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Conricode, Dominic and Bradbury, Steven (2025) ‘You just want the right person for the right job’: ‘race neutral’ and ‘race conscious’ rationales for the implementation of positive action measures in sports coaching. Sport in Society. pp. 1-24. ISSN 1743-0437

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2453843

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in Sport in Society

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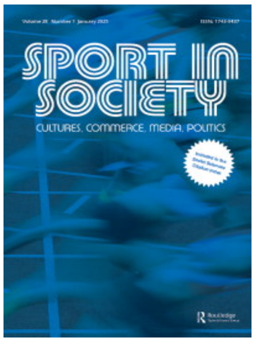

Routledge
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Sport in Society
Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcss20

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To cite this article: Dominic Conricode & Steven Bradbury (21 Jan 2025): ‘You just want the right person for the right job’: ‘race neutral’ and ‘race conscious’ rationales for the implementation of positive action measures in sports coaching, Sport in Society, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2025.2453843

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2453843

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'You just want the right person for the right job': 'race neutral' and 'race conscious' rationales for the implementation of positive action measures in sports coaching

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, a small number of sports bodies in the UK have developed new interventions designed to address racialised inequities in sports coaching. This article draws on interviews with CEOs and Youth Academy Managers ($n=14$) to examine their approaches to conceptualising and operationalising one such positive action measure in men's professional football in England. With particular respect to; (i) the ways in which these organisational actors adhere to 'race-neutral' or 'race-conscious' understandings of the racial equality landscape of football coaching, (ii) how such understandings inform and mediate their conceptual opposition or support for positive action measures, and (iii) how such rationales underpin the non-implementation or implementation of such measures in practice. Finally, the authors utilise Critical Race Theory (CRT) to draw linkages between the underpinning philosophies, rationales and implementation of such measures, and broader neo-liberal ideologies, notions of interest convergence, and the normative power of Whiteness in such settings.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 31 August 2023
Accepted 10 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Sports leadership; diversity; colour-blindness; positive action; race equality

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, the higher echelons of (some) elite level sports in the UK have become characterised by the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the playing workforce. However, during this period, these incremental pitch level representational gains have not been reflected in the senior leadership tiers of sports, which remain an almost exclusively White domain (Bradbury 2013; Hylton 2018; Sporting Equals 2023). This is especially the case in 'positional' senior leadership roles in sports, such as board membership, senior management and elite level coaching at National Governing Bodies of Sports (NGBs) and professional sports clubs. For example, the Diversity in Sport Governance report indicates that just 7.5% of all board members at UK sports bodies are from racialised minority backgrounds, and almost two-thirds (64%) have no board members from racialised minority populations

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(Perrett Laver 2020). Similarly, the Sporting Equals Race Representation Index (Sporting Equals 2023) indicates that just 13% of NGBs have senior management teams within which racialised minority representation is comparable to or higher than their representation of 18% of the national population (ONS 2022). This latter research further reveals that 69% of NGBs have between just 0% and 4% racialised minority representation within their senior management teams (Sporting Equals 2023). Similarly low levels of racialised minority representation are also evidenced in senior coaching positions. For example, just 13% of NGBs have senior coaching teams within which racialised minority representation is comparable to or higher than their representation in the national population, and 47.8% of NGBs have between just 0% and 4% racialised minority representation within the senior coaching workforce (Sporting Equals 2023). These latter findings chime strongly with research conducted in the UK, Europe, and North America, which has drawn attention to the under-representation of racialised minority coaches across a range of national and sporting contexts, and the tendency for such coaches to be disproportionately restricted to peripheral support positions with lower levels of formal authority and decision-making powers (Bradbury, Lusted, and Van Sterkenburg 2021; Lapchick 2021; Cunningham 2021).

Largely in response to external political pressures, changes in equality legislation, and a growing interest in the perceived organisational benefits of diversity, some national sports bodies in the UK have over time sought to develop policies to engender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in sports. Where such efforts exist, they represent an ideological shift from a denial of social inequalities in sport and accompanying rejection of calls for reform, to at least some recognition of the existence of more institutionalised barriers to engagement and an increasing consideration of EDI as a strategic priority for sports organisations. Further, in accordance with the 2010 UK Equality Act, efforts to operationalise EDI in sports have sought to encompass a range of social identifications across nine 'protected characteristics' including ethnicity, and to broaden the scope of policy intent beyond the playing to the coaching and governance tiers of sports. However, for some critical scholars, research in this field has indicated a disjuncture between the development of EDI policies and broad rhetorical commitments of sports bodies, and their limited implementation in practice and ineffectiveness in engendering meaningful or impactful change (Dwight and Biscomb 2018: Lusted 2013). In particular, with respect to limited efforts to diversify the sports workforce or dismantle the deep structures and cultures which underpin historically embedded and systemic practices of exclusion in sports leadership (Shaw 2007: Turconi and Shaw 2023). Further, for some authors, this lack of progress has been underscored by the top down imposition, contested reception, and operational resistance to EDI principles by some key personnel and organisational departments within such settings, alongside a more general adherence to the dominant liberal 'equality consensus' within sports which position it 'unproblematically' as an inherently fair, unbiased, and meritocratic space (Lusted 2014, 2017: Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017a).

More promisingly, in recent years, several national sports bodies in the UK have exhibited a heightened sensitivity to and recognition of those residual patterns of under-representation and racialised inequities identified above, engendered in part by the emergence of and support for the Black Lives Matter movement by athlete activists drawn from a range of marginalised and dominant ethnicities (Hylton 2020). Relatedly, in 2021, Sport England and UK Sport published the (revised) 'Code for Sports Governance': an overarching policy and guidance document designed to establish good governance at around 4,000 sports bodies in receipt of public exchequer funding across five key principles: structure, people, communication, standards and conduct, and policies and processes. In particular, the code features a strong commitment to diversify the senior leadership workforce in sports and states that '*organisations in receipt of significant funding from Sport England and/or UK Sport must have a detailed and ambitious plan to increase the level of diversity not only on their boards, but also on their senior leadership teams and across their organisational structure*' (UK Sport 2021, 6). To achieve these aims, sports bodies are expected to develop a clear Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP), work towards meeting the aims and targets within it, and monitor and publish progress on an annual basis. Central to the aims of the code is the strong intention to increase the representation of racialised minority groups as board members and in senior management and senior coaching positions, and to establish inclusive organisational structures, processes and cultures, with particular respect to equitable practices of recruitment and retention.

In order to successfully achieve the above intentions, the Code for Sports Governance explicitly encourages sports bodies to adopt contextually proportionate positive action provisions in order to better stimulate equality of opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for racialised minority (and other marginalised groups) in sports leadership contexts. Such actions constitute a permissive and flexible form of self-regulation within the 2010 UK Equality Act and in their broadest sense can be understood as '*proportionate measures undertaken with purpose of achieving full and effective equality in practice for members of groups that are socially or economically disadvantaged or otherwise face the consequences of past or present discrimination or disadvantage*' (Bell, Waddington, and Archibong 2010, 2). More specifically, sections 158 and 159 of the 2010 UK Equality Act allow 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. Positive action provisions of this kind seek to go beyond dominant liberal notions of equality, sameness and equal treatment, towards the enactment of policy and practice which bring to life more critical philosophies which posit that for the redistributive goals of social justice to be achieved, a much stronger emphasis on recognition, difference, and equitable treatment is required (Wrench 2005; Wetherley, Watson, and Long 2017). However, despite the legislative opportunities imbued by the 2010 UK Equality Act, the concept and application of positive action provisions in the UK has remained highly contested and under-utilised in practice (Davies and Robison 2016; McCrudden 2020). Further, they have often been subject to misrepresentation within popular, mediated, and political discourse as a form of 'preferential treatment' and 'reverse discrimination', and which accords unearned privileges to undeserving populations within otherwise perceived meritocratic and egalitarian societal contexts (Noon 2010). Nonetheless, in sports in the UK, and largely in response to the requirements and guidance outlined in the Code for Sports Governance, a number of sports bodies have more recently developed and embedded specific positive action-based policy goals in their Diversity and Inclusion Action Plans, with particular respect to the recruitment and retention of racialised minority groups in senior leadership roles. Whilst for many sports bodies the development of these positive action measures represents a new medium through which to fulfil their renewed strategic goals around EDI, other sports bodies have a longer history of engagement with and implementation of such measures pertaining to specific areas of operations and specific demographic groups. In this respect, the focus, scope, and processes through which such positive action measures have or might be implemented differ markedly between sports bodies, dependent in part on the ideological commitment, strategic prioritisation, and operational resource of those individuals and bodies tasked with their enactment, and the particular socio-historical locations and cultural contexts within which different sports operate and exist within the UK (Frisby, Thibault, and Cureton 2014: O'Toole 2000).

To provide a window into the way in which such positive action measures are conceptualised and operationalised by those organisational actors with responsibility for the implementation in practice, this article examines one such intervention in men's professional football in England: the EFL mandatory and voluntary codes of coach recruitment. In doing so, the article draws on semi-structured interviews with professional football club Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) ($n = 4$) and Youth Academy Managers ($n = 10$) drawn from a mix of dominant and marginalised ethnicities to examine the following three areas of interrelated focus. Firstly, the extent and ways in which these key organisational actors adhere to 'race-neutral' or 'race-conscious' understandings of the racial equality and diversity landscape of football coaching. Secondly, how such understandings inform and mediate their conceptual opposition or support for positive action measures designed to address racialised inequities and promote cultural diversity in the football coaching workplace. And, thirdly, how such rationales underpin the resultant non-implementation or implementation of such measures in practice. In doing so, this article offers a timely and original contribution to knowledge in the field and has significant applicability to the football contexts under review and transferability to other sporting and EDI contexts more broadly.

Context

Within the English men's professional football and youth academy contexts under review, a number of empirical research studies indicate that patterns of racialised minority coach representation are broadly comparable to those identified in UK sports more widely. For example, at professional club first team level, a number of studies indicate that the levels of representation of racialised minority coaches in head and assistant coaching positions has remained stubbornly low at around 4% over time (LMA 2017; SPTT 2017). Similarly, at youth academy level, research indicates between 2014 and 2017, the levels of racialised minority coaches holding academy manager or phase-lead coaching positions rarely exceeded 5% of the coaching workforce (SPTT 2017). Further, more recent research in academy settings indicates that whilst 17% of youth academy coaches are from racialised minority backgrounds, around three-quarters hold lower status and/or part-time positions with limited opportunities for occupational advancement (Bradbury and Conricode 2021a). In recent years, a number of UK based scholars have also drawn on the informed experiential testimonies of racialised minority coaches and other key stakeholders to ascertain the key factors underpinning their under-representation and racialised experiences in men's professional football and youth academy contexts (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon 2014, 2018; Bradbury 2021; Kilvington 2021). Broadly speaking, research of this kind has alluded to the historical and continued existence of multiple and multileveled practices and experiences of discrimination at the bodily, cultural and operational level. Firstly, with respect to the incidence of inferential racisms, racialised microaggressions, stereotyping, and othering, and the problematisation of racialised minority coaches as lacking the aptitude and intellect to excel in some coach education and workplace settings. Secondly, with respect to the continued operation and almost exclusive reliance on networks-based mechanisms of coach recruitment premised on personal recommendation and patronage, and which militate against the appointment of racialised minority coaches positioned outside of the dominant White social and cultural networks of the football industry. Taken together, such practices and experiences have been argued to be underscored by the normative and relational power of Whiteness within the professional football industry, and chime strongly with research which has identified similar patterns of systemic access and treatment discrimination in other sports coaching contexts in the UK and beyond (Apoifis, Marlin, and Bennie 2018; Cunningham 2021; Fletcher et al. 2014, Fletcher, Piggot, and North 2021; Hylton 2018; Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017a, 2020: Rankin-Wright and Hylton 2021; Regan and Feagin 2017).

More promisingly, in recent years, a number of governing and stakeholder bodies in English football have worked singularly or in tandem to develop new interventions designed to address racialised inequities in football coaching, and which at their core have utilised a series of positive action measures to this end. For the most part, these interventions have utilised softer positive action measures, such as the provision of financial and mentoring support and opportunities to undertake extended placements at men's professional clubs and national teams. For example, the Football Association (FA) Coach Inclusion and Diversity programme, the English Premier League (EPL) Elite Coach Apprenticeship Scheme, the FA and Professional Footballers Association (PFA) National Team Placement Scheme, and the EPL, EFL and PFA Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Player to Coach Scheme. Taken together, these softer positive action interventions have been designed to support racialised minority coaches to enhance their vocational and experiential learning and skill sets and heighten their employability within the football coaching marketplace, although the extent to which these processes of educative empowerment have enabled transitions into employment at men's professional football clubs remains a moot point (Bradbury and Conricode 2021a).

In contrast, other interventions have utilised potentially harder positive action measures, and which feature a stronger focus on addressing institutional barriers of racial closure embedded in normative processes and practices of coach recruitment in men's professional club and youth academy settings. Interventions of this kind have been informed by the Rooney Rule, which was first implemented in the US NFL in 2002, and which features as its core component a strongly regulated principle of 'inclusive shortlisting' for suitably qualified candidates from racialised minority backgrounds. The rule is further supported by a process of independent monitoring and the threat of significant financial penalties for non-compliance, and has been cited as a key mechanism through which the representation of racialised minority coaches has increased and been sustained over time (Duru 2021). Perhaps the most substantive positive action interventions of this kind in professional football in England is the EFL codes of coach recruitment. In accordance with the definitions of positive action provisions outlined in section 158 of the Equality Act 2010, these codes constitute a form of positive action in their attempts to better enable the participation of underrepresented groups in a given activity or workplace and are specifically described as such by the EFL (Davies and Robison 2016; EFL 2016; EHRC 2015, McCrudden 2012). The codes were introduced at 72 club youth academies (mandatory code) and professional football clubs (voluntary code) in the second, third, and fourth tiers of the English game in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Broadly speaking, the mandatory code stipulates that youth academies should run a full recruitment process and advertise publicly for all emergent coaching positions and ensure that at least one suitably qualified racialised minority candidate is shortlisted for interview. In contrast, the less tightly worded voluntary code advocates (rather than stipulates) similar sentiments of inclusive shortlisting for head coach positions at the first team level of professional clubs, but also features a series of operational caveats and opt-out clauses for clubs choosing not to adhere to this positive action measure in recruitment. Whilst the mandatory and voluntary codes differ from one another in their operational focus and scope and further still from the more strongly interventionist mechanisms embodied by the US NFL Rooney Rule, they nonetheless share similarities of emphasis and intention. In particular, in constituting a form of reflexive self-regulation and consideration forcing mechanism designed to act as a stimulus for (rather than enforce) a more equitable approach to coach recruitment across professional football club and youth academy contexts.

Prior research examining the mandatory and voluntary codes of coach recruitment has focused on their operational development, implementation, and effectiveness in increasing the representation of racialised minority coaches and establishing more inclusive practices of recruitment in men's professional football and youth academy settings respectively (Bradbury and Conricode 2021a, 2021b; Conricode 2022; Conricode and Bradbury 2021). For example, in relation to the voluntary code, these authors have drawn attention to the insular and overly defensive development and promotion of the code by the EFL and member clubs. This lack of deliberative democracy and organisational protectionism at the policy design stage has been argued to have limited opportunities to establish a more purposeful directive with a stronger emphasis on regulatory compliance. Further, the authors indicated there was little evidence to suggest that the principles embodied in the voluntary code had been engaged with or implemented by EFL clubs in practice. Rather, EFL clubs continued to conduct informal unregulated approaches to recruitment premised on identification and information gathering exercises undertaken within the private conversational spaces of the dominant White social and cultural networks of the football industry and without censure. As a result, the authors argued that the voluntary code has been for the most part ineffective in engendering its intended operational and representational impacts and allowed some predictable patterns of racial closure and homologous reproduction within the coaching workforce to continue unabated. In contrast, in relation to the mandatory code, these authors indicated a much stronger operational adherence to the implementation of the code at youth academies, and which had enabled increased opportunities for racialised minority coaches to progress through the applications to interviews pipeline in some settings. Further, the authors offered empirical evidence to suggest that the mandatory code had exhibited some success in engendering identifiable representational gains in employment at youth academies for some racialised minority coaches, and concluded that the code had provided a useful policy based platform on which youth academies (and professional clubs more broadly) might begin the process of dismantling some of the more institutionalised barriers embedded in recruitment practices in such settings.

Finally, in relation to both codes of coach recruitment, the authors also drew attention to some divergent perceptions amongst key decision makers at professional clubs and youth academies as to the relevance and applicability of these positive action measures to the organisational settings under review. However, much less is known about the ways in which ideological understandings of the racial equality and diversity landscape in football coaching has mediated the conceptual reasoning and rationales for the use of positive action measures, and informed the contours of the implementation of such measures across the interface of policy and practice. It is an examination of these interconnected relationships which form the main empirical focus of this study.

Theoretical framework

The analysis in this article is informed by several key tenets of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. There is not a concrete universal set of principles which embodies a CRT framework as scholars often draw upon tenets most applicable to their research aims and analysis. However, notwithstanding similarities and differences in empirical focus and theoretical enquiry, a central theme prioritised by most CRT scholars is the intention to critically interrogate the ways in which racisms are reproduced, reified, normalised, and resisted in society (Lopez 2006). Further, a CRT framework has also demonstrated particular utility in investigating discourses surrounding 'race'-based positive action programmes (Amoah 2023; Dorsey and Chambers 2014; Hextrum and Haslerig 2024; Lewis and Shah 2021).

Tenets most pertinent to the analysis of this study's findings are four-fold. Firstly, a critique of liberal ideologies of colour-blindness, race-neutrality, and meritocracy. In this regard, the liberal ideology of colour-blindness posits that 'race' is of little relevance to the social and occupational mobility of diverse groups in Western democracies, and that to acknowledge 'race' in the development of social and sporting policy is inherently discriminatory against non-targeted groups (Cooper et al. 2020). Similarly, 'race'-neutrality is a particularly embedded ideological informant that posits that equal opportunity is best created through the identical treatment of different ethnic and cultural groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). These neo-liberal notions often also draw on the problematic concept of abstract liberalism, which utilises ideas associated '*with political liberalism (e.g. "equal opportunity," the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g. choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters*' (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 28). On this basis, dominant groups are able to frame efforts intended to redress inopportunity for marginalised groups as excessive, unfair and violations of democratic principles of objective meritocracy (Schmalz and Mowatt 2014).

Secondly, a critique of whiteness. In this respect, the above ideologies of colour-blindness, race-neutrality, and meritocracy are central features in the operationalisation and maintenance of whiteness, which can be understood as '*a powerful ideology that serves to rationalize, legalize, and legitimize the meaning of and value ascribed to those who are defined as White and those who are not*' (Goldstein Hode and Meisenbach 2017, 4). Whiteness is normal and invisible, to the extent that White identities are often deemed oppositional to the notion of ethnicity (Leonardo 2009). Resultantly, in places and spaces where White groups are socially, culturally, and numerically dominant, such settings are often imagined as 'race-less' (Reitman 2006). Further, the definitional and discursive power of whiteness also enables leaders in such settings to determine the extent to which they tolerate difference and how to value its potentially 'enriching' qualities (Hage 2000). These ideological determinations have been argued to be calculated on the basis of whether or not racialised minorities are deemed beneficial to the betterment of White interests (Hage 2000).

Thirdly, and relatedly, the principle of interest convergence has been cited as a significant explanatory principle in examining how White interests are regularly protected and maintained within programmes designed to address historic disadvantage and inopportunity experienced by racialised minority groups (Bell 1980; Dixson and Rousseau 2005). This more critical account of the concept of interest convergence contends that any (often short-term) advancement made towards racial equity will only take place when it aligns with the interests, needs, and ideologies of dominant White groups (Harris, Barone, and Davis 2015; Milner 2008). Key to this is an appreciation of power and politics, and an understanding that interest convergence is not a neutral, balanced and evenly negotiated process. Rather, progress towards racial equity is often played out on terms deemed acceptable to dominant White groups and can instead recede when these interests diverge (Gillborn 2013: Hextrum and Haslerig 2024).

Fourthly, central to the work of many CRT scholars and related empirical and theoretical enquiry is an explicit commitment to the pursuit of social justice (Hylton 2008). For this pursuit to be realised in practice, some CRT scholars have argued that efforts towards dismantling racisms must recognise the existence, drivers, and impacts of racialised inequities, and to go beyond liberal '*approaches to intervention that merely assist marginalized persons, families, groups, or communities to acquiesce to a racist structure*' (Ortiz and Jani 2010, 183). In doing so, some scholars identify the importance of adopting a more 'race-conscious' approach within which issues of 'race' and a stronger understanding of the systemic, institutional and interpersonal informants of racialised inequities are centralised in the creation, enactment, and enforcement of policies and interventions designed to address racialised exclusions and promote inclusion (Cooper et al. 2020).

Methodology

The findings in this article are drawn from a study which examined the development, implementation, and effectiveness of one positive action measure in men's professional football coach recruitment in England. The data presented in this study is drawn from semi-structured interviews with men's professional football club Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) ($n = 4$) and Youth Academy Managers ($n = 10$) and was undertaken between June 2018 and July 2020. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, which enabled the selection of participants most likely to generate useful information. CEOs and academy managers oversee managerial and coach recruitment in their respective professional club and youth academy environments, and consequently have responsibility for the implementation of the positive action measure under review. All CEOs were White ($n = 4$), and academy managers were drawn from a mix of White ($n = 7$) and racialised minority ($n = 3$) backgrounds. Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the primary author. Thematic analysis was adopted and broadly followed the six-step approach outlined by Clarke and Braun (2018). This mode of analysis was particularly apposite for this research as it enabled the emergent themes and sub themes identified and categorised by the authors to be linked to relevant theoretical, conceptual, and practical issues (Clarke and Braun 2018). This process of interpretation and analysis therefore provided a useful means through which to represent the perceptions and attitudes of sports leaders in a coherent and accessible way for academic and policy making audiences (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Findings

Race-neutral rationales and resistance to positive action measures

Interview findings revealed a strong tendency amongst many CEOs and a significant proportion of academy managers to deny the existence of racialised inequities in professional football and youth academy coaching contexts. In doing so, these interviewees drew on dominant neo-liberal ideologies of colour-blindness and race neutrality to present a deracialised and individualised account of prospects for recruitment and occupational mobility within such settings. Not least of all, in conceptualising the football coaching recruitment process as a site of operational and cultural impartiality, where opportunities for employment were primarily perceived as dependent on the efforts and abilities of potential candidates and 'open to all' in equal measure. Three interviewees comment further in this respect:

> I don't see there being major barriers to be honest as I think with the amount of jobs there are available now, if people are proactive and they want to get involved then I think it's quite easy. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)
>
> I don't necessarily think there's anything in that at all. I think we'll always be open-minded, I'm looking for those that have got talent, who are showing the right attitude and tick our boxes. Whatever their background is or 'race' or whatever I wouldn't have an issue with that, none of us would have an issue with that. (White, CEO interviewee)
>
> I don't want to be disrespectful or dismissive of it, but I do feel that there are enough structures and systems in place that should enable the guys to get in front of the right people. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

Relatedly, a number of interviewees drew on neo-liberal discourses of egalitarianism and objectivity to position the coach recruitment process in the settings under review as inherently fair, devoid of racial bias, and ensuring the appointment of the most deserving candidates for the job, regardless of ethnicity. Such meritocratic assumptions have been argued to constitute a normative feature of the elite level coaching landscape in professional football and other sports more broadly (Bradbury and Conricode 2021b; Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017b) and to overlook the ways in which evaluation of the social and vocational skill sets of racialised minority coaches is often undertaken through an unconscious and culturally unreflexive (White) racialised lens (Bradbury and Conricode 2024). Nonetheless, the findings in this study suggest such aspersions to race-neutrality remained the dominant narrative amongst those with oversight for the coach recruitment process in the football contexts under review, especially at the first team level. Two interviewees below echo these broader sentiments:

> The simple truth of the matter is that 'race' and colour doesn't come into it. We're just looking for the best manager. (White, CEO interviewee)
>
> There's opportunities there for everyone. First, you look at the candidate, you look at what they can do and what they can bring to the club, and it genuinely makes absolutely no difference whatsoever what their background is. (White, CEO interviewee)

Further, several interviewees also downplayed the potential beneficial organisational impacts which might be incurred by establishing a more culturally diverse coaching workforce. In this respect, the deprioritisation of the salience of ethnicity as a relevant consideration in the recruitment process is to some extent reflective of the dominant discourse within elite level sport more broadly, and which has positioned diversity as '*in tension*' with broader performance goals and an '*extra task*' unrelated to organisational success (Turconi, Shaw, and Falcous 2022, 600). This has been argued to be especially the case in high performance coaching environments, where issues of racialised diversity and inclusion have been framed as irrelevant to and incompatible with notions of sporting excellence (Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017a). These discourses were also evident in this study in the testimonies of interviewees involved in the coach recruitment process. For example:

> I've got to be honest, it's not a priority of mine to have a diverse coaching staff. My priority is to have the best people available. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> For me it's not about you have to have a diversity, I don't think we do, I don't think that's important in my opinion, I think, well what is important is we have the right people in the right places who can do the jobs. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

Resultantly, some interviewees indicated a strong conceptual aversion to the redistributive principles embedded in the mandatory and voluntary codes of coach recruitment and to the notion of race-based positive action measures more broadly. In this respect, such measures were felt to have the potential to corrupt the perceived sanctity of established 'meritocratic' practices of coach recruitment and to constitute a form of 'undeserved favouritism' and 'preferential treatment' towards racialised minority coaches. These perceptions seemed especially apparent amongst interviewees who also expressed concerns that potential beneficiaries of positive action measures of this kind from racialised minority backgrounds might lack the skill sets and competencies to fulfil their coaching duties to the requisite standard or to excel as coaches under 'normal' conditions. Two interviewees comment further:

> That [mandatory code], for me, contaminates the recruitment process. We're then recruiting on 'race' or background rather than on candidate. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> You've just got to be careful that it is all about appointing the best person for the job and we don't basically put people into jobs that then suddenly within 6 months you're extending their probation and then not being good enough and you're having to get rid of them. (White, CEO interviewee)

The ideological resistance to the implementation of positive action measures identified above have been argued to constitute a commonplace feature of the football and sports coaching landscape more broadly (Lusted, Kilvington, and Qureshi 2021). Further, they arguably also draw attention to the ways in White groups utilise a series of discursive strategies to rationalise and maintain patterns of racialised advantage and stratification across a range of societal and sporting contexts. Especially when their over-representation is challenged and when efforts to redress patterns and processes of White supremacy and privilege are proffered in response (DiAngelo 2011). In this respect, several interviewees also articulated a form of 'racial whataboutism' which equated the under-representation of racialised minority coaches with the 'normative' and normalised representational imbalances experienced by other marginalised groups in professional football and youth academy coaching contexts. In doing so, interviewees utilised rationales of naturalisation in which the perceived 'natural order of things' was used to legitimate and underpin resistance to the 'imposition' of positive action measures designed to establish more equitable processes of coach recruitment and diversify the coaching workforce. For example:

> I think we're going to end up with a situation where we've got Black and Asian Minority Ethnics at some level of standing in the game. Now, we're going to go 'you know what, well actually that it's still not represented correctly, because there's not enough Asians and too many Blacks. Or there's no women and it's all men'. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> I just don't feel clubs should be restricted. Where do you draw the line? There's a lack of Scottish managers so therefore do you interview a non-English manager to make sure you've got a Scot, or a Welsh or a Spanish or a French manager? I just think clubs would always look at the best candidate, they're not going to look at anything to do with their origins or whatever. (White, CEO interviewee)

As a result of this contested reception and rationalised opposition to positive action measures, both the mandatory and voluntary codes of coach recruitment were considered by some interviewees to constitute an unmeritocratic, unwarranted and anti-competitive encumbrance to the everyday concerns of professional football clubs and youth academies. In particular, in inhibiting operational autonomy to identify and sanction coaching appointments without external monitoring and regulation and related efforts to recruit the perceived 'best person for the job'. Whilst for some academy manager interviewees such reticence was informed by a belief in the equitability of existing processes and practices at youth academies, for many CEO it appeared exacerbated by additional pressures to appoint first team head coaching staff quickly and during periods of in-season crisis management. Two interviewees comment further in this respect:

> I would hate to think that I would need to follow BAME guidelines to recruit someone in order to recruit the best person for the job. I'd hate to think that I couldn't run a fair and appropriate recruitment process without people or without the game assuming that I'm going to have a bias towards non-BAME candidates. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> I just think whatever time of the year you change your manager you need to appoint as quickly as possible. We got absolutely battered the last time because it took us something like 14 days to get a manager. The fans were singing against the chairman saying we want a manager and all that kind of stuff and it was only 2 weeks but it seemed like an age at the time. Certainly, from our point of view *former manager* was my number one target but I'd be wasting other people's time by actually interviewing other people just to make sure I ticked that box. (White, CEO interviewee)

Finally, interview findings indicated that the ideological adherence to philosophies of 'race neutrality' and conceptual resistance to positive action measures exhibited by some interviewees, had resulted in the non-implementation of the codes of coach recruitment at some professional football clubs and youth academies. In this respect, a number of interviewees suggested that the codes of coach recruitment and the principles of racial equity embedded within them had done little to disrupt some long established and commonly practiced networks based methods of coach recruitment in some of the football contexts under review. Three interviewees below reflect further on the resultant non-implementation of the codes and related practices of operational continuity in coach recruitment:

> It [voluntary code] was in place when we hired [club manager]. We fired [club previous manager] on the Saturday and our Chairman wanted a new manager in place by the Monday. So, we did it in one day. We only interviewed one candidate. It wasn't really an interview, and I guess that's the problem, is that it's just not as structured a process as you think it should be. (White, CEO Interviewee)

> It's not really impacted on anything because like I said earlier, I'll always be looking for the most positive kind of candidates that we've got… it's not really affected us within the coaching department much. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> I don't really think that we're doing anything 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. (White, CEO interviewee)

Race conscious rationales and support for positive action measures

Interview findings indicated that amongst a smaller number of predominantly academy manager interviewees drawn from dominant and marginalised ethnicities, there was a stronger level of 'problem awareness' as to the existence and types of racialised inequities experienced by racialised minority coaches in football coaching contexts. In particular, these interviewees alluded to the ways in which racialised minority identities have been constructed, problematised and measured unfavourably against imagined White norms and idealised standards of social and sporting acceptability in such settings (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon 2018; Hextrum 2020; Hylton and Lawrence 2016). In some cases, this was felt by interviewees to have led some key power brokers at clubs to question the competencies and suitability of racialised minority coaches, and to favour the appointment of White coaches with similar perceived norms, values and behaviours. Two interviewees comment further in this respect:

> People that have come from a Black and Asian culture may have been brought up a different way, and that can sometimes be perceived to be less professional. I think when a manager goes you know what I'm going to appoint the next ex-player to work with me, sometimes they'll go right, I'm going to go for the right man who's really professional and works hard, and they tend to sometimes be seen as the White players. (Racialised Minority, Academy Manager interviewee)

> I think within the game and within society there is definitely a subconscious prejudice about BAME candidates and their ability to take managerial roles more generally. I think that stems from the roles that they've played on the pitch. (White, CEO interviewee)

Relatedly, several interviewees also referred to institutionalised barriers to career progression embedded in the reliance on networks based approaches to coach recruitment at many professional football clubs and some youth academies. Such approaches were felt to militate against the appointment of racialised minority coaches positioned outside of the dominant (White) social and cultural insider networks of the football industry and informal marketplace of coach recruitment in such settings. In this respect, there was a recognition amongst these more 'race conscious' interviewees that such closed mechanisms of recruitment had engendered deleterious impacts in limiting equality of opportunities and outcomes for racialised minority coaches. Further, they were felt to have perpetuated and sustained patterns of (White) homologous reproduction in the football coaching profession over time (Bradbury 2021). Two interviewees articulate these themes further:

> We do now advertise at part-time level, but that's not always been the case over the years. Whether that might have been a barrier in the past the fact that there wasn't interviews and advertisements of part-time coaching roles, that might have been a factor in the past

> without it being a conscious thing. So what may have happened is a part-time position becomes available because a coach leaves, so then you start thinking well do we know anybody, you speak to the people who may be interested in a part-time coaching position. So, let's say it was someone like myself and I'm not from a BAME background, I'm White and it might be that most of my contacts are also White. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> Before this [mandatory recruitment code] came in, that [public advertisement of roles] never happened. I'd agree to an extent that before it was like the jobs for the boys' type thing; 'oh I know him, I used to play with him' or 'he worked with me in my last club' type of thing. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

Further, amongst some of these more 'race conscious' interviewees there was also a strong tendency to recognise the potential organisational benefits of establishing a more culturally diverse workforce and to view racialised minority coaches as an important asset through which to enhance operational effectiveness and meet performance related goals. Such business case rationales reflect a developing consensus amongst key stakeholders at some sports organisations in the UK more broadly and can be identified in the EDI policy rhetoric of such bodies with respect to commitments to diversify the senior leadership workforce in sports, including in sports coaching. Further, in recognising and embracing the perceived value and utility of ethnic diversity within the coaching workforce, some interviewees in this study also referred to an 'unproblematic' interest convergence between diversity related and corporate agendas in such settings. For example:

> If you've got people who more represents your customer base, if you've got people with different perspectives, with different levels of creativity, different thinking on things then your business is going to operate better. I think for me when we have a young player who's come to Europe from Africa to play, would it help him if he's got members of the coaching team who are who are Black and have been on a similar journey? Absolutely. In the same way having foreign people so that people struggling with language difficulties or cultural things I think it makes absolute sense. I think both from a training ground perspective and a kind of commercial perspective the more breadth you've got in those areas and the more diversity the more beneficial it is for your business. (White, CEO interviewee)

> The more you broaden as a club, the more you look wider in terms of your recruitment then probably it's going to lead to you considering individuals that you wouldn't have before and it may just open your eyes and there may be people that suddenly you feel can make the football club stronger. (White, CEO interviewee)

More specifically, these interviewees alluded to the perceived 'added value' of racialised minority coaches and often framed them as a positive pedagogical and intercultural 'resource' through which to extend and diversify the 'cultural options' and operational capacities of the football coaching settings under review. This was especially the case at youth academies where interviewees cited the potential of racialised minority coaches to engender greater 'cultural connectivity' with young players and their families from racialised minority backgrounds. Also, to facilitate an enhanced understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion, and encourage more culturally reflexive coaching practice amongst White coaches in such settings. Taken together, there was a strong sense amongst these interviewees that efforts to establish a more culturally diverse coaching workforce might help increase operational functionality and maximise player and coach performance. Two academy managers below articulate these themes further:

> We do believe in role models for the boys and particularly in our club. Some of our [young] Black players have a different relationship with some of our Black coaches than with our other coaches, not on every single case, but I think there's definitely a pattern. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> It's fantastic if we can get a real mix because for example a Black coach from inner-city [location] may have had some different experiences that he can share with us as staff that can help us get better and better understand the kind of Black inner-city areas of [location]. It broadens our horizons and allows us to have more options and more capabilities. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

Resultantly, taken together, these more 'race conscious' interviewees exhibited a stronger conceptual buy-in to the principles of racial equity embodied in codes of coach recruitment, and to the applicability and relevance of positive action measures of this kind to the professional football and youth academy contexts under review. In particular, for some interviewees, in recognising the inequitable social locations and histories of racialised minority coaches and considering how the normative application of neutral criteria approaches to coach recruitment in such settings has tended to sustain rather than redress patterns of racialised disadvantage over time (Bradbury and Conricode 2021a; Kilvington 2021). In this respect, these interviewees conceptualised the codes of coach recruitment as a useful policy based platform through which to better enable an important operational shift towards a more formalised and equitable approach to coach recruitment. Two interviewees comment further:

> I just think it does need a bespoke option or bespoke solution because if we keep doing what we're currently doing then the numbers aren't going to improve because we've been trying to do that already. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> I think the introduction of the mandatory requirements for academy coaching interviews can only be a good thing and I think that it will enable (racialised minority) coaches to gain experience that they necessarily haven't got, gradually over time. I think that will be the biggest thing that will make the difference. (White, CEO interviewee)

Further, for these and other interviewees, the codes of coach recruitment were perceived as a useful operational mechanism through which to increase the numerical representation of racialised minority coaches and to diversify the coaching workforce at professional clubs and youth academies. This was especially the case amongst interviewees who had previously drawn on more instrumental 'business case' rationales, and which allude to the enhanced organisational functionality and effectiveness of establishing a culturally diverse coaching workforce. For these latter interviewees, conceptual support for the codes of coach recruitment was in part underscored by broader notions as to the perceived value and utility of cultural diversity to meet a series of key performance related operational agendas in some football coaching contexts. Further, the codes were felt by 'race conscious' interviewees more broadly to establish a mechanism through which equality of opportunities and outcomes for racialised minority coaches might be better realised in the future. Two interviewees reflect further:

> I can see benefits to it for sure, because I think it will create opportunity for racialised minority coaches to at least go to the interview process. (White, Academy Manager Interviewee)

> For me you just want the right people for doing the right job and to give them an opportunity, if that's what you've got to do and bring out a rule then that's what it's got to be. (Racialised Minority, Academy Manager interviewee)

Finally, interview findings indicated that in such circumstances where interviewees exhibited a strong ideological commitment to notions of racial equity and proffered conceptual support for positive action measures designed to address racialised inequities and promote cultural diversity in the football coaching workforce, this increased the likelihood of the implementation of the mandatory and voluntary codes of coach recruitment in practice. This was especially the case at youth academies where interviewees were more likely to exhibit greater cultural reflexivity as to the institutionalised nature of racialised barriers to coaching career progression and where a mixture of overlapping social justice and diversity rationales in support of positive action measures were displayed. Further, there was a general consensus amongst these more 'race conscious' interviewees that the implementation of the codes of coach recruitment indicated an operational 'break from the past' and reflected an inclusive shift in recruitment practices in accordance with UK equalities legislation and the increasingly multi-cultural impulses of the modern game. Further, for some interviewees, the implementation of the codes of coach recruitment were also considered to be a useful means through which to encourage and access a more demographically and vocationally rich talent pool of prospective coaching candidates than had been the case in the past, and to heighten the quality of the coaching workforce. Two interviewees below summarise these themes and reflect on some recently amended processes and related outcomes at their respective clubs.

> We've had problems in the past where we haven't gone through that process. Generally, it's (mandatory code) helped everything just move to transparency in what we do. Everything has to be really clear and concise and overall transparent to everybody. There's got to be a fairness to what you do. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

> We've implemented that across the board. Any job that goes out has to be advertised through a set amount of channels so previously you could simply put it on your club's media and that would be all it is but now it's got to be advertised through the EFL. I think the rule is there with good intent and ultimately you still hire the best person for the job. It's just allowing an opportunity for people to be considered and to put forward their ideas. (White, Academy Manager interviewee)

Discussion

This article has drawn on the testimonies of CEOs and academy managers to ascertain their adherence to 'race neutral' or 'race conscious' philosophies and understandings of the racial equality and diversity landscape of football coaching, and the development of related rationales towards the operationalisation of positive action measures in men's professional football club and youth academy contexts. Further, the article has also examined the ways in which such ideologically informed conceptualisations have underpinned the ensuing non-implementation or implementation of such measures in practice. It is to a critical discussion of the findings to which the article now turns.

Firstly, findings indicated that almost all CEOs and the majority of academy managers exhibited 'race neutral' philosophies and related understandings of the racial equality and diversity landscape of the football coaching contexts under review. In particular, in denying the existence and impacts of racialised inequities and in conceptualising professional football clubs and youth academies as meritocratic and egalitarian spaces within which processes of coach recruitment were operationally and culturally impartial and devoid of racial bias.

Further, these interviewees questioned the salience of ethnicity as an operational consideration in recruitment, and downplayed the potential organisational benefits of establishing a culturally diverse workforce in such settings. Whilst neo-liberal perspectives of this kind constitute a normative feature of the high performance sports coaching environment more broadly and tend to consider upward occupational mobility as a natural end-product of talent and hard work, they have also been argued to present a highly individualised and deracialised account of social and sporting relations (Bradbury and Conricode 2021b; Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017b). In particular, in framing ongoing racialised inequities as resulting from the individual and cultural deficit of racialised minority coaches, rather than as stemming from the routinised practices of individuals and organisations at an institutional level (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon 2018). In doing so, such narratives arguably strip the realities of success or failure from the deeply racialised sports coaching contexts in which they occur, including the football settings under review (Bradbury and Conricode 2024; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2017b).

As a result of the adherence to ‘race neutral’ philosophies identified above, almost all CEOs and the majority of academy mangers exhibited a strong conceptual aversion to the principles of racial equity embodied in the codes of coach recruitment. In particular, positive action measures of this kind were considered to constitute a form of ‘preferential treatment’ and ‘racial favouritism’, and an unwarranted and anti-competitive corruption of pre-existing ‘meritocratic’ practices of coach recruitment at football clubs. In doing so, interviewees drew on the concept of abstract liberalism to frame the codes of coach recruitment as a violation of principles of ‘objective meritocracy’, and to subsequently legitimise their ideological and operational resistance to such measures (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Bradbury and Conricode 2021b). In this respect, the contested reception of positive action measures in coach recruitment in this study is to some extent reflective of the organisational reticence towards racial equality policies in sport more broadly, especially where the implementation of such measures requires structural change (Long, Robinson, and Spracklen 2005; Lusted 2013, 2014; Spracklen, Hylton, and Long 2006). Further, the tendency of key organisational actors to justify that such measures are not required in sports and to ‘*block any action that would implement equality and diversity initiatives by justifying that there is no need for such commitments*’ (Rankin-Wright, Hylton, and Norman 2016, 362). Relatedly, such ‘race-neutral’ rationales were also underscored in this study through the operation of a series of discursive strategies which naturalise existing patterns of racialised disadvantage and rationalise such inequities by drawing false equivalence with other under-represented and marginalised groups. Such strategies arguably bear resemblance to those techniques which have sought to critique and undermine social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, by exclaiming that *all* demographic groups experience forms of oppression and inequity (West, Greenland, and van Laar 2021). Such strategies are arguably also demonstrative of the fragility of Whiteness, especially when dominant White populations are confronted with measures which seek to disrupt patterns and processes of White supremacy and privilege, and stimulate a more equitable redistribution of racialised power across a range of societal and sporting contexts (DiAngelo 2011, Hylton 2018).

Resultantly, the ‘race neutral’ ideological value positions and related conceptual aversion to notions of ‘race’ equity exhibited by organisational actors identified above, is argued to have underscored the non-implementation of the codes of coach recruitment at many professional football clubs and some youth academies in this study. This has enabled some key power brokers to bypass proposed positive action measures and persist in conducting informal and unregulated approaches to coach recruitment without reflection. In this respect, the codes of coach recruitment have been argued to have been for the most part ineffective in engendering meaningful operational and cultural change, and to have done little to disrupt some predictable patterns of racial closure and homologous reproduction in the football coaching workforce, especially at first team level (Bradbury and Conricode 2021b). Findings here chime with and extend the work of scholars who have alluded to the disjuncture between the high profile institutional commitments of sports organisations in the UK towards EDI more broadly, and the lack of action to ensure their meaningful implementation by organisational actors at the local level (Bury 2015, Shaw 2007; Dwight and Biscomb 2018). This has been argued to be especially the case in relation to policy interventions designed to bring about substantive organisational change, but where their lack of application in practice has rendered them as gestural, symbolic and non-performing substitutes for action (Ahmed 2012).

Secondly, and conversely, findings indicated that a smaller number of CEOs and academy managers exhibited more ‘race conscious’ philosophies and related understandings of the racial equality and diversity landscape of the football coaching contexts under review. In particular, in recognising the existence and impacts of institutionalised barriers to career progression embedded within the coach recruitment process and ensuing inequities experienced by racialised minority coaches. Beyond these more social and moral orientations towards the recognition of racialised injustice, some ‘race conscious’ interviewees also drew on instrumental ‘business case’ rationales to acknowledge and celebrate diverse racialised identities in football coaching, and to recognise the potential organisational benefits of establishing a more culturally diverse coaching workforce. In particular, in framing racialised minority coaches as a pedagogical and intercultural ‘resource’ through which to diversify and extend the ‘cultural options’ of professional football clubs and youth academies. Such diversity orientated rationales reflect a developing consensus amongst some stakeholders at some sports organisations nationally, and can be identified in the EDI policy rhetoric of such bodies with respect to public commitments to increase the representation of racialised minority (and other marginalised) groups in all aspects of the senior leadership workforce, including in sports coaching (UK Sport 2021).

As a result of the development of and stronger adherence to more ‘race conscious’ philosophies, a small number of CEOs and academy managers drew on some differing but overlapping social justice and business case rationales to exhibit a conceptual buy-in to the principles of ‘race’ equity embodied in the positive action measures under review. For example, in some cases, such perspectives were underscored by stronger social and moral justifications and a recognition of the potential of positive action measures to act as a progressive and remedial policy platform on which to establish a more equitable and inclusive operational approach to coach recruitment. In other cases, such perspectives were informed by ‘business case’ rhetoric and related diversity orientated rationales and which allude to the potential organisational benefits of establishing a culturally diverse workforce, and the perceived value and utility of racialised minority coaches to enable professional football clubs and youth academies to meet strategic aims and objectives. However, in this latter respect, such conceptual support for the codes of coach recruitment was arguably informed by an (un)problematic conceptualisation of racialised minority coaches through a distinctly commodified lens of ‘diversity as competitive advantage’, and related interest convergence between notions of cultural diversity and performance related operational agendas (Gardner, Love, and Waller 2023; Spaaij, Knoppers, and Jeanes 2020). Whilst such conceptualisations appear to be reflective of a developing expediency and 'palatable mantra' through which to legitimate support for race-based positive action measures in football coaching and sport in the UK more broadly, from a CRT perspective they are arguably also demonstrative of the ways in which the value associated with racialised bodies and identities becomes heightened when they are considered by powerful White stakeholders to meet White expectations and benefit White interests (Bradbury and Conricode 2024; Goldstein Hode and Meisenbach 2017; Hage 2000). Further, they arguably also downplay the uneven racialised power relations embedded in the notion and practice of interest convergence, and the ways in which the pace and parameters of progress towards racial equality is often played out on terms deemed acceptable to dominant White individuals and institutions (Corr, Atwater, and Southall 2022; Gillborn 2013; Harris, Barone, and Davis 2015; Hextrum and Haslerig 2024). Relatedly, whilst such diversity rationales have underscored a partial operational turn in shifting the racial equality and diversity landscape in the football coaching contexts under review, they have arguably also obfuscated the structural and cultural antecedents of racialised inequities in such settings and left the deep structures and normative cultural assumptions which inform them relatively untouched (Shaw 2007; Turconi and Shaw 2023). Not least of all, in drawing on White crafted ideologies and discourses to frame racialised minority coaches as 'other than' and differently abled' to their White peers, and as 'best suited' to more developmental and mentoring rather than high performance coaching roles. Such conceptualisations have been argued to have led to the prioritised evaluation of the perceived cultural rather than vocational abilities and preferences of racialised minority coaches in some football settings (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon 2018). Further, to have had unintended consequences in facilitating differentiated career opportunities and pathways for racialised minority coaches and perpetuating and sustaining the racialised distribution of labour in the football (and other sports) coaching workforce (Bradbury and Conricode 2024; Corr, Atwater, and Southall 2022; Cunningham 2021; Turick and Bopp 2016).

Nonetheless, regardless of the extent to which interviewees purported to socially orientated remedial or instrumentally informed diversity rationales as underpinning their conceptual support for the principles of racial equity embodied in positive action measures, these more 'race conscious' organisational actors indicated a strong operationalisation of such philosophies in practice. In particular, with respect to the resultant operational implementation of the codes of coach recruitment in the football coaching settings under review. This was especially the case in relation to the mandatory code at youth academies where the establishment of inclusive shortlisting has been argued to have enabled more equitable processes of coach recruitment and led to a representational increase in racialised minority coaches in some youth academies (Conricode and Bradbury 2021). In this respect, these findings chime with the claims of CRT that liberalism alone is not enough to address the institutionalised informants of racialised inequities, and that more interventionist, transformative and redistributive approaches are required to disrupt and reconfigure the processes and practices which have created and sustained the status quo in sports coaching, and sports more broadly (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon 2018; Kilvington 2021; Hylton 2008, 2018). Further, the findings in this study indicate that such interventions are more likely to be operationalised in practice where organisational actors with responsibility for their implementation exhibit more ‘race conscious’ philosophies and rationales and exhibit stronger conceptual buy-in to their intended aims and objectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is the contention of the authors that efforts to address racialised inequities in elite level football (and other sports) coaching should be strongly interventionist and transformational in their focus and scope, and should utilise contextually proportionate positive action measures to achieve these aims. In particular, with respect to the establishment of inclusive shortlisting as a means through which to enable opportunities for racialised minority coaches to access the interactional spaces of interview encounters and ensure more equitable and transparent approaches to coach recruitment. However, in doing so, much stronger consideration should be paid to examining the ways in which the ideological standpoints of key power brokers inform and mediate their conceptual opposition to or support for positive action interventions, and inhibit or enable their implementation in practice. As indicated in this study, such philosophies and rationales are an important informant of the extent and ways in which such measures are contested and resisted, or endorsed and operationalised, at an institutional level.

In this respect, the authors propose that the design and implementation of positive action measures such as the codes of coach recruitment should form one element of a more holistic and overarching effort to address racialised inequities in the football coaching settings under review. Further, they should be accompanied by the delivery of targeted educational activities for key stakeholders with responsibility for the recruitment and promotion of coaching staff at professional football clubs and youth academies. In particular, such activities should encourage key stakeholders to critically reflect on their ideological understanding of the racial equality and diversity landscape in football coaching, and seek to enable a shift in thinking from ‘race neutral’ to more ‘race conscious’ perspectives. In doing so, such activities should pay attention to heightening awareness of the existence, types and impacts of racialised barriers in football coaching and how ‘race neutral’ approaches in coach recruitment have tended to sustain rather than redress patterns of racialised disadvantage over time. Relatedly, such activities should also contextualise the relevance and applicability of targeted positive action measures to the football settings under review, and encourage a conceptual shift amongst key stakeholders within which notions of racial equity, difference and equitable treatment become more strongly valued and prioritised.

Further, it is the contention of the authors that any such educational activities and related considerations should be underscored by a strongly social justice orientated rationale, within which efforts to dismantle the unequal racialised power relations embedded in the normative structures, cultures, and practices of coach recruitment is prioritised. In doing so, such activities should also offer a considered critique of the conceptual efficacy of instrumental ‘business case’ rationales which draw on processes of racialised reification to frame the utility of racialised minority coaches through a commodified cost-benefits lens of high performing (and by proxy, low performing) diversity and performance related advantage. Further, those associated notions of interest convergence which have become increasingly popularised as a means through which to appeal to the market forces and commercial impulses of modern football, but which have arguably also contributed to sustaining structures and cultures of Whiteness and related racialised power relations in the sport. In this respect, a social justice orientated approach to educational activities should challenge and disrupt ideologies and discourses which have led to the essentialisation of racialised bodies and identities to meet powerful White interests and corporate agendas, and refocus attention towards the social and moral justifications for the implementation of positive action measures.

Taken together, it is the contention of the authors that the educational activities identified above would stimulate a more social justice orientated 'race conscious' and culturally reflexive appreciation of the racial equality and diversity landscape in football coaching, and help garner stronger conceptual support for and the operational implementation of positive action measures in coach recruitment. In this respect, such activities might also offer a useful pedagogical platform on which to challenge, disrupt, and dismantle the racialised structures, cultures, and practices of White supremacy and privilege embedded in such environs, and with significant transferability to other sporting contexts. Finally, it might enable key power brokers at professional football club and youth academies to conceptualise and operationalise positive action measures in such ways that truly result in 'the right person, for the right job'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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