National Football League (NFL) US in 2003, and which has since been expanded to incorporate other senior operations positions at NFL clubs (Duru, 2011; DuBois, 2015). The Rooney Rule stipulates that at least one ‘person of colour’ is interviewed for all positions of this kind at NFL clubs and includes significant financial penalties for clubs in breach of these regulations. The Rooney Rule has been hailed as a key mechanism through which the representation of minoritised coaches and leaders has increased significantly over time, and its central principle of ‘inclusive shortlisting’ has since been adopted by a range of other sporting, corporate and governmental institutions in the US and beyond (Duru, 2020).

Whilst in 2018 a bespoke version of the Rooney Rule was adopted in principle by The FA in relation to the recruitment of coaches at national team level (FA 2018), the potentially most substantive efforts to engender equitable coach recruitment practices in men's professional football in England have arguably been undertaken by the EFL. In 2016, following a period of internal consultation with all 72 member clubs in the second, third and fourth tiers of the professional game, the EFL launched two parallel recruitment codes for these clubs. The Mandatory Recruitment Code (MRC) is targeted specifically at all EFL club youth academies and was first implemented in the 2016-17 season. The MRC stipulates that all EFL clubs run a full recruitment process for any coaching position that requires an individual to hold as a minimum an FA UEFA B license. It also states that clubs should interview at least one suitably qualified Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>viii</sup> candidate for any coaching position where an application has been received. In contrast, the Voluntary Recruitment Code (VRC) is targeted specifically at EFL club first team coaching operations and was initially piloted at 10 clubs in the 2016-17 season, before being expanded to include all 72 EFL clubs from the 2017-18 onwards. The VRC specifically states:

- During the season, clubs will be expected to interview one or more BAME candidate for any First team managerial/coaching role (where an application has been received) in instances where they run a full recruitment process.
- During the close season, clubs will be expected to run a full recruitment process for any First Team managerial/coaching role during which they must interview at least one or more BAME candidates (where an application has been received) (EFL 2016)

It is important to note that despite some surface level similarities, the VRC differs markedly from the Rooney Rule in its more limited operational intentions and apparent lack of independent monitoring or enforcement of sanctions for non-compliance (Cowell, 2020). In this respect, the VRC can arguably be understood less as a legally binding consideration forcing mechanism and more as a form of reflexive self-regulation ‘*which does not seek to impose substantive rules on sub-systems, but instead works with the internal dynamics of those systems*’ (Hepple 2011: 320). As a result, the VRC has been characterised as a ‘*softer positive action with a harder edge*’ (McGurk et al., 2019) in its intention to act as a stimulus for - rather than as a regulatory mechanism to enforce - a more equitable approach to coach recruitment at EFL clubs in England.

**Theoretical framework**

The presentation and analysis of findings featured in this article are informed by and draw on the key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This theoretical framework provides a useful conceptual and analytical tool-kit with which to examine the ways in which the relationship between racialised structures, ideologies and practices can engender exclusionary impacts for minoritised groups across a range of societal and sporting contexts, **including sports coaching** (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Hylton, 2010, **Bradbury, 2020**). It also offers potential for a critical interrogation as to the efficacy of organisational responses designed to address racialised inequities and the barriers that might be encountered during their implementation in **societal, sporting and sports coaching contexts** (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020; Lusted et al., 2020). Firstly, in centralising ‘race’ as the key organising principle of social **and sporting** life

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3 alongside other intersecting forms of oppression, and in considering racisms to  
4 constitute a routinised and endemic feature of the experiences of minoritised groups **in**  
5 **these settings** (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Hylton, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Secondly,  
6  
7 in critiquing dominant liberal ideologies of meritocracy, race neutrality and colour-  
8 blindness which fail to recognise or seek to address in any meaningful way the  
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10 existence and impacts of racisms unless manifest in their most egregious forms, and  
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12 which strip the realities of success or failure from the racially inequitable **societal,**  
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14 **sporting, and sports coaching contexts** in which they occur (Bimper, 2015; Bonilla  
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16 Silva, 2018; Burdsey, 2011). **These frames of interpretation have been**  
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18 **conceptualised by Bonilla Silva as constituting a form of ‘abstract liberalism’ which**  
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20 **draw on and conjoin ‘ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., equal**  
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22 **opportunity, the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy), and**  
23  
24 **economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism), in an abstract manner to explain**  
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26 **racial matters’ (Bonilla Silva 2018: 56). From this perspective, the notion of**  
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28 **‘abstract liberalism’ is also understood to be utilised by dominant (White) groups**  
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30 **as a platform from which to rationalise ambivalence towards and inaction against**  
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32 **patterns of racialised disadvantage in societal, sporting and sports coaching**  
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34 **contexts, whilst simultaneously claiming an adherence (rather than opposition) to**  
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36 **principles of ‘fairness’ and ‘equal opportunities’ in such settings (Bonilla Silva,**  
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38 **2018; Hylton, 2018; Rankin Wright et al., 2016). Thirdly, in drawing attention to**  
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40 **Whiteness as a powerful structural and cultural practice through which hierarchical**  
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42 **systems of racial domination in societal, sporting and sports coaching contexts have**  
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44 **become effortlessly created and reproduced and the unearned advantages of White**  
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46 **privilege framed as the cultural norm (McIntosh, 1990; Long and Hylton, 2002;**  
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48 **McDonald, 2005; Bradbury et al., 2018). And, fourthly, in arguing that liberalism**  
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alone is not enough to address embedded forms of institutional racism, and that a much more strongly interventionist, redistributive and transformational approach to social justice is required at the policy level to ensure equality of opportunities, experiences and outcomes for minoritised groups in **societal, sporting and sports coaching** contexts (Hylton, 2018; Lusted et al., 2020; Rankin Wright et al., 2017). **In the context of this study, for example, by extending the operational scope of those progressively ‘race-conscious’ but, highly individualised, ‘softer’ positive actions identified in the previous section, to incorporate organisationally reformative ‘harder’ positive actions which seek to ensure an equitable and transparent approach to coach recruitment at men’s professional football clubs in England.**

**Study and methods**

The findings in this article are drawn from two separate but overlapping studies examining the implementation and effectiveness of targeted positive action interventions designed to address racialised inequities in men’s professional football coaching in England. The studies were undertaken by the authors between June 2017 and July 2019: encompassing the first two full seasons of the implementation of the VRC. Taken together, the studies involved conducting semi-structured interviews with CEO’s at EFL clubs (n=5) and football stakeholder representatives (n=14) at the FA, PFA, Kick It Out, and Sports People’s Think Tank. In total, eight of these interviewees were White (including all CEO’s) and 11 from minoritised backgrounds. The studies also involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 26 minoritised coaches, all of whom were presently working - or had previously worked - within EFL club first team or youth academy coaching operations. Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted for

between 50-70 minutes and took place at mutually agreed venues such as training facilities, office spaces, or meeting rooms. Despite the requests of the authors, senior staff at the EFL declined to take part in this research. **In order to help make sense of the interview data the authors undertook a rigorous, systematic and inductive approach to thematic analysis which included identifying and categorising emergent themes and sub themes in relation to the topic under review. This process of interpretation and analysis has been argued to provide a useful means through which to capture the contours of data elicited from qualitative research of this kind and to better represent the perceptions and experiences of research participants in a coherent and accessible way for academic and policy making audiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Sparkes and Smith, 2014).**

Central to this qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was the strong emphasis and value placed on the professionally and culturally informed experiential knowledge of interviewees. As such, interviewees were encouraged to openly articulate their observations and experiences in their own terms of reference and from a foregrounded position as the ‘primary knowers’ within this discursive space. From a CRT perspective, this approach is felt to be an especially important means through which to render visible and illuminate the testimonies of minoritised groups, whose experiences and perspectives have traditionally been excluded from – but remain subject to – dominant majoritarian narratives as to the realities and impacts of ‘race’ and racisms in sport (Hylton, 2009). This approach is further strengthened in this research by the inclusion of interviewees from both marginalised and dominant ethnicities and for whom the experiences of exclusion and inclusion within the football coaching contexts under review is markedly different. This approach helped the authors to

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3 broaden the diversity of discourses and insights drawn upon and to engender a more  
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5 holistically informed account of processes and events.  
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10 **Finally, the authors recognise that the qualitative techniques of data collection and**  
11 **analysis used in this study cannot and should not be considered as a set of**  
12 **(race)neutral methodological procedures, nor be fully decontextualised from the**  
13 **interpersonal, social and institutional contexts within which they were enacted.**  
14 **Rather, they are informed to some significant extent by the racialised socio-**  
15 **historical locations and epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions of**  
16 **the authors, and the quest to exercise and encourage greater critical reflexivity in**  
17 **the field of research and the real world settings under review (Fletcher, 2014;**  
18 **Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).** In doing so, the  
19 authors remain cognisant of the inherent power imbalance embedded in the social and  
20 cultural distance between our own White identities and that of minoritised interviewees,  
21 and the privileged space this imbues in relation to reporting on rather than directly  
22 experiencing racisms or racialised exclusions. In this respect, it is important to  
23 acknowledge that the racialised power relations and normativity of Whiteness  
24 embedded within the football coaching contexts under review cannot be fully separated  
25 from those which exist in the research process, and that as a result we may at times  
26 draw unconsciously on White situated discourses in our analysis and presentation of  
27 findings (Frankenburg, 2004; Sin, 2007). **However, we contend that such influence is**  
28 **neither fixed nor definitive and that our theoretically informed and lived**  
29 **engagement with the practice of critical (and cultural) reflexivity has provided us**  
30 **with a useful epistemological tool through which to reflect on and contest the**  
31 **impact of Whiteness on our scholarship. In particular, in encouraging us to better**  
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consider our racialised self and the ways in which our racialised self is perceived by others, and in helping us to avoid writing and/or acting in ways that are congruent with dominant hegemonic discourses which pathologise the behaviours, perceptions and experiences of culturally ‘othered’ minoritised groups (Fletcher, 2014; Fletcher and Hylton, 2017, Hylton, 2018). Such an approach has also enabled us to clarify the conceptual particularity of the research and our own social, cultural and political positionality as researchers, and in such ways as to foreground rather than deny the inevitability of racialised subjectivities impacting on the research process. From this perspective, whilst acknowledging the contextual validity of arguments which allude to the importance of ‘identity matching’ in the research process, we contend that the epistemological quest to uncover a singular and ‘authentic’ racial truth is reliant on a series of problematic essentialist assumptions and homogenising tendencies. Such totalising principles tend to overplay the rigidity of racialised insider and outsider binaries, and underplay the multifarious and fluid identity constructions, experiences and perspectives of researchers and researched across a range of structural, cultural and gendered intersections (Berry and Clair, 2011; Carrington, 2008; Fletcher, 2014). This was especially evident in the interactional research encounters underpinning this study, in which authors and interviewees drawn from a range of dominant and marginalised ethnicities and vocational backgrounds adopted a series of flexible and shifting identity positionings in order to establish and maintain connectivity, trust and rapport. This enabled the authors to access a series of variegated and often overlapping contextually apposite and culturally situated narratives in relation to the topic under review. Taken together, this epistemologically and methodologically reflexive approach has enabled the authors

to present a holistically informed and analytically considered account of the implementation and existing and potential effectiveness of the VRC in men’s professional football coaching in England.

Findings

*Implementation of the VRC*

There was a strong consensus amongst interviewees from a range of professional and cultural backgrounds that the principles and guidance embodied in the VRC had not been fully engaged with or implemented by EFL clubs during the period under review. This was felt to be the case in relation to the proposal that clubs run a full recruitment process and shortlist candidates from minoritised backgrounds. Instead, interviewees referred to the continued operation of informal and unregulated ‘back-door’ approaches and an attitudinal resistance amongst senior decision makers at clubs to the implementation of more equitable, transparent, and culturally considered methods of coach recruitment.

For example, at an operational level, interviewees referenced the lack of public advertising undertaken by clubs in relation to first team coaching positions. In some cases, this was contrasted to other areas of public life where efforts to formalise and broaden methods of vacancy promotion were considered an important ‘first step’ in establishing more inclusive recruitment practices (Bradbury and Conricode, 2020; Duru, 2020; Singer et al., 2010). However, for some CEO’s, the assumed specificity and highly mediated arena of professional football was felt to render such efforts

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3 'redundant', and underscored a reticence towards advertising for coaching positions of  
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5 this kind. Two interviewees comment further:  
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10 *'You look at the recruitment process in football compared to teachers,*  
11 *public servants, where there's a defined recruitment process, the post is*  
12 *advertised. Never done that in football. It's almost like the last frontier. It*  
13 *still does its own thing'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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21 *'In terms of the voluntary code, I still think, because it's so public, even*  
22 *though you're not advertising, you still get all the applications come in'*  
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26 (CEO interviewee)  
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31 Interviewees also referenced the ongoing preference for and enactment of networks  
32 based methods of identification and appointment of first team coaches at EFL clubs. In  
33 the first instance, these methods were felt to rely on initial 'information gathering' as  
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35 to the personal and professional 'suitability' and 'character' of potential candidates.  
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37 Such processes were almost exclusively undertaken with 'trusted' power brokers  
38 within the 'behind closed doors' professional circles and private conversational spaces  
39 of the dominant (White) social and cultural networks of the football industry  
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47 **(Bradbury et al., 2018, Kilvington, 2020).** Two CEO interviewees outline these  
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49 processes further:  
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54 *'So, there's two sides to it really. The initial period is just seeing the interest*  
55 *that comes in. Then we'll maybe do our own sort of calls in the background as*  
56 *well. There's a lot of gathering information. It's quite a small world football.*  
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*We'll speak to other people who may be able to give us a bit more information about certain characters' (CEO interviewee)*

*'It's much easier to phone up 3 other chief execs and say, 'what's this guy like to work with' or another coach and 'say, what's the word on the street about this coach?'. If you're not in those networks, it makes it harder to be appointed' (CEO interviewee)*

These initial processes of identification and (implicitly racialised) assessment was felt by interviewees to underpin the ensuing operation of targeted 'head-hunting' approaches to coach recruitment at clubs. On this latter score, it was felt that few clubs operated formalised interview procedures to which multiple candidates were invited, and that where such procedures were enacted they included only the preferred candidate and were conducted as a largely confirmatory process. This was felt to be exacerbated at clubs experiencing periods of in-season 'crisis management' and where there were significant pressures from sponsors, fans, and media to appoint replacement coaching staff in immediacy. Findings here chime strongly with statistical evidence which suggests that 70% of all head coaching appointments at clubs take place during the playing season (PFA, 2020), and are also reflective of the preferences of senior decision makers to exercise operational autonomy in appointing coaches quickly and without external regulation (McGurk et al., 2019). Two interviewees comment on the habitual and enduring operation of these quick and closed processes of appointment:

*'Rather than do a proper recruitment process, they'll 'put it out', but if somebody's phoned up somebody and said 'yeah, put your CV in, apply for*

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3 *it', they'll literally tell you you've got it'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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8 *'In the first team we only interviewed one person for the job. We didn't go*  
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10 *through an interview process because there was only one person and we*  
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12 *managed to get him in quite quickly'* (CEO interviewee)  
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16  
17 At an attitudinal level, the continued operation of the above mechanisms of coach  
18 recruitment were felt by interviewees to be underscored by the belief amongst senior  
19 decision makers that such methods were inherently '*fair*' and '*unbiased*' and offered  
20 the reward of employment to the most 'deserving' candidates regardless of their  
21 ethnicity. Such meritocratic beliefs remain a normative feature of the football (and  
22 broader sporting) landscape in England and position the coaching field as an  
23 egalitarian space in which opportunities for occupational advancement are premised on  
24 talent and hard work alone (Bradbury, 2018, Rankin-Wright et al., 2016; Hylton,  
25 2018). Further, they underpinned assertions that pre-existing processes of coach  
26 recruitment were operationally and culturally impartial and ensured the acquisition of  
27 '*the best person for the job*'. Two CEO interviewees echo these sentiments further:  
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45 *'The simple truth of the matter is that 'race' and colour doesn't come into it.*  
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47 *We're just looking for the best manager'* (CEO interviewee)  
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51  
52 *'There's opportunities there for everyone. First you look at the candidate,*  
53  
54 *you look at what they can do and what they can bring to the club and it*  
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56 *genuinely just makes absolutely no difference whatsoever what their*  
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58 *background is'* (CEO interviewee)  
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The lack of implementation of an open and transparent recruitment process was also felt by some interviewees to be underscored by an explicit resistance to the principles and guidance embodied in the VRC amongst senior decision makers at clubs. In particular, that such measures were considered antithetical to the competitive process of coach recruitment and to constitute an imposed and unwarranted distraction from the everyday concerns of first team coaching operations (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020; Lusted, 2017). In this respect, there was a strong consensus amongst interviewees that the VRC had been conceptualised by senior decision makers as an unwanted and optional - rather than valued and fundamental – principle, and had done little to disrupt commonly practiced methods of coach recruitment during the period under review. Two interviewees summarise further:

*'I don't really think that we're doing any different so I can only really speak from our club. I don't think we're doing anything any different really to what we've done previously'* (CEO interviewee)

*'Clubs won't buy into the Rooney rule, for them the rule is not an issue. There are owners who have their own ideas and reasons on who they're going to bring in and I don't think they're going to be dissuaded by being asked to look at this process'* (Stakeholder interviewee)

### ***Effectiveness of the VRC***

There was a strong consensus amongst interviewees from a range of professional and

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3 cultural backgrounds that as a result of the lack of implementation of and resistance  
4 towards the VRC at EFL clubs, its application had been largely ineffective in  
5 engendering its intended operational and representational impacts. For example, in  
6 relation to establishing inclusive recruitment practices, interviewees suggested that  
7 beyond the senior organisational tiers of the EFL and its member clubs, there was little  
8 knowledge and awareness as to the existence of the VRC and the specificities of its  
9 expected operational practice. Further, the absence of public advertising was felt to  
10 have positioned minoritised coaches as ‘in the dark’ in relation to emergent coaching  
11 opportunities and at a comparative disadvantage to their better connected and social  
12 capital heavy white counterparts (Bradbury et al., 2018; Kilvington, 2019). Two  
13 interviewees comment further on this ongoing marginality:  
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*‘I know there’s been talk about the Rooney Rule, I don’t know if that’s  
actually been implemented or not’* (Coach interviewee)

*‘Now I ask a load of BAME coaches and they go ‘I don’t even know where to  
search for these roles’. Because unanimously these roles are not freely  
advertised so it becomes ‘well, I’ve got all these qualifications, but I don’t  
know where I need to go’ ’* (Coach interviewee)

49 Relatedly, interviewees reported that the continued operation of quick and closed  
50 processes of identification and headhunting by clubs had limited opportunities for  
51 minoritised coaches to access and progress through the applications to interview stage  
52 of the recruitment process. Findings here chime with the work of scholars who have  
53 argued that normative processes of coach recruitment tend to generate ‘unfair  
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3 *outcomes, as quick hiring decisions limit and inhibit the ability of racial minorities to*  
4 *gain genuine opportunities to engage in the interview process’ (Singer, 2010:286).*  
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7 This was felt to have disabled opportunities for minoritised coaches to showcase their  
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10 technical and experiential skill sets and increase their visibility within the interactional  
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12 spaces of formalised interview settings. Two interviewees comment on the outcomes  
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14 elicited by these restrictive practices:  
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19 *‘If you were to speak to a former [minoritised] player for example about this,*  
20 *I don’t find many that have said ‘Yes, I’ve had this positive response, I’ve*  
21 *had this interview’ (Stakeholder interviewee)*  
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28 *‘If there’s an opportunity to go for a job and that BAME coach has got those*  
29 *qualifications he should be shortlisted along with anybody else. But what*  
30 *happens is the BAME coach has got the qualifications but because a White*  
31 *coach might have a ‘name’, might not have the same qualifications as him,*  
32 *he gets shortlisted, he gets interviewed, he gets the job’ (Coach interviewee)*  
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42 As a result of the lack of clear advertising, application, and interview procedures,  
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44 interviewees were in general agreement that the VRC had been ineffective in  
45  
46 increasing the representation of minoritised coaches at the first team level of EFL  
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48 clubs. These assertions are supported by statistical data which indicates that  
49  
50 minoritised coach representation at clubs remained consistently low at around 4%  
51  
52 during the period under review (SPTT, 2017; LMA, 2018; Bradbury and Conricode,  
53  
54 2020). Two interviewees reflect on this unchanging picture:  
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3 *'I don't see any changes. I just don't see it. It's the same faces. There are*  
4 *some black managers out there, but they're the same faces too. Where are*  
5 *the new black managers coming through?'* (Coach interviewee)  
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12 *'It doesn't seem to have made a much of a difference so far, does it. I mean,*  
13 *every time there's another appointment, not just the manager, but his staff,*  
14 *it's just more of the same. And how many of these clubs have gone through a*  
15 *proper process, probably very few. That's the feeling I get anyway, from*  
16 *speaking to people in the game'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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26 Consequently, interviewees referred to the continuation of some predictable patterns of  
27 racial closure and homologous reproduction (**Cunningham, 2020; Regan and Feagin,**  
28 **2017)** amongst the coaching workforce at clubs. In particular, with respect to the  
29 ongoing recruitment of 'known' White coaches drawn from within the pre-existing  
30 managerial merry-go-round of the football coaching marketplace (**Bradbury, 2020;**  
31 **Kilvington, 2020; Van Sterkenburg, 2020).** But, also, underscored by the  
32 unregulated freedoms afforded to head coaches to recruit 'trusted' coach support teams  
33 with similar (White) norms, values, and behaviours, and which sustained the  
34 operational and cultural status quo of coaching and governance relations within these  
35 club settings (**Hylton, 2018).** Two interviewees comment further:  
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51 *'Often you appoint a manager and then there's often a trust put in a*  
52 *manager to say, 'well you go and appoint your coaching staff'. And then it*  
53 *becomes 'well who does he know and who's in his network'* (CEO  
54 interviewee)  
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*‘It’s still a mate’s game, football. You can have all the qualifications in the world, but my experience is coaches and managers take people they’ve worked with before, people they know and trust’* (Stakeholder interviewee)

Taken together, the continued enactment of network based practices of coach recruitment and the ongoing (and unchanging) under-representation of minoritised coaches at clubs, was felt by many interviewees to provide a clear indicator as to the ineffectiveness of the VRC as a mechanism to address racialised inequities in football coaching. For some interviewees, this was underscored by the gestural and symbolic nature of the policy itself and the simultaneous lack of any meaningful and impactful implementation of it at club level (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020; Lusted, 2017). As a result, the VRC was considered with some scepticism as a ‘meaningless’ and ‘ineffectual’ intervention which had done little if anything at all to challenge the networks of racialised association and mutual benefit embedded in the coach recruitment process, or enable the occupational progression of minoritised coaches. Two interviewees summarise these perspectives:

*‘I think when you generally speak to people of similar backgrounds to myself there’s still a feeling of, well I’m not sure how fair it is’* (Coach interviewee)

*‘I’ve been around for some time in the football world and you see the campaigns that are going to supposedly make a difference to people, and then time goes on and it’s another campaign, and you almost become*

immune to it. It's almost like *Groundhog Day* sometimes' (Stakeholder interviewee)

### ***Critical reflections and recommendations for change***

In response to the apparent limited implementation and effectiveness of the VRC, a number of (mainly stakeholder and coach) interviewees reflected on the ways in which it might be reformulated and reimplemented in order to meet its intended operational and representational impacts. In doing so, interviewees offered proposals for best practice at the national and local level of policy formation and implementation, which featured a strong emphasis on regulatory compliance and enhanced operational and attitudinal enactment.

For example, at the national level, interviewees suggested that the process of policy (re)formulation should be undertaken by the EFL in consultation with a much broader range of relevant parties than was the case in the past, and should include football stakeholder bodies, EFL clubs and minoritised coaches. Such an approach was considered likely to circumvent some organisational power imbalances and promote 'deliberative democracy' (Fredman, 2011) in the process of policy development. Further, it was felt that the VRC should be more robust and tightly worded than was the case in its original caveat laden incarnation, and should feature a clear and formalised obligation for clubs to operate a full recruitment process for all first team coaching positions in all circumstances and at all times. Two interviewees comment further:

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3 *‘The devil is in the detail, and the detail of the code is written in such a way*  
4 *as to make it virtually impossible to break it. It’s not a policy, it’s a just a*  
5 *series of opt out clauses for clubs if they don’t want to do it’.* (Stakeholder  
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10 interviewee)

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15 *‘I think for this to work it needs at least to be properly embedded within rules*  
16 *and regulations’* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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21 At the local level of implementation, interviewees felt that more needed to be done by  
22 clubs to establish an equitable and transparent approach to coach recruitment, with  
23 particular respect to advertising, applications, and interviews. Such assertions chime  
24 strongly with the work of scholars who have argued that temporally limited and closed  
25 processes of recruitment *‘prevent decision makers from really being able to seek out,*  
26 *identify and interview a diverse pool of head coaching candidates that includes racial*  
27 *minorities’* (Singer et al 2010:285) and that *‘opportunity only exists if those who might*  
28 *gain from it are also in a position to know about it, and act’* (Shaw 2007:428). Such  
29 opportunities have been cited as a key factor in neutralising racialised bias amongst  
30 senior decision makers with powers of appointment at professional sports clubs and to  
31 increase the likelihood of minoritised coaches securing employment in the immediate  
32 and longer term (DuBois, 2015; Duru, 2011). Two interviewees comment further:  
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51 *‘They have to have something in place which allows for CV’s or job*  
52 *applications to be submitted and for them to take what they feel is the best*  
53 *candidates for an interview’* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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3 *'There needs to be a more considered process which ensures that that if*  
4 *you've got the qualifications, then you have a chance to show that you are*  
5 *the best candidate. You've got to have something that makes it possible for*  
6 *black coaches to get in front of people and have interviews and show their*  
7 *worth'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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17 As a result, interviewees felt that a formalised obligation for clubs to operate a full  
18 recruitment process for all first team coaching positions should be implemented  
19 mandatorily. This was felt to bring the VRC closer in line with harder positive actions  
20 such as the NFL's Rooney Rule which mandates rather than suggests that clubs operate  
21 'inclusive shortlisting' for emergent coaching positions (**Duru, 2020**). Recent research  
22 has also indicated that the implementation of the MRC in EFL club youth academies  
23 has exhibited some success in engendering inclusive recruitment practices and  
24 representational gains for minoritised coaches, and to have transferability as a useful  
25 policy platform through which to dismantle the institutionalised barriers which have  
26 constrained the career progression of minoritised coaches in first team football  
27 (**Bradbury and Conricode, 2020; Conricode and Bradbury, 2020**). Two  
28 interviewees reflect on the prior shortcomings of the VRC and offer support for a  
29 mandatory approach moving forwards:  
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49 *'Essentially the voluntary code is a club will give it a go, if they're not under*  
50 *any pressure to do so. I mean it's so weak that it's not really been given a*  
51 *chance to succeed'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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58 *'With anything voluntary, if you want to make change you've got to say this is*  
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3 *what you're going to have to do. I think a voluntary code in this instance is a*  
4  
5 *waste of time, I really do'* (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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10 Relatedly, interviewees felt that the proposed implementation of a mandatory code at  
11  
12 first team level should be supported by a robust and transparent process of monitoring  
13  
14 and enforcement, and feature the gradual escalation of financial sanctions for non-  
15  
16 compliance by clubs. These more strongly regulated approaches were felt to be a  
17  
18 necessary step in ensuring that clubs adopt equitable processes of coach recruitment in  
19  
20 ways in which they had not done and without repercussion in the past (SPTT, 2017).  
21  
22 The utilisation of monitoring, enforcement and sanctions has been argued by some  
23  
24 scholars to constitute a key component of successful reflexive regulation in equality  
25  
26 policy in other societal and sporting fields, and to have direct relevance to the football  
27  
28 coaching context under review (Hepple, 2011; Duru, 2020; Cowell, 2020). Two  
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30 interviewees comment on the financial and public relations pressures engendered by  
31  
32 such approaches:  
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40 *'Stuff which is mandatory, clubs tend to do because there's punitive*  
41  
42 *measures against it. Then there's the sort of PR element as well of, you*  
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44 *know, if it came out that we didn't follow the voluntary code, not sure it'd be*  
45  
46 *a big story. They'll be like 'oh well'. But if you break a regulation, you*  
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48 *know, as well as the punitive measures the EFL could pull on you, it looks*  
49  
50 *quite bad then doesn't it, because you look a bit racist don't you'* (CEO  
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52 interviewee)  
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3 *‘I’ve been saying for some time that asking clubs to do this of their own*  
4 *accord isn’t going to work. They won’t do it of their own accord. They need*  
5 *to be forced into it in some way. They need to be ‘called out’ for their*  
6 *inaction’* (Coach interviewee)  
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14 Finally, interviewees drew attention to the importance of engendering attitudinal buy-  
15 in to the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion embodied in mandatory positive  
16 actions of this kind amongst senior decision makers with responsibility for their  
17 enactment at clubs. **Findings here chime strongly with authors who have suggested**  
18 **that such efforts have the potential to better contextualise the relevance and**  
19 **applicability of such measures and encourage staff at clubs to operationalise**  
20 **racial equality policies in a meaningful way and with positive representational**  
21 **outcomes for minoritised coaches (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020).** Two  
22 interviewees articulate these themes further:  
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38 *‘Until you can influence the mindsets of people making the decisions, all*  
39 *these types of things will have no importance’* (Coach interviewee)  
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44 *‘Having a policy is one thing. Making clubs stick to that policy is entirely*  
45 *another, and we just haven’t seen that. So, I think there’s a lot more to do,*  
46 *not just in terms of making sure the policy works, but making sure the*  
47 *people whose job it is to implement it, understand the value of it’*  
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54 (Stakeholder interviewee)  
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## 58 Discussion

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This article has drawn on the experientially informed narratives of club CEO's, football stakeholder representatives and minoritised coaches drawn from a range of dominant and marginalised ethnicities. In doing so, the article has sought to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the VRC in meeting its principal aims of establishing inclusive practices of coach recruitment and increasing the representation of minoritised coaches in first team coaching operations at men's professional clubs. The article has also sought to ascertain critical reflections as to the ways in which the VRC might be reformulated and reimplemented in order to better realise its aims and intended impacts.

In the first instance, the findings indicated that the principles and guidance embodied in the VRC had not been engaged with or implemented at EFL clubs, with respect to operationalising a full recruitment process or shortlisting candidates from minoritised backgrounds. Instead, clubs continued to conduct informal and unregulated approaches to recruitment premised on processes of identification and information gathering undertaken within the dominant (White) social and cultural networks of the professional football industry (Bradbury, 2020; Bradbury et al., 2018; Kilvington, 2019, 2020, Hylton, 2018). From a CRT perspective, these approaches were underscored by an uncritical adherence to dominant liberal ideologies of meritocracy, race neutrality and colour-blindness on the part of senior decision makers at clubs, and which remain a normative feature of the societal and sporting landscape in England and other Western democracies (Bimper et al., 2015; Burdsey, 2011; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016). Such perceptions largely downplay the existence and impacts of racialised inequities and present professional football coaching as a discursively deracialised and



operationally egalitarian space in which opportunities for occupational advancement are unencumbered by more institutionally embedded and routinised forms of racialised discrimination. In doing so, senior decision makers drew on the conceptual frame of abstract liberalism (Bonilla Silva, 2018) to suggest that existing recruitment practices were fair and unbiased and that the redistributive principles of the VRC constitute a violation of the democratic principles of equal opportunities and a form of 'racial favouritism'. Such perspectives strip the realities of success or failure from the deeply racialised contexts in which they occur and were utilised by senior decision makers to legitimise resistance to a specific 'race-conscious' equality directive intended to redress racialised imbalances in football coaching. In this respect, opposition to the principles and implementation of the VRC at clubs were to some extent reflective of the organisational reticence towards racial equality policies in sport in the UK more broadly (Lusted, 2013, 2014) and the tendency of elite power brokers *'to block any action that would implement equality and diversity initiatives by justifying that there is no need for such commitments'* (Rankin-Wright 2016:362).

In the second instance, the findings indicated that as a result of the resistance towards and lack of implementation of the VRC at EFL clubs, it had largely been ineffective in engendering its intended operational and representational impacts. In this respect, the findings chime strongly with the work of scholars who have alluded to the disjuncture between the high profile institutional commitments of national sports organisations towards equality, diversity and inclusion and the lack of meaningful action undertaken to ensure their implementation by a range of organisational actors (Bury, 2015; Dwight and Biscomb, 2018; Spaaij, 2018; Shaw, 2007). This is especially the case in relation to the intention of the VRC to engender internal organisational change at clubs, but

where its consequent lack of application has rendered it a largely gestural and non-performing substitute for action (Ahmed, 2012). Findings here are also reflective of the limited effectiveness of racial equality policies in sport in the UK more broadly, which have sought to amend organisational processes whilst leaving the structures and cultures which underpin and operationalise them relatively untouched, and have consequently failed to diversify the coaching (and leadership) tiers of sports to any significant extent (Long et al., 2011; Lusted, 2017; Spracklen et al., 2006). From a CRT perspective, the ineffectiveness of the VRC on this score is also underpinned by the normativity of whiteness as a powerful structural and cultural practice through which patterns of racialised disadvantage have become naturalised and where dominant (White) groups remain the *'beneficiaries of a host of seemingly neutral arrangements and institutional operations, all of which seem to them to have no racial basis'* (Hartigan 1997:496). In this respect, the landscape of professional football coaching has been framed by senior decision makers at clubs in distinctly non-discriminatory terms, and in such ways as to preclude any critical inward gaze as to the ways in which the unreflexive practices of dominant individuals and institutions has created and sustained racialised inequities over time (Hylton, 2018; MacDonald, 2005). In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that many minoritised coaches remain beyond the narrowly conceptualised operational preferences and networks of mutual acquaintance at clubs and that some predictable patterns of racial closure and under-representation continue to exist in this occupational field (Bradbury et al., 2018).

In the third instance, the findings alluded to critical reflections as to the ways in which the VRC might be reformulated and reimplemented to meet its intended operational and representational impacts. In doing so, football stakeholders and minoritised coaches

argued strongly for a more consultative process of policy formation, which featured a mandatory formalised obligation for all EFL clubs to run a full coach recruitment process incorporating the inclusive shortlisting of minoritised coaches. The implementation of this proposed policy was felt to be likely enhanced by the establishment of a clear and transparent system for monitoring and the enforcement of financial sanctions for non-compliance at clubs. Such assertions chime strongly with the work of scholars examining the efficacy of positive action interventions in football coaching, and who have argued that the normative application of neutral criteria approaches to recruitment tend to sustain rather than redress patterns of racialised disadvantage (Conricode and Bradbury, 2020; Cowell, 2020; Kilvington, 2019). They also square firmly with the claims of CRT that liberalism alone is not enough to address deeply embedded forms of institutional racism and that a more strongly interventionist, redistributive and transformational approach is needed to disrupt, challenge, and reconfigure the White hegemonic structures, cultures and practices which have created and sustained the racialised status quo in sports (Hylton, 2009, 2018). In this respect, it is argued here that such approaches should seek to engender an ideological shift away from dominant liberal discourses of ‘race-neutrality’ and ‘colour-blindness’, to ones which recognise the unequal social locations and histories of minoritised groups and offer a more culturally nuanced consideration of the ways in which racialised power relations inform and impact on the process of coach recruitment. It is to some concluding comments as to how such approaches might be implemented in practice to which this article now turns.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, the authors concur with other CRT scholars and the experiential narratives of stakeholder and coach interviewees in this research in supporting the implementation of more strongly interventionist and transformational racial equality measures in professional football coaching (Bradbury et al., 2018; Hylton, 2018; Rankin Wright et al., 2017). Further, it is the contention here that such measures should utilise strongly regulated and reformatory positive actions to forcefully stimulate the conditions under which equality of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for minoritised coaches might be realised. In doing so, we argue that the EFL, its member clubs, key football stakeholder bodies and minoritised coaches work consultatively to develop a more holistic legislative and pedagogical approach to establishing inclusive recruitment practices and increasing the representation of minoritised coaches within first team coaching operations at clubs. In the first instance, this should utilise creatively the opportunities enshrined in UK equalities legislation with respect to targeted employment practices and establish a mandatory formalised obligation for all EFL clubs to run a full coach recruitment process at all times, incorporating the inclusive shortlisting of minoritised coaches. This new policy should include a clear, transparent, and independent process for the monitoring of its implementation and the enforcement of financial sanctions for non-compliance at clubs. In the second instance, these legislative efforts should be supported by the delivery of a bespoke programme of educational activities targeting senior decision makers at clubs with powers to grant or withhold access to coach employment. These pedagogical efforts should pay particular attention to outlining the ways in which institutionally embedded operational practices and unconscious racial bias can impact negatively in constraining the career progression of minoritised coaches, and feature a strong emphasis on increasing understanding of the benefits of cultural diversity in the football coaching workplace. They should also

be supported by the production and dissemination of a uniform guidance document and checklist of preferred practice for clubs in relation to advertising, applications, and interviews. This guidance should also be extended further to ensure the demographic make-up of selection and interview panels is culturally diverse, and that appropriate feedback is provided to unsuccessful candidates to help them reflect on the interview process and better prepare for future applications. Taken together, such efforts should help to contextualise the relevance and applicability of this new policy and engender stronger attitudinal buy-in to the principles of racial inclusivity embodied within it amongst senior decision makers with responsibility for its enactment at clubs. Finally, it is the contention here that the legislative and pedagogical positive actions identified above would engender a more operationally equitable and culturally reflexive approach to coach recruitment and increase the likelihood of statistical advances in the representation of minoritised coaches within first team coaching operations at clubs over time. The extent to which such ambitions might be realised is to some extent dependent on the ideological malleability and operational willingness of key power brokers at clubs and within national football governance structures to actively engage in and effectuate meaningful change of this kind. What is a little more clear, is that successful efforts on this score are likely to have positive operational and representational impacts and significant transferability as a model of best equality practice with relevance to other sporting contexts in the UK and other countries more broadly. In contrast, the continued operation of informal and unregulated approaches of coach recruitment in professional football in England is likely to yield simply ‘more of the same’.

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<sup>i</sup> The term 'minoritised' is used in this article to reflect an understanding of 'minority status' as a socially constructed process (rather than as an entity) which takes place in specific social, and political contexts over time, and which has resulted in 'minoritised' groups having less power or representation compared to other (dominant) groups in

society. Whilst recognising that processes of ‘minoritisation’ are manifest and impact on differently ‘minoritised’ groups (such as women and LGBTQ groups) in different ways and to different extents, in this article the term ‘minoritised’ is used in a targeted way to refer to racially, ethnically, and culturally ‘othered’ populations experiencing myriad and overlapping forms of structural and cultural discrimination and disadvantage across a range of societal and sporting settings.

<sup>ii</sup> Notwithstanding reference to the broader international literature examining the relationship between ‘race’, ethnicity and sports coaching, the term ‘minoritised coaches’ is used more specifically in this study in a contextually apposite way to refer to first, second and third generation Black-African, Black-Caribbean, South Asian and Dual-Heritage football coaches resident in England. In doing so, the authors remain cognisant that categorisations of this kind which seek to capture the commonalities and specificities of diverse minoritised identities and their varied and overlapping experiences remain conceptually limited and subject to academic contestation. Nonetheless, the authors proceed with some scholarly caution (and no small amount of theoretical and practical utility) in using the term ‘minoritised’ as a means of identifying and analysing the perceptions and experiences of ‘minoritised coaches’ (and other ‘minoritised’ stakeholders) in relation to the implementation and effectiveness of the VRC in the men’s professional football coaching contexts under review.

<sup>iii</sup> The Football Association (FA) is the governing body of association football in England. It is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the amateur and professional game, including coach education and development.

<sup>iv</sup> The English Premier League (EPL) is the organising body of the Premier League in England. It is responsible for administering its competition and has 20 member clubs.

<sup>v</sup> The English Football League (EFL) is the organising body of the Football league in England. It is responsible for administering its three league competition (Championship, League One, League Two) and has 72 member clubs.

<sup>vi</sup> The Professional Footballers Association (PFA) is the professional players union in England. It provides support and guidance to existing and former professional players, including in relation to future career pathways in coaching.

<sup>vii</sup> The League Managers Association (LMA) is the representative body for football managers in England. It provides support and guidance to those working (or seeking to work) in coaching, management and governance positions in professional football.

<sup>viii</sup> Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and the acronym BAME is presently the most recognisable term of self-identification used in British social and political discourse to refer to generationally settled and newly established in-migrant communities from ‘non-white’ backgrounds. The term is commonly used as a marker of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity in the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) plans and policies of UK sports bodies, including in professional football.