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“If you do anything to my little fresher – I’ll kill you” : Stories of transition in British varsity football

Daniel Clayton

University of Warwick

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***“If you do anything to my little fresher – I’ll kill you”:* Stories of transition in British varsity football**

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Abstract

The last decade has witnessed increasing attempts to investigate and understand the concept of transition in the context of sport. Such studies have tended to focus on migratory and career transitions as experienced by individual athletes (e.g. Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Schinke et al., 2013). This paper attempts to address a gap in the literature with a novel approach predicated on two claims: first, that transition encompasses not only the spatiotemporal but also movement through social boundaries, and second, that “humans are essentially storytelling creatures” (McGannon & Smith, 2015: 80). Drawing on interview data collected from a single British university football team over a 3-year period, this work seeks to understand the transitional experiences of new players as they cross the social boundaries of the team, and illuminate how they construct, and make sense of, transitional experiences through stories. Following Ochs & Capps’ (2001) notion of “tellability”, it is argued that player story selection was not arbitrary but specifically selected as a discursive means of making sense of team transitional experiences in the overall context of their entering university. Revealing a team environment humming with laddish masculinity (Dempster, 2009; Francis, 1999), transitional experience was retold as a process of compliance and reward: compliance with laddish ideals of behaviour resulted in the reward of friendship, protection, status and place in the team’s community in the unfamiliar space of university.

Keywords

UK; university; transition; narrative analysis; lad culture; masculinities

1 Introduction

According to Benson et al. “the experience of entering a new sports team environment is fraught with potential ambiguities surrounding how athletes will fulfil their role as a newcomer” (2016, p. 463). While the last decade has witnessed increasing attempts to investigate and understand the concept of transition in the context of sport there is a dearth of studies investigating how individuals experience transition in teams. Existing work has tended

to focus on migratory and career transitions as experienced by individual athletes (e.g. Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Schinke et al., 2013; Ryba et al., 2016). This paper aims to provide a contribution to understandings of transition into teams that is potentially valuable to both sport sociolinguistics and sports psychology by investigating transitional experience through a narrative lens.

Drawing on interview data collected from a single British university association football team over a three-year period, this paper seeks to understand the transitional experiences of new players as they cross social boundaries. It will be argued that this particular version of transitional reality as retold through selected stories of team members is predicated on a new player's adjustment to the highly gendered environment of the team and subsequent ability to align with practices and behaviours associated with laddish masculinity (Dempster, 2009; Francis, 1999). In this respect, transition into the team was retold as a process of compliance and reward: compliance with laddish ideals of behaviour resulted in the reward of friendship, protection, status and place in the team's community in the unfamiliar space of university.

However, the place of gender in this paper is somewhat complicated by tension between ideals of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. strength and independence), and team member identity construction, where stories involving self-portrayals of vulnerability, weakness and subservience were evident. Traits not typically associated with hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2010).

Overall, this paper aims to place the team members' rich and illuminating stories of entry into the club within the gendered context of British varsity sport.

2.1 *Transition in sport*

Transition has been traditionally understood as the change individuals experience as they go through some major life event with such periods argued to involve a need to adapt to new relationships, routines, assumptions, etc. (Schlossberg, 1981). Following this perspective, for example, both a new team member's entry into, and departure from, a sports team, represent forms of transitional experience. More recently, however, understandings of transition have sought to move beyond framing the experience as a specific response to some fracture in one's life circumstances. In this respect, Angouri maintains that transitions "...form a normal part of everyday life" and can include movement across various borders, be they physical, spatiotemporal, life stage, intellectual or social (2017, p. 1). Transition to a university sports team may encompass the crossing of all of the above listed boundaries and be contextually relevant to specific domains and aspects of the experience. This complexity marks out such teams as particularly interesting sites for research.

Scholarly work on transitions in sport has predominantly focused on the following experiences: transition into sport, transition out of sport and migratory transition. Regarding the latter focus, academics in this area have highlighted the challenges faced by athletes undertaking transnational journeys and entering culturally alien sporting environments (e.g. Adams, 2019; Agergaard, 2008; Elliot, 2014; Richardson et al., 2012; Ryba et al., 2016; Schinke et al., 2013). The migratory and cultural hurdles that individuals are required to navigate are argued to be numerous and diverse relating to both on and off-field considerations. Transition into sport has received attention, particularly in the domain of football, where greater investment in youth development by professional teams has been concurrent with earnest attempts by sports scholars to chart the experiences of young players at the boundary of professionalism (Cook et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014; Morley et al., 2014; Richardson et al.,

2012; Weedon, 2012). The step-up from academy scholar to professional footballer is noted as particularly challenging, with only a fraction of players successfully navigating the transition (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Researchers focusing on transition out of sport have considered how voluntarily or involuntarily retired athletes come to terms with life outside of sport (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Grove et al., 1997; Park, Lavellee & Tod, 2013). How individuals reconstruct identity in the aftermath of a sports' career has been a central focus for scholars in this area. For example, Brown and Potrac's (2009) investigation of deselected English academy footballers highlighted the emotional impact of leaving football in the form a disturbed sense of self.

Although this body of work provides useful insights, there are theoretical and contextual considerations worthy of more in-depth unpacking. Regarding the former, conspicuous in their absence are studies focusing specifically on the processes involved when new players join teams and make the step from outsider to team member. Teams often involve complex social structures that incoming athletes are required to navigate and are underpinned by situated power dynamics (Benson et al., 2016). Power in this respect can refer to the presence of official and unofficial leaders who influence what form a specific team environment will take (Cotterill, 2012; Fransen et al., 2018; Schnurr et al., 2021). For example, formally prescribed leaders in the form of coaches and captains may introduce specific team values and expectations to team members (Loughead et al., 2006).

Furthermore, sports teams are located within specific socio-cultural contexts that also serve to influence the formation of a team's social environment. For example, men's professional football in England has been labelled "hyper-masculine" e.g. not revealing pain, playing injured, etc. (Richardson et al., 2012) and associated with heightened expectations of gendered performativity. Moving beyond the professional sporting domain, however, British university sport as the context of transition represents a compelling but under-researched area.

2.2 *The social environment of British university male sports clubs*

There are a number of factors that make university and collegiate sports teams distinct from professional organisations and serve to create unique transitional experiences. First, due to the nature of university education, varsity teams have extremely high turnover with players joining and leaving as a consequence of beginning or ending tertiary education, respectively (Johnson & Donnelly, 2004). Second, formal leadership in the form of coaching staff may be absent with university clubs instead run by elected captains who subsequently are expected to both lead and play alongside other team members. In accordance with the high rate of turnover such captaincy is short-lived. For example, the captains in the team investigated in this research were only elected to their position for the duration of a single academic year. Hence, the social environments of typical British university sports clubs are player focused and constantly in flux.

While player turnover and shifting team dynamics are important considerations, an appreciation of the social context of university and normative practices in male varsity sports clubs is fundamental to understanding the transitional experiences of players joining such teams. Men's sport has been traditionally connected with the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2010; Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt & Connell, 2005). Through this lens, male sports teams are seen as sites where team members who most readily espouse the appropriate masculine values are afforded greater social capital (Anderson, 2010). Such preferred "masculine" traits are argued to include courage, strength, aggression, autonomy, athleticism, risk-taking, adventure, stoicism and success (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

While scholars have noted push back against these traits and the potential for “softer” or more inclusive masculinities to be present in male sports teams (see Anderson, 2010), ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity still remain.

Indeed, in the context of British varsity sport hegemonic masculinity takes on a form heavily linked with “laddism” (Clayton & Humberstone, 2006; Clayton, 2013; Dempster, 2009, 2010; Nichols, 2018). Early theorisations of laddism associated the concept with white, working class men and anti-intellectual and anti-establishment attitudes (Willis, 1977). However, more contemporary understandings have typically connected lad identity performance with young white middle class men, particularly in the form of university students (Phipps & Young, 2013). Indeed, Dempster (2009) has argued that laddism forms a template of sorts of hegemonic masculinity for young British males in university sports and associated practices and behaviours bear this out. Francis offers a more specific definition of lads:

“A young, exclusively male, group, and the hedonistic practices popularly associated with such groups (for example, ‘having a laugh’, alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviours, objectifying women, and an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine)”. (1999, p. 357).

Although according to Phipps “the figure of the “lad” has especially come to dominate discussions around masculinities in UK higher education” (2017, 1), expectations of alignment with idealised lad behaviour are arguably most apparent in university sports teams (Clayton, 2013; Dempster, 2009). Moreover, sports such as football and rugby have been reported as bastions of laddishness at university (Dempster, 2009; Jeffries, 2019; Sparkes et al., 2007). Hence the transitional experience of a new player might be expected to be coloured by behaviours argued to be pervasive in such groups. One practice that has become almost synonymous with laddish performance and university male sports teams is excessive alcohol consumption (Anderson et al. 2012; Conroy & De Visser, 2013; Clayton & Humberstone, 2006; Clayton & Harris, 2008; Dempster, 2009, 2011; Nichols, 2018; Sparkes et al., 2007). Indeed, heavy drinking has been noted to form one component of a laddish trinity, which in the perspicuous words of Edwards, includes: “drinking, football and fucking” (1997, p. 82).

Studies focusing on the drinking practices of male university students and varsity sports teams suggest that such behaviour centres on drinking games (Dempster, 2011; Zamboanga et al., 2017). These games are argued to be high risk as participation can lead to individuals becoming severely intoxicated with the prescribed rules being specifically designed to facilitate heavy drinking (Zamboanga & Tomaso, 2014). The recent deaths of young male students on British campuses underscores the risk associated with such participation (Rawlinson, 2018). Though limited, research focusing on male teams in British varsity sport has illuminated the competitive edge that can accompany such drinking as part of the performance of laddish masculinity (Dempster, 2011). In this respect competitiveness as a highly valued masculine trait in male sport is transferred from the football pitch to the club bar. Indeed, being able to “hold one’s drink” is noted as a particular test of masculinity (De Visser & Smith, 2007). It can be reasoned then that for new team members, adherence to the above practices might form a central part of their transitional experiences. While this notion may seem counter-intuitive with regards to understanding how membership is earned in what is ostensibly an athletic club, previous work has highlighted the connection between drinking prowess and team selection in British university football teams (Dempster, 2011).

2.3 *Entering varsity clubs*

Entry into a university sports teams entails a number of events that are necessary for admittance. For example, varsity clubs conduct team trials where the sporting ability of hundreds of hopeful student-athletes is tested and the most talented are selected. However, away from the sports field one salient aspect of university sport are the highly ritualised entrance events that take place in the form of initiation ceremonies. Common in North American contexts (Allan & Madden, 2012), and increasingly problematic for British universities (Groves et al., 2012), initiations may be regarded as key gateway events for varsity sports teams (Johnson, 2011). Initiations have been traditionally described as ceremonies where new players are required to undergo tests of fortitude (Anderson et al., 2012) that serve to both introduce newcomers (club freshers) to the team's pervading ethos and existing power structure (Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Holman, 2004), and facilitate group bonding as successful "initiates" earn acceptance and approval from teammates (Clayton, 2013). However, these ceremonies have emerged as a troublesome aspect of male student sub-cultures, in particular, on university campuses as they are argued to often involve degrading and abusive behaviour, physical violence, and humiliation (Anderson et al., 2012; Clayton, 2013; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Holman, 2004).

The connection with laddishness is particularly apparent in British initiations where activities centre on heavy drinking, risk-taking, competitiveness, etc. (Anderson et al., 2012; B. Clayton, 2013; Groves et al., 2012). Reframing Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic capital, De Visser and McDonnell (2012; 2013) use the term 'masculine capital' to refer to the masculine "credit" accrued by men performing typical masculine behaviours as carried through pervasive discourses surrounding gender and identity (Connell, 1995). Hence drawing on the notion of masculine capital young men joining such teams who do not adhere to normative behaviours and practices potentially face a social penalty (Johnson, 2011).

It has been posited that participation in initiation ceremonies is driven by a desire to belong and be accepted by the group (Anderson et al., 2012; Johnson, 2011; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002). Here it is important to locate varsity sports clubs in the greater context of higher education and the undertaking of university education. Krause and Coates note entry into university represents "...a complex and often difficult period of a student's life" (2008, p. 495), and it is especially during this period that first year students or freshers have a need to fit in or belong (Maunder, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2005). Moreover, Maunder et al. (2013) argue that undergraduate students seek to specifically build friendships with those they identify with as they reconstruct a sense of self in an unfamiliar space. Keeping this in mind, studies noting the relationship between male students' gender performances and university attendance may be considered important. Warin & Dempster (2007) drew on interview data collected from a sample of British male undergraduate students and suggest that identity performance aligning with typically laddish behaviour was seen as an "easy, comfortable form of social currency" for participants and as a means of accessing friendship groups within the alien environment of university (2007, p. 901). In this respect a further distinction can be drawn between, for example, a varsity football club and a professional football club, with the comparative social function of the former arguably much more important to its constituent members.

Returning then to the question of transition in British university sport the literature presents a specific picture. The practices found within male sports clubs (particularly association football) are argued to align with a peculiarly British guise of hegemonic masculinity in the form of laddishness that is often associated with young, white, middle class men (Phipps & Young, 2013). The crossing of the social boundary dividing non-member and member must therefore entail some degree of conformity to group expectations of lad identity

construction. Furthermore, new team members have the opportunity to demonstrate worthiness in a number of formal (and informal) gateway events that present possible trajectories of transition. Where the sporting trials involve potential new team members being tested according to athletic ability, during initiations the same players are granted the opportunity to demonstrate masculine “suitability” through tests of manhood. Finally, at the core of this transitional experience is a need to belong and identify with others in an unfamiliar and transient space.

3 Narrative and sport

This paper follows Jerome Bruner’s (1990) classic assertion that people have an inborn tendency to both tell and interpret experience through stories. In this regard, humans as a species are *homo-narrans*. This understanding is reflected in the emphasis scholars across disciplines have placed on trying to understand social phenomena through narrative. Indeed, narrative as a research method now forms a cornerstone of qualitative approaches to data analysis (Frank, 2010; Gibbs, 2018).

Researchers in the domain of sport are no exception with Smith and Sparkes (2009) noting the narrative turn in sport underway as early as a decade ago. For example, Carless and Douglas (2013) have demonstrated how the personal narratives of professional athletes can be constructed in resistance to, or in compliance with, master narratives surrounding high performance sport. Equally, other work has successfully shown the utility of placing emphasis on narrative production and identity construction when investigating transition out of sport (see Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jewett et al., 2019), and experiences of athletes transitioning between athletic level (Franck & Stambulova, 2020).

More broadly, following discursive traditions, Kilger’s (2017) study of youth athletes in Sweden provides some useful insights into the social and relational qualities of narrative production. For Kilger, societally shared narratives are stories that function “...as a means to understand the moral and normative framework that surround us” (2017, p. 48). In the domain of sport, for example, Kilger points us to the “success stories” of elite athletes that are discursively disseminated in society (i.e. through media) and drawn upon by youth athletes when describing their own success.

While acknowledging these studies and other work embracing narrative approaches as a means of understanding sporting experience, there is little research that employs this method to study either the context of football (professional or university) or transition into sports teams. In focusing then on the specific stories told by individuals who have joined a university football team this paper seeks to address the gap in the literature.

4 Methods

4.1 *Stories as an analytical focus*

In the words of Frank: “stories have the capacity to make one particular perspective not only plausible but compelling” (2010, p. 31). Following this position, it is argued that applying specific focus to stories as manifest in research interviews could yield potentially fruitful insights with regards to transitional experience. Indeed, the methodological approach adopted in this paper concurs with the following propositions: first, that language is a fundamental component of identity construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004); second, that identity is generally

given centrality in theorisations of transition across disciplines (Angouri, 2017; Schlossberg, 1981; in sport see Brown et al., 2015; Douglas and Carless, 2009), and finally, as Miglbauer maintains "...in interviews most identity work is achieved through story-telling" (2017, p. 200).

From a structural perspective, stories are tellings of already occurred events, ordered temporally though not necessarily linearly (Frank, 2010). They are reconstructions of past events rather than mirror images of "truth" (*ibid*). However, beyond structural temporality and this simplistic premise, it is necessary to outline a number of core aspects of storytelling forwarded by narrative scholars. These can be relevant to researchers seeking to extract meaning, illuminate identity construction and draw connections between personal experience and greater discourses. Firstly, stories are expressions of experience that carry subjective evaluations. De Fina and Georgakopoulou argue that "...a story without evaluation is simply a sequence of events with no point, a good narrative is one where a narrator is able to convey certain interpretations..." (2011, p. 32). Stories may revolve around single (or multiple) evaluative points (Linde, 1993; Labov, 2001). The identification of evaluations can reveal particular claims of, or distancing from, specific identities.

Secondly, drawing on Ochs & Capp's (2001) seminal work: stories are "tellable". Highly tellable stories often involve something unusual or unexpected that is designed to draw the attention of the recipient and is suggested to be a skill learned during early childhood (Ochs & Capps, 2001). As a learned experience Ochs and Capps remark: "the narration of unexpected events assumes some degree of what is normative and expected in everyday life" (2001, pp. 77-78). However, while it is necessary to draw the attention of the recipient, it is also a requirement that a story is accessible. Hence, thirdly, Bruner's (1991) notion of referentiality and the importance of conveying experience that has a "truthlike" quality. Therefore, while narrators may choose to engage the listener with something unusual, paradoxically, the same story must also not be so outlandish as to be unacceptable to a recipient's ears. In simpler terms, this would involve a listener accepting that a particular tale *could* have happened, rather than it *did* happen.

Finally, although not specifically proposed as an artefact of narrative production, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) indexicality principle has utility concerning the stances adopted (thus interpretations presented and identities constructed) through stories. For example, Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 594) note that indexing can involve overt mentioning of identity categories or labels or implicature and presupposition regarding one's own or other's identity. The role of indexicality as part of individual narrative production will be explored as part of the analysis.

In this work, therefore, stories are seen as reconstructions of past events, constituted by both tellable and accessible elements, conveying particular interpretations, and carrying claims to potentially multiple identities.

4.2 Context

Data was collected from members of the same football team based at a university in the English midlands and competing within the British Universities and College Sport (BUCS) system. The decision to focus on one team was driven by the fact that the limited number of studies that have actually looked at transition in team sport have tended to draw not only on participants from different teams but also different sports (e.g. Benson et al., 2016). It is reasonable to assume that perspectives and reconstructions of transitional experience as illuminated in such studies are coloured heavily by context. Accordingly, the football club in this research is

framed as a specific community where existing normative behaviours, values and practices are underpinned by socio-cultural factors and notions of gendered performativity. The primary aim of this article is to use player stories to build a picture of the experience of becoming a member of this community.

4.3 *Participants*

Twenty-four club members were interviewed between 2017 and 2019. The participants were male, aged between 18 and 24, and predominately white. The sample could further be divided according to national background, with approximately 50% of the interviewees being British and the other 50% primarily coming from EU countries with a small minority of non-EU students participating. Interviews were conducted with three separate intakes of new players who were interviewed approximately three months after joining the team (e.g. in 2017, 2018 and 2019). This timeframe allowed participants to build experience at the club and thus be able to produce particular recollections and retellings. In addition to the primary focus on new players, several senior players were also interviewed to build a fuller picture of the team environment.

Following ethical approval, access to the team was obtained through a senior member of the club who was approached to act as a gatekeeper. Following the ethical guidelines set out by the research institution, player identities were anonymised and all participants were given the opportunity opt out of the research as outlined in consent forms. Interviewees were given the opportunity to read their interview transcripts, delete or comment on any section, and request to opt out entirely if they felt uncomfortable. Other datasets were collected in the form of ethnographic observations of the club's yearly trials (where new players are initially selected to join the team), and email correspondence made by various club captains to new players and the overall team. While this data is not drawn on directly in this paper, it did allow for a more holistic understanding of the team environment to be built beyond the interview data presented here.

4.4 *Instrument*

The research interviews were semi-structured with a balance sought between covering general themes (e.g. arrival at university, joining the team, experiences on the pitch, etc.) and, importantly, giving participants the opportunity to tell their story. Narrative interviewing is argued to be underscored by minimised contribution by the interviewer except in the form of probing questions related to the story told and supportive interactional work (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In this respect, with the design erring more towards openness, the interview structure could be seen as representing a middle ground of sort between semi-structured and unstructured (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), without attempting to extract myself from the interview as an interactional context. Importantly, participants were not specifically asked to "tell a story", hence the stories identified manifested across interviews emerged organically.

4.5 *Analytical procedure*

The analysis is presented in a way that attempts to illuminate the transitional trajectories of new players joining the club while highlighting masculine identity construction. Participants

described and chose to focus on a number of events that appeared to form a significant aspect of transition into the team. For example, attending club trials, participating in training for the first time, attending the first social event, etc. Moreover, thematic coherency with regards to overall experience was also apparent across the interview data. Therefore, while the specific focus was on a select number of stories told, this data was also considered with regards to the shared transitional experiences of the players. In this sense, the aim is to present a broad view of transition through the stories of individual players unpacking themes related to the navigation of club hierarchy, alignment within community practice, and the search for belonging in a liminal space. These stories were selected as representative of themes that emerged across both narrative data, and additionally, across the interviews more generally.

Story selection was heavily dependent on the availability of stories appropriate for analysis i.e. well-formed, sufficient in length and relevant. For clarity, “well-formed” essentially referred to stories that could be bracketed from surrounding text with Labovian understandings of structure proving useful i.e. when identifying the beginning (abstract/orientation) and end of a particular story (evaluation/coda), and when attempting to illuminate meaning (identifying one or more evaluative points). Acknowledging the potential pitfalls of cherry-picking data (Denscombe, 2010), “relevance” here refers specifically to stories that represented retellings of transitional experience. In total, 26 stories were identified that met the above outlined criteria.

5 Stories of transition

5.1 *Story 1: the right kind of mates*

The initial stage of the interviews involved a broad question related to the experience of arriving at university. While not directly related to entry into the team, it is a useful starting point as it helps to elucidate the pre-transition experience of participants immediately prior to attending the football trials and joining the team. Arrival at university is noted as potentially a deeply challenging experience for new students (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Krause & Coates, 2008). This is reflected in the interviews with participants noting the need that they had to “find their feet” with regards to organising their daily routines. Equally present in the data, however, is the emphasis placed on belonging and the need to quickly form new friendships. The loss, or diminishing, of home social networks has been noted as a key factor in British university transition (Maunder et al., 2013). The following story provides insight to this experience. Here “Arron” has been asked if he had any examples of challenging experiences during this initial period.

1. **Researcher:** erm could you provide any examples of say a difficult experience?
2. **Arron:** a difficult experience erm yeah this sounds silly literally the first day one of the times
3. when I questioned whether I’ve come to right place I came on the first day first night on
4. university and my flat like didn’t want to go out like on my first night like we stayed in we
5. had a few drinks you know like pretty much everyone was like sitting around it was the
6. Scottish referendum at the time and they were sitting around having like a really heated
7. debate about the Scottish referendum and I was like I’m not sure this is like...this wasn’t
8. what I was expecting so that made me question like what my decision up till very soon

9. before I joined I had planned on going to [university] with primary thing the sport so I was
10. questioning whether I'd made a mistake at that point but once I got into the football I'd say
11. that it was easier because I became mates with people similar to me

The structure of the above story is complex as it is interspersed with temporal jumps in the form of retrospective evaluations that are given in the “here & now” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011). We are orientated to player’s first night on campus (lines 4–7), and his (unwilling) involvement in a discussion surrounding the 2015 Scottish referendum. The participant as narrator attributes flatmates with the characteristics of not wanting to go out. His retrospective stance towards events is to note with dismay that he did not go out on his first night. Indeed, in the interview the utterance was voiced with incredulity. In doing so, he also implicitly makes an identity claim in opposition to his flatmates, specifically, as someone who *is* outgoing and has particular expectations of university life. This is further built on in lines 9–10 where the interviewee introduces sport as an equally important factor in the “experience” he was looking for. Tellability is enhanced by the narrator constructing these events as something of a crossroads, i.e. questioning his decision to come to this particular university. The immediacy of the player’s concern is evident through the fact that he is reconstructing the events of his *first day* at university. The events of which are conveyed as being so challenging to the narrator that it made him rethink his decision to come to the university.

Baumeister and Leary argue that the “...need to belong is a fundamental human motivation” (1995, p. 497). Here the football club is constructed as a community where the narrator can belong, and hence as a remedy to the challenge of the first night. While this research has focused specifically on a university football club, transitioning into a complex system such as university involves negotiating membership across communities within that system. This particular story highlights the narrator’s agency in his search for belonging and place within the bounds of the institutional context. Indeed, this consideration provides an important foundation for understanding why new players accept subservient status within the community as part of their process of transition. This is explored further in the next excerpt.

5.2 *Story 2: Negotiating membership: the “right” kind of lad*

University sport is distinguished from professional sport by the specific entry events that must be completed before a player is officially accepted into a club. The majority of participants chose to focus on a specific event when reconstructing their experiences of joining the football team with interviewees providing rich descriptions of the football trial, or the initiation ceremony that they attended, in particular. Discussion surrounding initiations was notable in that while many players readily reconstructed storied experience, a small number were unwilling to relate what had happened in their own initiation due it being “against the rules” of the club. Johnson (2011) notes that secrecy often surrounds such ceremonies with sports clubs wary of institutional interference. The above comments notwithstanding some players offered particularly rich descriptions of their night as an “initiate”. The following story provides an example of this:

1. **Researcher:** what was the distance between the shooting?
2. **Brett:** we chose this it was our idea to do this it was probably 2 metres [...] it was fine for me

3. I shot him first I did 3 shots on him and then the gas canister was used and it had clearly run
4. out a lot because he drew blood from just a paintball shot it was just horrible on his back and
5. the other 2 were quite badly bruised whereas if you look at my back I had bruises but hardly
6. comparison and we worked out that's cos the gas had been used up slightly which I didn't
7. know before but if I had known before I would have made use of it I was lucky my
8. punishment was I there were some horrible punishments but mine was the lad that came 2nd
9. last and I and when I say I came last I was told it was fixed that I was gonna come last
10. because what happens when you come last you almost its gotta be someone who would do if
11. you get it not like right I'm not doing that and they thought I'd do it and I did and me and the
12. guy had to have a race to see who would cut off the most hair in 2 minutes [laughing] and yeah as a
13. result my hair was all uneven so it got shaved off that night I went back to some older
14. students house in [town] and said and then you go into the shower cos you are covered
15. in eggs form the initiations because eggs are thrown everywhere and then you get showered
16. and they they just cut my hair shaved it all off and I asked for a 3 all over thinking that won't
17. be too bad as in in hair clippers I didn't realise it was beard trippers I was literally like 0.5 all
18. over in terms of hai

To provide context for this excerpt, the participant “Brett”, had been asked to discuss the social side of the football club before he moves discussion to the subject of initiations. On the surface this section of talk may be seen as Brett simply retelling this part of the initiation experience as part of his position as interviewee. However, this particular segment betrays a number of other positions and important identity work. Firstly, to provide context the listener has already been orientated to Brett’s viewpoint discussing the punishment with the tellability of the construction enhanced by Brett’s framing of the club’s initiations as a “secretive event” and stating that he is unable to “reveal too much”. In constructing the event as secretive he also positions himself as the bearer of confidential information which, in turn, enhances the tellability of the story that is about to be told. Dialogically the interviewer is indirectly positioned as an outsider who would not (normally) be privy to such knowledge concerning intimate club practices.

Initiations in British varsity sport have been described as involving two core components: the initiate first performs some kind of task and then together with other initiates, receives a punishment (Anderson et al., 2012; B. Clayton, 2013). The importance of such events with regards to transition lie with the fact that they present initiates with the opportunity to demonstrate both their worth, and commitment, to the community. Accordingly, this excerpt can actually be viewed as two interconnected stories: one retelling the task, and the other retelling the punishment. Temporality is again a factor in the storytelling with the participant applying retrospective meaning to events. Briefly considering the first story we learn of the physical pain endured by the initiates and the extent they feel they need to go to in order to impress their new teammates. This is illustrated in lines 4–5 where the listener is presented with the graphic image of an initiate bleeding on account of being shot with a paintball by the

narrator as part of their “performance”. In the context of the story this involves the initiation as an event where the narrator is attempting to align with the normative expectations of the club. Indeed, foreshadowing what comes in the next story, the player self-positions as someone who takes risks which, in turn, can be associated with masculine ideals among young men (Mitchell et al., 2001) and part of a demonstration of worthiness to his new teammates (Johnson, 2011). That this story is accompanied by the player’s laughter and is carried through an air of boastfulness can be seen as further evidence of identity construction related to “laddish” identity.

Moving to the second embedded story, the listener is retold the events surrounding the “punishment” with the recipient being introduced to the revelation that even though the player did not come last during the event he was chosen to receive the worst punishment because senior players selected him (lines 9–12). Indeed, the narrator assigns himself with the characteristics of being daring and willing (i.e. “they thought I would do it and I did”). Hence, Brett self-positions as the right kind of club member (i.e. a “lad”). In many ways this represents the main evaluative stance of the story. Laddishness is again indexed by conformity to risk-taking behaviour.

Finally, in 14–18, the story concludes with the player heading back to his teammates flat to clean up and have what remained of his hair shaved off. However, unfortunately for the narrator more hair is removed than was to be expected. The addition of this latter narrative element can be seen as further enhancing the overall tellability of the story by drawing attention to the physical sacrifice the narrator made to become part of the team. Notably embedded in this story is also a foreshadowing of the rewards for being committed. Specifically, following his punishment, Brett then accompanies senior players back to their flat. This is not an insignificant point. While ostensibly the story covers initiation as experienced by this player, under the surface, meaning lies with the player’s retrospective stance in that in committing to the punishment and showing deference to the existing hierarchy he was able to bond with senior teammates. Ultimately the narrative can be seen as illustrating the necessity, price and reward of alignment with club expectations.

Johnson (2011) has described initiation as a rite of passage for new members who are introduced to their place within the specific hierarchical structure of the team, and where expectations of gendered performance are reinforced through highly ritualised socialising practices (see also Johnson & Holman, 2004). Where the previous story involved the search for the “right” group, this story involved the passing of the first social test required to gain admittance. Ergo, a demonstration of worthiness. The navigation of a new social environment and overt statements of commitment to the rules of that environment underscore transition in this respect.

5.3 *Story 3: becoming a better drinker*

Theoretically congruent with the understanding in this work that transition is not a product of single, isolated events, Johnson notes:

“Of course, a sense of belonging is not guaranteed to accompany an initiation ritual; there must also be an invested interest on behalf of the athletes to pursue membership and to have that identity validated.” (2011, p. 208).

Thus not only is an individual’s “want” to be initiated an important concern but also their continued adherence to club values, practices and hierarchy, as espoused as a group member beyond the initiation ceremony. Membership is constantly renegotiated as newcomers engage in community practice underpinning the transition process. For this football team, club practice

centred on the weekly social event, which involved team members congregating at a university bar and participating in drinking games before heading off to the local town. Drawing on the overall interview data, practice as described appeared to be highly ritualised, grounded on gendered expectations of behaviour and serving as a reinforcement of hierarchy. Although complex in structure due to the player intermixing both past and current perspectives the story presents an example of what this meant as a transitional experience while also illustrating identity construction in alignment with laddish values and club practice.

One notable aspect of the club's ritualised drinking event is that new players are *not* allowed to be told the rules of the game. Hence, "freshers" only learn the rules of the game through observation and/or failure. However, failure in this context means that an unsuccessful player must drink a pint of beer. Scholars investigating the practice of drinking games among male students have suggested that they are high-risk activities for those who are new to the practice as the games are specifically designed to facilitate inebriation (Zamboanga & Tomaso, 2014). In essence, freshers who participate in this central activity learn to drink (through repeated failure) in alignment with club practice. Part of player's transition, therefore, relates to their ability to adjust to the amount of drinking that is normalised within the confines of the club. Indeed, the need to meet this challenge was evident in player reporting of the event, and in this story, in particular.

19. **Researcher:** "[...] how does the social side work again if we go from the start?"
20. **Steve** "So *laughing* every Wednesday there's at [the university] there's [an event]"
21. **Researcher:** "Mmm"
22. **Steve:** "And it at the universities it will be like sport social stuff but for some reason I have no idea
23. why at [the university] it's called [social] this is like for every society people will be there like are
24. you going out on Wednesday [...] it's so bizarre but like you turn up on
25. Wednesday you sit in a circle and you play a lot of drinking games and its literally
26. the best part of my week by a country mile just it involves a lot of drinking I didn't expect before I
27. came to uni because I'm local I'd always go down the town and obviously where everything was
28. and sort of thing and erm I was laughing I considered myself quite a good drinker in terms of if
29. you go out with a bunch of mates which I would regularly especially after my exams summer was
30. a very good time you drink a lot and I always considered that I could handle it quite well this is a
31. different kettle of fish completely you've gotta prepare yourself"

On the surface "Steve" is explaining the social activities associated with the football club and adopting an explanatory role (lines 6–9). Beyond such superficial analysis, however, is the identity work regarding both the team identity, and the player's identity in relation to the club. The core social practice centred on drinking is described by the player who positions not only as a drinker but a "good drinker" (line 28), The boastful nature of this claim reinforces the masculine performance with drinking being constructed as a normalised practice by the participant and hence orientation to masculine (laddish) ideals (Clayton & Harris, 2008; De Visser & Smith, 2007).

The practice of drinking lots of alcohol is associated with having a "very good time" in the telling world. However, drinking as practised by the team is constructed as a step-up from

that which the player is used to and thus as an activity that required adjustment. In this respect, his drinking ability becomes something that required improvement. Previous research has found the notion of *'holding one's' drink* to be clearly related to constructions of masculinity (De Visser & Smith, 2007). In this story masculine practice is indexed by alcohol consumption. Here parallels can be drawn with other transitional challenges, e.g. being able to cope with university education, managing independent living, etc. Similarly, coping with alcohol consumption as practised by the team is constructed as a rite of passage for the player. Indeed, through participation within the club's community the player is required to improve his ability to drink copious amounts of alcohol and prove his worth to teammates.

5.4 *Story 4: Managing hierarchy: "...you can't do that in the football team"*

While the hum of laddish practice is evident in the previous story, and the associated expectations of identity performance require transitional navigation for new players, so too does the existing social structure within the club. "Freshers" face social penalties such as that described above which involved new players not being allowed to know certain rules in the drinking games. These structural penalties also relate at a more general level to aspects of their time at the club. Reporting across interviews pointed to a subservient status with freshers required to carry out certain tasks such as cleaning the team's football kits, carrying ball-bags and ensuring the general maintenance of club equipment. Parker and Manley note "football traineeship in England has been historically replete with images of physicality, discipline and subservience" (2017, p. 9). In a similar vein, the requirement of freshers to perform mundane jobs can be seen as both a demonstration of power of senior players through reinforcing status, and a means for new players to display commitment and deference to the existing power structure. Stories that specifically spoke to the need to adjust to team hierarchy, and associated subservience, were evident across interviews. The below retelling is rich in identity construction and provides an intimate perspective from the football pitch of a fresher "understanding one's place".

1. **Researcher:** ok so moving away from the social side of things could you describe any challenges you've experienced of actually playing for the team itself?
2. **Henry:** yeah last year I played in the [...] team and the 2nd game we played we lost
3. [heavily] it was the worst defeats of the club in a long time it was a horrible game I didn't do very well
4. the whole team didn't play very well it's sort of its really it was a huge challenge you had lost you can
5. feel something going on because you've lost everyone from the club has played from really young and
6. losing that badly is really rare and it's with people you've only known for 2 weeks and it's a really
7. weird experience because if the captain is gonna yell at you because you've only known him for 2
8. weeks and its sort of something that impressive that much of a defeat and I remember it was a
9. challenge because I got into a sort of argument with one of the players I just disagreed with him but

10. because he was older and I thought I was right but you aren't allowed as a fresher to just yell at
11. someone like that I've always been a captain and I've never been in that position before when someone
12. yells at you and you fight back and it's not acceptable and you can't do that in the football team

This story emerged as part of the overall dialogue follows lines of inquiry relating to the players general experiences and aspects of the social side of the club. The story again follows elicitation from the researcher who has asked a question relating specifically to a challenging experience. The narrator first makes a distinction in attributing actions to his past-self and then the team as a separate entity (lines 3–6). More precisely, that neither himself nor the team played well. As evidenced throughout the analysis the tellability of the player's contribution is enhanced as the recipient is retold the events of the story from the viewpoint of Henry as a new player, we are placed in the player's boots having only known his teammates for "2 weeks".

However, the key moment of the story, the orientating action per Labov (1997), is the personal challenge presented by the argument with the senior player (lines 9–12). An integral piece of the storytelling in this excerpt is the player's identity claims as a leader and a fighter, which are constructed through both explicit and implicit indexing, e.g. "I've always been a captain". We learn that the narrator was required to constrain these leadership characteristics as a form of deference and subservience to the older player and, by extension, hierarchical tradition within the club. In essence the underlying meaning of this story can be interpreted as the leader learning to be led as a core aspect of transition in the player's experience. The interviewee constructs an identity aligning with masculine ideals, i.e. naturally individualistic, assertive, competitive, etc. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, simultaneously, the story also demonstrates his apparent powerlessness in the context of the community and thus represents an identity that does not align with the above mentioned masculine ideals.

This story can be seen as underlining membership as both negotiated and learned with a balance existing between individual agency and deference to structure (socialisation). This can be compared with those players who do not participate in the club's social activities as they do not align with club practices and thus suffer a social penalty. A valid assumption to make is that for new players who resist or ignore hierarchy on the pitch would also experience a similar penalty with regards to their participation within the club community.

5.5 Story 5: *"If you do anything to my lil fresher – I'll kill you"*

The experience of needing to adjust to the social structure of the team can be construed as the price, or commitment demanded from incoming players who wish to be accepted. However, a recurring theme in the interviews involved participants describing a deep sense of belonging to the club. This sentiment ranged from overt expressions of friendship with teammates to participants detailing the specific support they received both on and off the pitch. In this respect, the reward for overcoming transitional hurdles as manifested through gateway events and team hierarchy is the bond formed with other "lads" in the club. The following excerpt provides an example of this expression of belonging as carried through a story recounting the protection received from a senior player during the interviewee's first game.

1. **Henry:** I remember my first game this game I just did a bad tackle and he started talking to

2. me and started saying he's gonna punch me or something and so the centre back of our team who
3. was very very big guy just said walked up to him and said "if you do anything to my lil fresher I'll
4. kill you" and I've never seen him that was my first game and he was protecting me it was
5. unbelievable they are so protective of their freshers in the first year and they put so much effort
6. into showing you are with them now and you are part of them I was surprised and really really
7. happy it's unbelievable how much effort they put in to make sure you are comfortable off the pitch
8. and on the pitch

Similar to the previous story this involves the participant reconstructing himself as powerless and a teammate as powerful. Hierarchy is thus made relevant with the key difference involving the fact that the powerful teammate is constructed as an ally protecting the player from an "Other" player. Considering the story, once again the recipient is orientated to the perspective of the narrator and specifically the first game he played. In the telling world the antagonist (the opposition player) and protagonists (Henry and teammate) are clearly stated and tellability is enhanced through the dramatic threat of violence as retold by the player. It can be argued that the overall purpose of the telling is to demonstrate the protection and acceptance that this player (and new players) receives on becoming a member of the club. In the told world this is explicitly stated as part of the player's retrospective evaluation of the retold events. The notion of team protection (hence togetherness) is evoked in the recipient's mind through contrastive descriptions of the characters in the story, e.g. the "very very big" teammate, the "lil fresher". To give further weight to the portrayal of the club as protective and welcoming of new players, the "protector's" voice is animated, specifically in the form of uttering a threat to the opposition player. However, misalignment between identity construction and ideals of masculinity is again evident in the retelling with narrator constructing an identity founded on physical inferiority. The above comments notwithstanding, such narrative work points to identity construction specifically associated with the team and the protection received. Importantly there is a clear contrast between the roles of the senior teammate in this story and in the previous story where the player was reprimanded for arguing with a senior player and thus not adhering to hierarchical expectations.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the transitional experiences of a select group of university footballers crossing the invisible social boundary of a sports team as they make the journey from outsider to member of the team's community. This involved drawing on interview data collected over a three-year period from members of the same football club. While transition has been investigated in sport, there is a dearth of research investigating team transition, in particular. Moreover, studies have focused on aspects of the lived experiences of male student athletes in teams, e.g. on initiations or social practices, but these experiences have not been considered within the bigger picture of a player's transition. Narratives of experience were identified in the stories told by players that focused on key elements of their transition. These elements involved specific ritualised events that serve to socialise new players to the

prevailing behaviours, practices and overarching power structures within the club. In particular, these narratives illuminated the potential hurdles present within the social environment of a university sports club predicated on laddish masculinity.

A story of initiation (Story 2) illustrated the compliance demanded of new players as their subservient status is both introduced and reinforced through a ceremony based on performance and punishment. Scholars have suggested that the primary purposes of initiations are to reinforce team hierarchy (Anderson et al., 2012; Allan & Madden, 2012), and foster the bond between initiate and club (Groves et al., 2012). Initiation as retold in this research also illuminates a new player's desire to belong and prove one's worthiness to club by aligning with community ethos and norms. Traditional understandings of initiation have tended to construct such ceremonies as the ultimate gateway event where a new player's transition begins and ends with acceptance to group being won after a successful ceremony. The stories in this research counter this position by showing how continued adherence to particular behaviours and identity performance forms part of an ongoing process of transition.

Following official entry into the team expectations of laddish performance when participating in club practices were described. A narrative (Story 3) recounting one player's need to "learn to drink" and adjust to what was necessary to be a part of the group reveal this experience. The story told was replete with indexing of a laddish identity with the narrator claiming that despite being an experienced drinker, alcohol as competitively consumed within the community required adjustment. De Visser & McDonnell (2013) have suggested that the "biggest" drinkers in the group may be afforded greater masculine capital. The advantages of such capital within varsity male sports teams have been noted in previous studies with Dempster (2011) remarking that playing time for individual players might be predicated on one's ability to drink and participate in laddish behaviour as opposed to their actual sporting ability. I argue that this constitutes an informal hierarchy with those players most in alignment with (masculine) performance expectations forming the core of the club. Hence, the ability (or not) to adjust to normative drinking practices impact what form "membership" of the club takes and how a player experiences transition.

Hierarchical status and power imbalances as key transitional considerations were described as relevant both on and off the pitch. In this respect new players are expected to find their feet both in the university bar and on the field of play. Viscerally illuminating this aspect of transition a narrative of hierarchy (Story 4) told of a player's need to constrain self-proclaimed leadership qualities in deference to the existing club power structure as manifested through a more senior teammate. Indeed, carried through the story were multiple conflicting identity claims that appeared central to the player's lived experience as a "fresher". It has been suggested that in sport senior players perform mentoring roles for incoming players (e.g. Benson et al., 2016). In this context, "mentoring" as retold in the player's story involved the issuing of a swift reprimand for the player stepping out of line. The narrative of transition concluded with a story of protection (Story 5). It has been posited that new team members are prepared to experience subservience and degradation as they enter varsity sport on account of the need to belong (Clayton, 2013; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Holman, 2004). The player's story centred on the construction of a vulnerable self in need of protection, and a senior player (and by extension the team), in the role of the "protector". Here, the contrasting narrative constructions of identities both in alignment, and not in alignment, with masculine ideals was noted.

Ultimately, I argue that the narratives constructed by players' frame transitional experience as a process underscored by notions of compliance and reward. Male sports clubs in British universities have been characterised as humming with hegemonic masculinity and associated laddish practices (Dempster, 2009; Clayton, 2013; Clayton & Harris, 2008). In this context, transition requires compliance with lad ideals of behaviour and the appropriate

performance of a laddish identity. Transition is also argued to be heavily ritualised as new players are introduced to different practices learned through specific rituals during their initial period with the club. While gateway events such as initiation have been considered (Anderson et al., 2012), and descriptions of the social environment of varsity sports club have been produced (Dempster, 2009), previous work has not joined the dots, so to speak, and offered an broader examination of transitional experience, albeit in this work, in the form of *retellings* of transitional experience.

Finally, the narrative approach adopted in this paper illuminated contradictions between ideals of hegemonic masculinity and identities constructed (e.g. weak, vulnerable, subservient, etc.) in particular retellings of experience. Though told stories (both presented here and in the overall dataset) were also replete with boastfulness relating to e.g. drinking ability, daring and toughness, being able to have a laugh, etc., the (mis)alignment of identity construction proved to be an interesting aspect of the narratives and worthy of future investigation.

6.1 *Future research*

The future direction of the research is driven by a limitation of this paper that also presents a clear opportunity. Specifically, this research has presented a particular version of transitional reality as reconstructed from selected stories. Through retelling and identity claims it has offered an insight into team transition from the perspective of those who have *conformed* to the social practices of the football club. While the consequences of non-conformity have been speculated, a clear avenue of investigation would be to voice the stories of players who did not align themselves with the core practices of the group. Building from this acknowledgement it is also recognised that the backgrounds of the participants were primarily white, middle class and attending a prestigious university. The “laddishness” as manifest in descriptions is typically associated with this particular demographic (Anderson, 2010; Anderson & McGuire, 2010). Therefore, future work might seek to focus on teams with a greater diversity in team members recognising the impact of class and race on gender performativity in sports settings. Equally, shifting the focus to the experiences of young women entering varsity sports team could produce illuminating findings particularly with regards to shifting understandings of gender, and gender in sport.

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