From identification to dis-identification: case studies of job loss in professional football

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Abstract

Taken from a broader study of the careers of professional footballers, this article uses two player stories of job loss to offer contrasting experiences of cynical dis-identification. I examine how in research on the careers of sports workers athletes so often express discontent yet maintain an apparent dedication and commitment to their craft. In contrast to the overwhelming focus on the construction and shaping of workplace identity, this article introduces the notion of dis-identification to explain how athletes resist coach/managerial domination in an occupation in which high commitment is assumed by expressing cynical and instrumental attitudes to their jobs: cynical athletes dis-identify with dominant cultural prescriptions so as to distance themselves from ideological rhetoric, a process in which subjectivities are 'externalised'. Although cynical athletes may feel like autonomous agents, nevertheless they still perform managerial norms and rituals.

Keywords:

Dis-identification, resistance, sport-as-work, biography, job loss.

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Introduction

Classic studies of sports work have exposed a well-understood but critical modern paradox: young athletes develop within a *supposedly* meritocratic sporting system in which their dreams are embedded, and then made to feel as though their talents are indispensible and goals achievable, yet their course leads un-discerningly into a monoculture in which, despite strong dedication, perfection is unobtainable and failure inevitable (Donnelly, 1996; Hoberman, 1992; Rigauer, 1987; Walsh and Giulianotti, 2007). These top down examinations indicate that the enduring effect for athletes of dedication to their craft is the production of alienated, para-technically dependent subjects who are unable to rationalise failure – or to employ ego defences – other than in ways which reaffirm the hegemony of this achievement-oriented ideology (Ingham *et al.*, 1999). A concern for those who have written from this perspective is that athletes who fail are said to find difficulty in coping as a result of their solitary, embodied attachment to a single identity – that of *athlete* – a process which simultaneously limits opportunities for the development of alternative selves (Coakley, 1992; Lavallee, 2005). Theoretically one-dimensional however, these singular but dominant ways of representing athletes' lives have received critical attention recently for avoiding the complexity of human life (Douglas and Careless, 2009; Nesti, 2008; Roderick, 2012a; Smith and Sparkes, 2008); they overstate the effects of disciplinary power and normalisation and disregard the possibility of *resistance* to managerial effects, the central theme of this article.

The construction and negotiation of the identity of athletes is a psycho-social problem that has long been at the core of sport-related academic research (Donnelly and Young, 1988). In spite of its relative success in analysing how athletic identities are variously formed, disrupted and foreclosed (Brown and Potrac 2009: Grove *et al*., 1997; Sparkes, 1998) – studies in which the concepts of power and subjectivity have been implicitly prominent –

little attention has been paid to whether or how athletes may cynically 'dis-identify' with social roles at professional levels as a tactical form of transgressive behaviour. With few exceptions (Robidoux, 2001), there has been an absence of studies of resistance in the context of employment practices in professional sport. The concept of dis-identification however, as a mode of contemporary workplace experience, has been underscored in several recent studies of organisational cultural management (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). While there are important reasons why sporting workplaces are different in kind to those featured in these specific organisational studies (Parker, 2001), particularly with respect to the orientations and expectations employees bring to – as opposed to acquiring in – their jobs (Roderick, 2006), the relevance of dis-identification as a more prosaic form of resistance is best explained by an explicit recognition that managerial domination in the workplace appears to colonise employee selves as a strategic enterprise (Fleming and Sewell, 2002)[i]. Although some athletes-as-employees may acquiesce to managerial controls that target the realm of identity, others in time may intentionally dis-identify with their social roles to protect particular elements of their personhood from the regulatory reach connected with forms of cultural management which attempt to 'engineer' compliance (Ezzy, 2001).

This article therefore looks to revive for sociological re-consideration the work-based issue of resistance to managerial cultural powers in the context of professional sport. In the light of the consistent manner with which athletes acknowledge their own exploitation in empirical research (Wacquant, 2001), the central motive here, in employing the analytical concept of dis-identification specifically, is to develop further explanation for the detached and sometimes cynical positions of research subjects, which remain largely under-theorised and taken-for-granted in media-led discussions of elite sport (Roderick, 2006). There is a long history of research which identifies the ways in which employees resist managerial

controls, including prominent collective strategies such as strikes (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). As a less conspicuous individualised mode of worker dissent, dis-identification may also take various forms, including humour and cynicism (Robidoux, 2001), both of which exemplify how employees 'subjectively distance themselves from managerial domination by constructing identities considered more authentic' (Costas and Fleming, 2009: 353). As sporting workplaces become increasingly geared towards establishing the identities of workers via a mixture of discipline, techniques of surveillance and power (Manley, 2012; Shogun, 1999) – and while several studies demonstrate that athletes do indeed identify with managerial 'cultural' precepts (McGillivray *et al*., 2005) – the biographical data presented in this article offer an alternative interpretation that draws attention to the paucity of studies examining sport-as-work and resistance to workplace controls. Using data drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews with two English professional footballers to construct their biographies, I theorise how they dis-identify with the values tied to team culture, and exhibit high levels of cynicism to managerial powers in order to repossess a sense of self-truth and overcome tensions between who they feel *they really are* and who they need to be 'at work'.

Identity issues for sports workers

There have been a number of experience-driven ethnographic studies that have examined the careers of professional athletes in which issues of identity and the complexity of its formation have been notable features (Douglas, 2009; Parker, 1996; Robidoux, 2001; Wacquant, 1995). Sensitivities to public exposure (Parker, 1996) and issues of access to these largely closed communities (Robidoux , 2001) plague most focused academic efforts, yet there are some consistent patterns which relate to the feelings of athletes towards their work. Lying at the heart of all these empirical studies – in various shades of self-comprehension – is the recognition that exploitation is a fact of existence (Murphy and Waddington, 2007). Even

so, as part of the language of accommodating their expendability, Wacquant (2001: 186) claims that individual adaptation to the realities of corporeal manipulation is essential for boxers to reclaim a sense of personal integrity; an important *agentic* step in terms of the way in which they 'take responsibility' for their selves and lives. Robidoux (2001) argues that hockey players in Canada lack any effective forms of resistance to unfavourable labour circumstances. Their only real hope is to 'turn back into play what management has turned into work' (2001: 162); yet this form of resistance – play as a resistive act – has limited (mostly jovial relief) effects which embeds players firmly into subordinate positions. Offering only a somewhat dismal outlook, Robidoux (2001: 161) indicates that throughout their careers, players are relatively indifferent to the 'business' of hockey, a status which reflects their 'apparent passivity' to 'conflicting relationships at the core of the labour process' in this sport.

A significant feature of these empirically-grounded studies is that athletes are embroiled in a form of 'coerced affection' (Wacquant, 1995, 521); meaning their commitments to their craft, and their desire to remain active at the point of production, necessitates a complex mixture of rationalising and suppressing their feelings of resentment to managerial domination. Both indicate that athletes are not unaware of what is happening though. Wacquant (1995: 522) for example suggests that for some boxers their work 'violates their sense of humanity, though they learn not to feel or show this', including he theorises, 'to themselves'. For Robidoux (2001: 161) resistance is most often achieved 'without the means or desire to rationalise their experience within the labour process'; so-called feelings of power are often 'illusory' in an industry in which subservience is celebrated. The notion of worker opposition has never really found expression in studies of professional sport, even though athlete subjectivities and questions of vocational desire and personal attitude have always been targeted by managers and coaches (Parker, 2001). The following article

therefore adds to the growing body of research associated with sporting identities by developing the notion of dis-identification as an illustrative example of how resistance may unfold under conditions in which it is assumed employees willingly behave in concert with the logic of the dominant workplace regime. In order to make this argument, the article is structured as follows. Subsequent to a brief review of the notion of dis-identification, I argue for its explanatory value in the context of professional sport. I then outline a justification for this article's methodological approach and present biographical data, which illuminate the career evolution of two English professional footballers and theorise that to preserve their selves, players must cynically dis-identify with their roles as players, even though such an idea challenges the dominant performance ideology in sport. In concluding this article I draw attention to an unintended consequence of this social process which I argue is increasingly tied to career strains in modern professional sport.

Interpreting athlete cynicism as dis-identification

There is nothing new about the kinds of worker disaffections evident in research on professional sporting cultures, particularly as athletes labour under the authoritarian modes of discipline so apparent in coaching and managerial practices (Kelly and Waddington, 2006), but the significance of the notion of dis-identification lies in its ability to explain the means by which more authentic emotions in occupational contexts may be preserved relative to the patently fake front-stage performances put on for management (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). Dis-identification is now a significant theme in organizational research and may take several forms including cynicism, humour, scepticism and irony (Costas and Fleming, 2009). In studies of professional sport a behavioural pattern has been identified outlining the cynical and instrumental attitudes expressed by athletes towards managing the workplace social relations in which they are bound (Wacquant, 2001). The idea that athletes can be cynically

disenchanted by their profession however is somewhat surprising for, so the dominant performance narrative tells us, this industry offers an opportunity for certain 'blessed' individuals with special talents to be imbued with a great deal of symbolic capital to which a highly distinctive value is attached (Nesti, 2010). Even so, the idea that athletes are cynically detached at work appears in cases where they no longer identify with, and resist, the values of their employing organizations (Robidoux, 2001; Roderick, 2006).

Although the idea of cynicism as a form of resistance has been discussed sociologically for some time – Simmel suggested that it is a 'psychic response' to modernity (Shilling, 2002) – more recent studies offer three interpretations of employee cynicism that are linked to, and arise from, the political economy of late capitalism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). First, managerialist interpretations have much in common with applied sport psychological research, which views athlete reactions to coach and managerial power at an individual level – in other words, cynicism is interpreted as a psychological defect that needs to be 'corrected' via intervention (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Resistance is not explained here in relation to a capitalist system of production, instead the pathologies of professional sport are pushed onto athletes-as-employees; failures are understood in terms of individual deficiencies such as a negative attitude, a lack of character, no heart or putting individual glory before the team (Grove *et al.*, 2004). A large corpus of sports research remains blind to recent challenges to the notion that (sports) workers possess unchanging, 'true' (or hidden) selves that remain outside the effects of social life. I argue, *pace* Douglas and Careless (2009), that a more adequate reading would be to conceptualise athletes subjectivities as dynamic and relational with recognition given to the 'work' they do on their self-identities.

The second interpretation identifies employee cynicism as a subtle means of resisting control by *dis-identifying* with contemporary occupational culture whilst concurrently complying with it. Fleming and Spicer (2003: 157) who advocate this humanist view suggest

that in the new age of post-Fordist corporate culture employees are 'working at a cynical distance'. In addition to approaches that view employee cynicism as a defense mechanism that attempts to side-step the colonisation of the identities of workers – that is, mechanisms that protect their 'back stage' selves – Fleming and Spicer (2003: 167) argue that

> when the dis-identification process is enacted it can establish an alluring 'breathing space' where people feel untrammelled by the subjective demands of the organization, but which ironically permits them to behave as an efficient and meticulous member of the team nevertheless.

In other words, although athletes may come to 'see through' and dis-identify with coaching and managerial rhetoric as a means to protect their sense of dignity at work and pride in what they do, they still engage in behaviour through which such occupational cultural ideology is reproduced. Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue that a process of *cynical* dis-identification is a more subtle form of resistance that raises sociological questions about the inexorable consequences of workplace 'power' and 'subjectivity'.

In this article I draw predominantly on a third ideological argument which suggests that even though workers may negatively distance themselves from the dictates of the occupational cultures in which they are embedded and work hard to dis-identify mentally with their prescribed social roles, their (paradoxical) behaviour can be understood as *simple conformity* (Costas and Fleming, 2003). This line of argument departs from the second humanist interpretation by purporting that cynicism as an unplanned awakening for athletes unobtrusively reproduces relations of power because cynical employees allow themselves to think (erroneously) that they operate with self-determinacy, but they still practice the 'cultural' rituals regardless. As an audience viewing 'front stage' performances (Goffman, 1959), the behaviour of professional athletes would appear to reproduce the very occupational culture that is and has been impressed on them in part by managers and coaches

whose motives in their eyes are questionable and with whom some have lost faith (Robidoux, 2001). Even so, the cynical detachment displayed by athletes enables them legitimately to resist the authority of coaches and managers in subtle ways without compromising their attitudes and reputations among either management or colleagues (Parker, 2001). When it comes to occupational cultural prescriptions, athletes have few alternatives other than to be active participants in their own self-discipline whether that leads to consent, (blind) compliance or resistance in the form of cynicism (Roderick, 2006).

There are developing arguments which seek to interpret processes of dis-identification in studies of resistance particularly in organisations which have as a key feature of business the engineering of occupational culture and (training for) the types of people who 'fit' this work(place), not solely in terms of essential skills and abilities but significantly in relation to values, attitudes and understandings which are brought to, and developed within, work spaces. Key writing in this genre is largely conceptual, rather than empirically-grounded, and to date no one has examined the occupational cultures evident in professional sport employing this conceptual lens; attention has been situated in the broader field of sport-related socialisation and identity formation (Douglas and Careless, 2009). I argue however that the notion of dis-identification is a useful one for sport as it offers a framework within which to interpret how athletes talk about their unfolding careers and explain how they have become – for some strongly and cynically – detached from their original and personal commitments to a vocation which they believed would offer an opportunity for self-actualisation, the cultural illusion that sport enables the fulfilment of childhood dreams. In the few work-centred studies of careers in professional sport there are clear and identifiable patterns of exploitation and vocabularies of motive for accommodating and continuing in such working conditions (Brown and Potrac, 2009; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005; Robidoux, 2001;

Wacquant, 1995). What is not theorised in these studies relates to how we interpret what is happening in terms of athletes' lifeworld orientations and how these are articulated.

Approaching dis-identification biographically

Data used to construct this article were drawn from a study which examined the work of professional footballers. Of 49 semi-structured interviews conducted, the focus of 19 in-depth interviews was on issues related to job mobility; other interview subject matters included workplace injury, occupational culture and problems tied to retirement. Labour mobility in this industry is a distinctive career contingency. From the broader study, two biographical case studies have been developed from two in-depth interviews in which experiences of job loss are stressed, as such employment transitions provide vulnerable periods in which player identities are threatened, and offer comparatively regular reflexive moments in which they may look back at what has been and consider the future and what it might hold[ii]. Although there are shades of dis-identification, the biographical cases have been selected because they provide two contrasting illustrations, yet both offer for scrutiny a series of reality checks related to players' feelings of career progress and impetus and fundamental material necessities tied to family provision. Considerations of job loss, real and threatened, evoke moments in phenomenological spaces where players consider what work means (Ezzy, 2000)[iii]. I needed to display in this article a longitudinal section of a career – biographically – to illuminate the significance of career time where a set of dispositions and characteristics cannot easily be discerned (Merrill and West, 2009). Arranging data biographically makes sense in terms of comprehending processes of dis-identification since players seldom maintain one subjective stance over time and context.

The two biographical cases represent job trajectories at either end of the work-status spectrum in professional football: the first is a recognisable, now former international player,

the second is best described as a ‘journeyman’ player. Both players differ in respect to their well-knownness, their relative levels of pay and the esteem accorded to them professionally; both however are grounded by their need to be active participants who make meaningful contributions. Unlike Ezzy (2000) who examined job loss by drawing on the subjective reflections as recounted by unemployed individuals (Polkinghorne, 1996), the organisation of data in this article was not based on a dichotomy between fate and agency. Rather than categorising specific periods of unemployment theoretically by augmenting either the ‘heroic’ or ‘victimised ’ elements of individual biographical accounts (Polkinghorne, 1996), my aim was to capture the fashion in which players piece together the mix of choice and constraint in the forward moving transitional stages of their occupational careers. Both biographies lead us to a familiar position yet very few studies of sports work present this developmental approach in relation to athletic subjectivities or suggest an interpretation for how players come to view their social roles or their feelings towards them.

A large amount of empirical data were collected on job loss; even so, isolating such a career transition for analytical purposes was difficult given the way players storied the irregular intermingling of workplace contingencies. Job mobility is a key turning point for players-as-workers who were prompted to talk about geographical workplace movement, how such transitions came about, and meanings attached to repeated employer change. A key sensitising concept to guide interviews was ‘lifeworld’ orientation; thus, questions were formulated such that player orientations to work were revealed, exposing contexts in which the micro-political and structural power relationships manifestly shape institutionalised frames of reference and associated forms of workplace behaviour (Potrac and Jones, 2009). This conceptual approach holds out the possibility of drawing attention to the impact of experiences such as (the threat of) job loss; accounting for the development of psycho-social life skills (defence mechanisms); and offering an explanation for the players’ acquired sense

of club ethic and responsibility towards contemporaries. Accordingly, a focus of this work was to appreciate the 'ritual' methods by which managers organise the co-presence of the 'socially dead' and the 'normal' within club settings (Goffman, 1952). Using Goffman (1959) and Padavic (2005) as points of departure, a conceptual lens was drawn to the connection between the objective events as experienced in athletic careers and their symbolic interpretation by athletes when retelling the accounts of what happened to them (Ezzy, 2000).

The player biographies have been edited to include a narrow focus on certain career passages in which their employment status was threatened; edited out are incidents related to the effect of contingencies such as injury, ageing, wider family and social life impacts, and the controlling character of the occupational attitudes to work indicative of this highly masculine form of employment (Parker, 1996). The biographical data presented therefore are characterised by methodological limitations given that a process of reconstruction has occurred with data sets which themselves are narrative constructions; even so, attention was paid to ensure that data related to specific episodes in players lives were not treated in isolation and frozen in time, and that the pervasiveness of transitional experiences was captured. This type of research has proven hard to achieve given the problem of accessibility to, and arranging extended interviews with, professional footballers, many of whom are cautious of 'outsiders' delving into their thoughts and feelings about their (often highly) public careers. Care was taken to make certain that all interviewees understood the ethical arrangements in relation to their testimonies.

Player experiences of the threat of job loss

This article is based on evidence drawn from two interviewees, John and David, whose biographies were selected principally for two reasons: firstly, their biographical data are interpreted as luminous case studies revealing opposite ends of a spectrum of dis-

identification; and secondly, they exemplify respectively the lived experiences of players who are indicative of contrasting categories (Critcher, 1979); John represents a 'superstar', David has the features of a 'journeyman'. Rather than selecting thematically-arranged cross-cutting data, the player biographical cases portray the essence of the development of a career in professional football and the cumulative effects of job-based contingencies. The task in constructing this article was to select player biographies whose career trajectories were contrasting, but whose narratives captured the empirical themes around which this examination is based; dis-identification as resistance. Although space prohibits the inclusion of potential subtypes and alternative data, what was clear for all interviewees was that unemployment posed a real threat, its impact leaving an unremitting impression on their occupational outlooks. There are noticeable similarities between the biographies, and it is worth drawing attention to the fact that both are marked by the interdependently developing careers of the managers under whom they were employed.

International/Premier League Player

John started his career as an apprentice-footballer with a southern Division One club. Midway through his two-year apprenticeship the club unexpectedly offered him a two year professional contract. John made significant progress in a comparatively swift manner. Even so, two years later, following the sacking of the manager who had signed him at the age of 16 years, John recognised that his earlier positive development was levelling out, and that age-group peers were being selected for first team matches ahead of him. In terms of how he viewed his future at that stage, John made the following point:

> My pro contract run out and .[..]. was Manager and he wanted me to sign a new one but I wasn't featuring at all in his plans then, I was sort of 19 at that stage and I wasn't featuring. A lot of the lads my age ... had all been thrown in first team games ... I'd not

had a look in at all, so I was thinking that my future was sort of lying elsewhere. I wasn't going to sign at that stage, they offered me at the age a reasonable contract, but I thought I wasn't going to get a look in. All I wanted to do was play football, I didn't think I was going to have a chance at the first team, I had nothing else lined up.

When questioned about whether it was a brave decision to turn down a contract offer at that career stage, he said, 'not particularly really brave, I felt I had to do that because I didn't think I was going to play'. Quite unpredictably, the manager was sacked, and the club's Chief Scout, a former player with whom John was very familiar, took over club performance affairs. John signed the contract which was then re-offered to him, and he was satisfied with his decision to do so. However, within days of him signing, the former Chief Scout-cum-manager parted company with the club, and yet another experienced manager took charge. This period of rapid upheaval and discontinuity was unsettling, but the new manager kept faith with John and his career blossomed under his leadership. At 20 years of age, John considered himself a first team regular and the club achieved notable success, reaching an FA Cup semi-final; he expressed the view that, 'it couldn't have worked out any better for me'.

One year on from the FA Cup success, the upheavals continued; the manager was sacked without warning. John now described himself as 'disillusioned' with club affairs, and when an option to transfer was presented – by a Premier League club, now coached by the manager who signed him at the age of 16 years – John grasped the opportunity. Unquestionably, this job move represented a career step up for John, who found himself playing regularly among the elite of English football. John's career status was further underscored by his inclusion in international squads; he had, as he expressed, 'made it'. Even so, the team struggled in John's second season and the club faced relegation from the Premier League. John described the events which unfolded from that point as follows:

> I was offered a new contract which I didn't sign. I was offered it initially about November, I was offered a slight improvement on my contract, which was good money, but the club was very rocky. I didn't sign it at that time, I'd arranged to meet with [the manager], and we were going to discuss it further whatever, then he went. [A new manager] took over and he spoke to me, and said you know it's a bit rocky at the minute, we were fighting relegation, we'll sought it come the end of the season. So it ended up that we went down. I went back in and they offered me a new contract, but it had gone down, it was virtually half what I was on. So I had all summer to think about it and I was on Bosman anyway, so I went away. There was a lot happening, we had our baby at the end of May, so that obviously took up a lot of our time. I still had this at the back of my mind all summer, the situation as I left it, if a club came in with an offer I couldn't turn down then I was going to have to go.

It was a very unstable period for John and his family, and he made several statements which signalled his disquiet:

> I had an agent who I was using at the time. He said oh so-and-so are interested ... not that I didn't trust him but at the end of the day I had not physically gone and spoken to anyone, so it was still waiting for people to get back ... it was a very nervy time.

As the new season approached, John finally heard back from the club manager. He said the revised employment contract offer,

> was a big reduction in money but at the end of the day if that's what it's got to be, it was still decent money, I could afford to pay the mortgage and so that's the main concern. Then [the manager] phoned me up one morning and said I think we've got to talk firstly about pre-season, and get the contract sorted out … then two hours later, another phone call, the club had ... withdrawn the offer altogether now, so that was it, I'd suddenly gone from at least I've got that to fall back on to nothing.

John went on to say:

> **Player**: It was half way through July, I only had about another two week's money coming in and then I was like on the rock-n-roll [the dole] sort of thing.
>
> **Interviewer**: You could have been unemployed?
>
> **Player**: Well, that's how it was looking, I know at the time nothing had happened at all, there were rumours, a few clubs were meant to be looking, but I hadn't actually spoken to anyone.

As the situation grew ever more fraught, John's solicitor – not agent – who had dealt previously with numerous professional football clubs, speculatively wrote on his behalf seeking an opportunity for a trial or some other sign of interest. Two clubs responded, one of which was a Premier League club with whom John subsequently signed a two year contract.

Asked to comment on player reactions to managerial succession at his former club, John said, 'it became almost a standing joke, the lads would like laugh about it, but people were worried, at the back of the mind, it's a subconscious thing, no one is happy with the situation'. John then discussed player attitudes, and in commenting on whether he felt his approach to the game had altered, he made the following point:

> It's not the same, I think your outlook does change, I mean my outlook in general has changed a lot and I've learnt a lot from things that have happened to me ... I definitely learnt a lot, your whole outlook on life really as much as anything else changes from your experiences, mine certainly has, without a doubt, I'd go home and I think I worried too much about it, particularly in the day... if it affected the club then it affected me. But I've sort of learnt to distance myself a little bit now. It's my job and I do it to the best of my abilities.

When asked whether he still enjoyed his job, John said he 'wouldn't swap it for the world', but added, 'I think people view it as "oh, you're a footballer, it must be fantastic",

and it is, but there are down sides to it as well'. In clarifying what he meant by 'down sides', John went on to say:

> Well obviously there are the constant injuries. And last season I was getting abuse and the crowd was hammering me. There's not a better feeling than getting 30,000 people cheering you on, but there's not much of a worse feeling than when 30,000 people are booing you. You go home and think, 'Oh, what's going on here. Do I need this?' You start wondering whether you are doing the right thing. How you can change things? Then you worry too much. That's what I end up doing and it makes things worse rather than better.

John's experiences help to explain how commonsense understandings of high level sport that reflect dominant values assumed to be inherent in orientations to work can misconstrue the nuanced ways in which player meanings towards their careers can alter appreciably over time. By reducing his vocation to the level of work in a more instrumental fashion and by distancing himself from club tribulations, thus *individualizing* workplace concerns, John has become aware of, and better able to accommodate occupational grievances and find motives which help rationalize his continued existence in the industry. This demonstration of an instrumental attachment to work in a vocation which is assumed to be characterized by high emotional commitment must be understood as an important component in any explanation of cynical *dis-identification.*

Journeyman player

David started his career as a 16 year old apprentice-footballer at a Division Two club in the north of England. He was released two years later (he was not offered a professional contract), and departed the professional game returning to further education. He played

football for a non-league team still committed to seeking full-time playing opportunities. At the age of 21 years David was offered the chance to reignite his professional career at a Division Two club based in the south. He was taken on trial, and having impressed sufficiently in both matches and training he was subsequently offered 'non-contract' terms for the remainder of that season[iv]. At the end of that first season, David was offered a three year professional contract. David said his career progressed steadily and his playing reputation grew. The following extract, which developed out of questions related with his daily life as a player, concerns de-selection:

> **Interviewer**: Were there times when you weren't included that led you to see the manager?
>
> **Player**: Yes definitely, well every time I wasn't included I was up in his office.
>
> **Interviewer**: Is that a normal player reaction?
>
> **Player**: I think it is for some players, I think some players accept it more easily than others I mean every club I've been at ... if I'm not playing regularly when I think I should be I end up moving on really because I'm not prepared to sit in the reserves for months at a time ... if a manager goes off me like I'll probably move on.

This exchange precipitated a discussion of the period in which he departed this club, and the personal circumstances which unfolded. David said that, with one year remaining on his contract, and following the appointment of a new manager, he returned for pre-season to find that he was not issued training kit or a squad number; an unequivocal sign that his club status was marginal at best. In responding to questions concerning his reaction to this situation he commented as follows:

> **Player**: Oh, I was very angry, very disappointed because in the previous two years I'd probably played 75 to 80 games in Division One, and I was a far better player than the players he was bringing in, I mean I knew I was because they had been

playing in the Conference or even below. And suddenly I was training on my own after sort of three years of doing my best ... I couldn't believe it.

Interviewer: You were training on your own?

Player: I was training on my own in pre-season; I just wasn't included in anything so I just went off and kept fit on my own. Just like, the lads were playing sort of practice games or something I was going round the pitch doing a twelve minute run.

David was offered a new contract by the new manager, although he rejected it and sought out new employment at other clubs. Free from contract constraints, he was ultimately offered a deal with a club in a lower division, and in reflecting on whether this transfer represented a good move for him, he said:

Obviously it was a step down in terms of leagues. Yes I was disappointed to drop down ... but realistically I didn't have many options. I could have stayed at [the club] and trained on my own for six months but then nobody sees you play and nobody sees you do anything so you've got to get away.

Underscoring the idea of active participation as most meaningful, David went on to explain how his approach to his football career had changed as an outcome of some of the work experiences described thus far:

... in the early stages I just wanted play football, I wasn't bothered about the money really. A couple of years later when you've played a lot of football, money becomes a lot more important because, you know, you are buying a house and you've got a girlfriend or wife. So it's income you want really rather than any sort of playing experience.

David resumed his career at his new club and signed a two year contract. He was initially very happy at this club – as a consequence of reuniting with former colleagues –

although, as he articulates well, time-related pressures can structure a player's frame of mind throughout a period of fixed-term employment:

> ... once you've signed a contract there's a sort of honeymoon period really where everything is nice and you've got two years ahead of you, guaranteed money. But then six months into that you think, well this time next year I'm starting to panic about another contract, particularly if you are not in the team. I mean if you are in in the first year of your contract and you don't play well or if you are not in the team you start to think well, I've got this season - if I'm not in the team at the start of the season, you know, its ... so that's where the pressure comes you know, it's just constantly thinking about what's your next contract or if not where the next club's coming from.

Even though David said he enjoyed his time, he moved on eventually because, as he put it, he was 'bumping heads' with the manager, and he went on to make the point that,

> the way I've always left clubs, it's never been because somebody's come and offered a lot of money for me and you know you are quite happy to make the move and that. It always seems to be forced upon me somehow, I mean by fall outs with managers or managers that don't like you, which is obviously not an ideal way to move, and every time it's happened it has been stressful.

David found work with a third division team within commuting distance of his family home, and although he believed he was playing well for them – and the team were being 'successful' – circumstances beyond his control, in part underpinned by constraining financial conditions at the club, led to two swift episodes of managerial succession. In discussing how such career contingencies, like managerial succession, shaped his personal outlook, he made the following point:

> Nobody else looks after you, you know you hear stories about players being, well it happened to me at [a previous club] actually. There was this player there who'd been

there seven years, played 350 games for the club, a new manager took over, who had previously been the coach and, I think the week before transfer deadline date, he gave him two weeks wages ... a week before deadline day and told him that was it, when he'd, you know, he'd been a regular for seven years and that was it, 'on yer bike'. So you've got to look after number one.

Asked whether such career upheavals are commonly experienced he said,

Yes, I think every player has probably ... gone through it or seen somebody go through it so I think you realise that you know it could be you in that situation ... I think a lot a players are very cynical and bitter especially as they get older. I mean they know that the younger players come in a bit starry-eyed, probably like I was, and then you start to realise that it is not about England caps and Wembley appearances and that it is a job and you've got to pay the mortgage like anyone else.

David finally departed the professional game following extended contract negotiations and, fatigued by the unrelenting search for employment, returned to non league football and, this time, higher education. Drained of his spiritual reserves to reprove once again his abilities afresh, he was keen to disengage voluntarily. David's biography establishes the power of managers (and club owners) to affect players' careers, sometimes in small ways (leaving them out of the team for one game) and sometimes with much greater personal costs (not issuing a squad number at the start of preseason). Players like David do internalise the ways in which they are defined in (in)formal club settings, although this does not mean they are beholden to, or in time do not see through the cultural scripts accompanying, these definitions. In order to theorize the trajectories of both players (for whom contrasting accounts have been constructed) and their cynical narratives it is important to understand their movement from identification to dis-identification.

From identification to dis-identification

The levels of cynicism articulated by David and John indicate that in time some players do not continue to internalise the values and norms of the official culture in unreflective ways. Both understand the building toll of their emotional investments in a kind of contingent work which offers little hope of a secure career foothold. Choices available to them however are in part a product of their social locations (Padavic, 2005). Players' experiences of job loss – as illustrated in both biographies – lead in part to their estrangement from dominant ideological rhetoric which depicts football as a vocation (Nesti, 2008). Indeed, the cynicism to which David refers, and John's recognition of his own role distancing (Goffman, 1961), speak to the mental withdrawal by players who change the nature of their attachment to their employers and also their occupation in order to survive.

During their early socialization into football and subsequently their work roles, young players are driven by strong identification with cultural beliefs and the dream of intrinsic vocational fulfillment (McGillivray *et al*., 2005; Parker, 1996). Following various transitional experiences, rather than their selves being unalterably and continually shaped by managerial rhetoric, the consequent development of cynicism helps players to keep norms of the job at a distance such that they are no longer internalized. At this career stage, the *process of dis-identification* has already been triggered. This explanation does not prioritize the (re)negotiation of a new or reconstituted identity insofar as players still want to play and (for many) enjoy playing – in the ludic sense of that term – yet in their backstage regions they have cynically distanced themselves from the belief that they must be a particular type of person or be motivated by the same cultural values and norms they once coveted. Players like John and David are freeing themselves from the clutches of cultural incorporation; club controls are increasingly *externalized*. This interpretation of player cynicism as a form of dis-

identification therefore disrupts the simplicity and largely accepted orthodoxy of the identification thesis (Ingham *et al*., 1999; Shogun, 1999).

Robidoux's (2001) research suggests that the loyalties and commitments of hockey players are manipulated in such a way that players lose any desire to resist. The interpretation developed here offers a contrasting deduction. Instead of producing committed, enthusiastic, self-disciplining – docile – players, a possible effect of the process of dis-identification is a reinforcement of instrumentality among footballers who now fulfill role demands without internalizing their values. Robidoux (2001) is right to imply that the threat of de-selection and the depth of surplus talent disarm players of any staid or explicit ability to challenge existing power structures. Likewise, footballers understand that if they intend to stay in the professional game they cannot avoid the cultural expectations of behaviour anticipated by managers, and find themselves incapable of outwardly resisting the logic of the game. Even so, the development of a cynical frame of mind towards their employers – indicative of both biographies – is a form of self-serving 'power' since players can be sceptical about, rather than blind to, the motives of significant others and, in their own minds, acquire a more realistic understanding of what the cultural circumstances in which they are embedded 'really mean' for them. In this sense, cynicism can be conceptualized as a form of resistance against both authoritarian and normative forms of control which, at least on the surface, constrain their actions and presentation of self.

By dis-identifying, players acquire a semblance of freedom from the philosophy of the organisation such that they see through to more base managerial motives; workplace subjectivities are gradually externalised rather than impacting on inner (perhaps more genuine) values and beliefs (Costas and Fleming, 2009). In other words, by externalising realms of human practice, ideological aspects of cynicism draw attention to the way players – like John and David – keep occupational norms and values at a distance and make concerted

efforts to ensure they are not absorbed unquestioningly into their psyche. Yet, even though they are constrained to their social roles in public spheres (which means for footballers both in and outside the workplace), the process of dis-identification creates an interior space in which they feel relieved of their commitment to this social role as true-believing, 'docile' employees (Shogun, 1999). Their cynicism may not be total however. The biographies illuminate polar opposites in terms of dis-identification – yet players are neither total cynics nor complete optimists – but committing externally to their clubs and the occupation as their source of meaning is an entirely different matter from sincerely believing in it. Fleming and Spicer (2003: 169) theorise that 'systems of identification can be externalised, placed onto a series of objects and actions', and helps explain why players respond when 'at work' – that is in front stage regions (Goffman, 1959) – and high profile footballers like John are rarely 'off duty', in often predictable, formulaic and clichéd ways (Emmison, 1988). This argument suggests however that cultural power and dominant managerial methods may work equally through dis-identification rather than simply through identification. Thus, cynical detachment as a tactic of transgression does not appear to alter or challenge existing power structures, for players may become 'trapped' over the course of their careers in a 'vicious circle of cynicism and dependence' (Willmott, 1993: 518).

The interpretation of employee cynicism put forward contends that in contemporary working life managerial ideology targets the 'selves' of employees who, in response, engage in an *active disengagement* (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). John and David could be identified therefore as complying with cultural norms without conforming to them, and simultaneously developing a flawed sense of autonomy that further embeds them to existing relations of power. A key issue for this article relates to the idea that, for coaches and managers, there exists a direct connection between 'success' and the type of person you need to be to achieve workplace goals. The enlightened cynicism illuminated in John and David's biography can be

understood as recognition of the fact that they see through the rhetoric and motivations of managers, enabling them to act individualistically; the outcome however is the shoring up of cultural control. It is clear that 'success' can be built by players who dis-identify yet whose actions are cognizant with dominant cultural beliefs; an idea which challenges the prevailing attitude built around identification with cultural norms and values associated with professional sport (Robidoux, 2001). Any discord which compromises the goals of the club is pathologized by managerial gaze in terms of disloyalty, irrationality and as the actions of a troublemaker. This is significant because it is awkward for players in public to reject the naturalized ways of talking about their work. The development of cynical instrumentalism therefore enables players to comprehend what is happening to them more clearly and dis-identify with a most fervently sustained edict of contemporary professional football – identifying subjectively with club and authoritarian managerial requirements.

Final thoughts and conclusions

There are many studies which detail the 'success' of cultural management in sport (McGillivray *et al*., 2005; Robidoux, 2001; Wacquant, 2001), but a closer reading of research conducted on professional athletes illustrates that many respond by actually dis-identifying with the culture – its norms, values, attitudes – and, in particular, attributing unbridled cynicism towards the organization of their work. In cases where cynical employees do not identify with cultural values, a regime of ideology still seems to be at work: thus ideological consent can be harnessed through dis-identification. Practices of resistance like cynicism, which are a human product of this attempt at cultural colonization, enables social scientists to comprehend the importance to studies of sports work of questions of power and its effects in athletes' careers. The notion of dis-identification is a useful one since at times athletes struggle to distance themselves from their work and its role requirements. They have been so

profoundly embedded within sports social relations for so long, any sense of authenticity is lost, only to be replaced by a dramaturgical self (Collinson, 2003) who attempts to survive/thrive in a realized existence of exploitation. Thus players struggle to maintain distance for themselves from football values and logic. It is still the case that the dominant performance narrative has no serious rivals. Even if athletes do not take the implications of values such as 'victory' or 'total commitment' seriously, even if they keep a cynical distance from its effects, they are still reproducing it through their involvement in everyday practices within which the performance narrative is inscribed.

All of the academic studies of the careers of professional athletes offer engaging narratives which illuminate the worlds of these employees, but sociological readings of their work and lives, with all its reference to subjugation and self-alienation, have been treated with relative complacency – very few moralists of sport ever question athletes' working conditions irrespective of their implications and largely overlooked injustices of power in these athletic occupations: likewise, the effects of, and rationalisations associated with, 'success' and career 'gain' are rarely theorised (Chambliss, 1989). Professional athletes do not offer classic examples of life's *underdogs*, one concern being that, at least in relation to issues of employment, examinations of 'sport as work' offer very little insight beyond established forms of sociological knowledge. The consensus associated with this orthodox position – in particular how cultural power operates through identification – exists in relation to understanding athletes' careers which has had the effect of burying from conceptual sight for social scientists issues connected to welfare, mental health and forms of addiction. The implication that 'we already know this' may have led sociologists to overlook what is really going on in terms of threats to an athlete's sense of dignity, self and fulfillment. It is easy to conclude that the negativity athletes harbor towards dominating coaches, managers and team owners is an inherently disrupting force that agitates rather than conserves particular relations

of power. This article acts as a reminder to sociologists of sport of the way in which mechanisms of resistance – cynical dis-identification – can become concurrently integrative mechanisms that underscore structures of domination that were the initial object of resistance.

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[i] Now with the celebrated assistance of sports psychology.

[ii] A distinction is made here between job loss and (non or) de-selection; crucially, not being in paid work is different from de-selection, a term which implies a non-playing status rather than unemployment (Grove *et al.*, 2004).

[iii] In England approximately 600-700 players are released by employers each season; and nearly 25% of the playing workforce experiences some type of permanent or temporary job move each year (Roderick, 2012b). The notion of job loss is used here rather than unemployment however to help emphasise job loss as a transition and to indicate the rapid search for new employment. The focus is mostly about involuntary job loss, although it is not uncommon for players to voluntarily decide against re-signing a contract offer if they believe they are not going to play an active role.

[iv] Players may be signed on a week-by-week 'non-contract' basis, a situation which affords no long-term employment security.