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## **Sports Reforms and Coaches' Spoiled Identities: An Analysis of Structural Stigma**

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This article explores how sports coaches' identity and social relations are shaped within the context of new policy initiatives in sport. It focuses particularly on South Korea's ongoing sports reforms wherein sports coaches feel stigmatised and disgraced. Informed by classic and contemporary sociological understandings of stigma and relying both on documents and narratives from 29 individuals, our qualitative analysis reveals that Korean coaches' stigma is discrediting, prior-known, and power-laden. By viewing stigmatisation as a social process constructed both 'symbolically' and 'structurally', this article extends Goffman's analysis to argue that coaches' stigmatisation is rooted in the social, institutional, and political power around sports reforms that forge stigmatising attitudes and beliefs across society by offering ready-made scripts for both the stigmatised and the 'normals'.

Keywords: Goffman, stigma, structural stigma, identity, sports coach

## **Introduction**

This article pays attention to contemporary contexts where sports coaching fields have undergone institutional and political shifts. It specifically considers the impact of the changes driven by broader society on sports and coaching fields, coaching practices, and the social definition of coaches (e.g., Taylor & Garratt, 2010; Taylor et al., 2016), as well as how individuals in the contexts experience these changes (e.g., Kim & Dawson, 2022). In particular, this article is informed by the work of Piper and her colleagues, who investigated sporting and coaching settings in the United Kingdom (UK), where the introduction of safeguarding initiatives promoted a culture of intergenerational mistrust between coaches and children, resulting in coaches being framed as ‘dangerous individuals’ (see Garratt et al., 2013; Piper et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). There are notable parallels between this research and other work in South Korea (hereafter, Korea), where coaching settings, as Taylor et al. (2016) observed, are “inappropriately regarded and pathologised as [a] problematic arena” (p. 187). In Korea, sports reforms are underway with the goal of altering the former authoritative sporting environment in accordance with more liberal, democratic principles (Kim et al., 2020; Nam et al., 2018). Amid this state of flux, Korean coaches tend to be depicted as an embodiment of the former coercive authority in high-performance sports, a predicament that has left them feeling stigmatised in social interactions (Kim & Dawson, 2022).

Reflecting on Korean coaches’ current social positionality of being stigmatised in society (see Kim & Dawson, 2022), this article explores the interrelatedness between three spheres of their social world, namely their stigmatised identities, social interactions, and the broader societal context in which they operate. In this study, we seek to go beyond an examination of individual coaches to consider the broader socio-political and institutional factors that influence stigma, and, in so doing, our research redresses a heavy theoretical focus on micro-level factors in stigma research that occurs at the expense of structural cues

that shape stigma. By approaching the study in a way that did not single out specific coaches' voices or experiences, we were able to focus on meso-level or institutional spheres that served as sites of stigma development and reproduction.

Framed in terms of the classic-contemporary pairing of Goffman's (1963) *stigma* and Hannem's (2012) *structural stigma* and drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and a range of documents, our study offers a more nuanced understanding of the three entangled levels of the social world – self, interaction, and society (Goffman, 1959). The analysis suggests that, *beyond* what Goffman (1963) described as a contingent matter of stigma that occurs through individuals' moment-to-moment responses during interpersonal interaction, stigma, as experienced by the coaches in this study, is deeply embedded in the social fabric of society and the institutional context that governs high-performance sports. Thus, stigma is reinforced by social structures and institutional factors in ways that shape coaches' subjective experiences and definition of the situation (Hannem, 2012, 2022; Tyler & Slater, 2018). We argue that the institutional context of high-performance sports in Korea offered ready-made scripts that were used by coaches and others in a way that reinforced stigma, regardless of the personal or distinguishing features of specific coaches.

Following this introduction, the paper begins with an elaboration of the theoretical concepts. The discussion then moves on with a brief illustration of sports reforms in Korea and an overview of the methodological approach of the study. Findings are presented in terms of the key features of Korean coaches' stigma: discrediting, prior-known, and power-laden. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief consideration of the key contributions and sociological implications of this study.

## Stigma and Structural Stigma: Symbolic and Structural Approaches to Understanding Stigma

Goffman (1963) defined stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (p. 9). Stigma occurs when the impression that people want to convey in face-to-face exchanges is downgraded by the impression that others have of them when they meet in person, or when virtual and actual identities are misaligned (Goffman, 1963). Viewing stigma as something discrediting and obtrusive to the extent that it interferes with interactions, Goffman (1963) categorised three types of stigmatic attributes: (a) physical deformities; (b) character faults or a personal record of imprisonment, alcoholism, mental disorder, homosexuality, and unemployment; and (c) tribal aspects of religion, race, and nationality. Goffman (1963) distinguished between those with stigma (the stigmatised) and a larger group of people who did not possess these attributes (the *normals*). His primary interest throughout *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Goffman, 1963) was to dissect patterns of interaction between the stigmatised and the normals, that is, “mixed contacts” (p. 23).

In Goffman’s (1963) analysis of stigma-normal interaction, there are two forms of stigma possessors: the discredited and the discreditable. The *discredited* are those whose stigma “is known about already or is evident on the spot”, such as body disfigurement (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). In intergroup contacts, the discredited may engage in ‘covering’ to minimise the negative effects of their stigma (e.g., amputees using artificial limbs to mask their disfigured bodies). The *discreditable* are those who are able to hide their stigma or whose stigmatic attributes, such as mental illness, a criminal record, or chronic illness, can go undetected during initial encounters, such that they are likely to ‘pass’ as normals (e.g., sex workers trying to keep their line of work secret among friends and relatives) (Goffman,

1963). Thus, unlike the discredited, the discreditable are able to exercise control over their personal information with regard to what or how much to disclose to different audiences.

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma has been used previously in the context of sport-related research concerning dominant groups' perspectives on minority individuals (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992). In a group of studies concerning sports coaching settings, Jones (2006) offered sociological insights drawing on Goffman's (1963) work to explain stigma experienced by a coach in the coach-athlete relationship, based on the coach's 'dysfluency' and fear of being undervalued by athletes. Partington and Cushion (2012) also relied on Goffman's (1963) insights to "[link] practical actions to social issues" (p. 94) in their consideration of coaching behaviours among those who were viewed as less knowledgeable due to their limited coaching experience. In their case study on a fitness coach's self-perception and relational actions, Thompson et al. (2015) found that the coach was stigmatised by other coaching staff in the team on the grounds of the negative first impressions that the coach conveyed as well as his alleged inadequacy for the position.

Much of the existing literature on the nature and sources of stigma emphasises individuals' uneasy feelings, personal traits and specific factors causing stigma. They seem to miss Goffman's (1963) crucial message that stigma should be understood as "a language of *relationship*, not [stigmatic] attributes" (p. 13, emphasis added); thus, the analysis remains at the level of the individual. Critics suggest that the heavy focus on the individual in stigma research was possibly the result of Goffman's (1963) overwhelming concentration both on the contingencies of face-to-face experiences and on various actions that stigmatised individuals take in response to awkward encounters (Hannem, 2012, 2022; Tyler, 2018). In this regard, Goffman's (1963) *Stigma* has come under fire for failing to elaborate on the social and cultural influences pertaining to stigmatisation. For instance, Hannem (2012) noted that Goffman paid scant attention to the genesis of stigma, glossing over "the larger

implications of power differentials that exist in some interactions” (p. 21). Tyler (2018) also alluded to Goffman’s apolitical, ahistorical, and individualistic conceptualisation of stigma, which stemmed from his exclusion of essential questions about how social interaction is fabricated through power.

To compensate for the weakness in Goffman’s (1963) work, Hannem (2012) proposed a supplementary concept of *structural stigma*. In part, she used Michel Foucault’s post-structural perspective to expand on Goffman’s symbolic interactionist idea of stigma: a top-up of Goffman’s bottom-up approach (beginning from a micro level of minutiae of everyday life) with Foucault’s top-down approach (starting from a macro structure of the whole system of thought/knowledge) (Hacking, 2004). Hannem (2012) maintained that structural stigma “arises out of an *awareness* of the problematic attributes of a particular group of people”, for the purpose of managing “a population that is perceived, on the basis of the stigmatic attribute, to be ‘risky’ or morally bereft” (p. 24, emphasis in original). Specifically, Hannem (2012) stressed the need to examine the social function of laws, government, and institutional policies because they operate as the social order, or *power*, that is intricately interwoven with stigmatic phenomena in society.

Relying both on Goffman’s (1963) stigma and Hannem’s (2012) extension of Goffman’s (1963) analysis, this article delves into the complex interplay between coaches’ stigmatised identity, their social interactions with non-sport-related people and the wider society they are a part of. Our work particularly considers Goffman’s (1963) implicit suggestion about the triangular relationship between stigma, shared knowledge, and the societal structure: before stigma is collectively perceived by others, there is a precondition in which the stigma has been mutually conceptualised and publicly established as shared knowledge across the society. Complementing this idea with Hannem’s focus on structural stigma, as the first study to apply the concept to sports coaching, allows us to explain the

social process involved in stereotyping Korean coaches as a collective entity. With these novel insights, we elucidate how Korea's peculiar definition of the situation has led to athletes-turned-coaches being reviled rather than revered. To contextualise the discussion, the next section briefly outlines public reforms in the sphere of sports in Korea.

## **Sports Reforms in Korea**

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the Korean sports system was geared to produce young high-performance/elite athletes for international success (Kang & Houlihan, 2021) with gruelling, intensive training regimes, which reflected the ethos of Korea's consecutive military governments. According to Kim et al. (2020), the Korean high-performance sporting setting established by the military governments was suggestive of what Goffman (1961) called a 'total institution', in that almost all high-performance athletes were controlled by institutional arrangements of seclusion, manipulation, discipline, and assaults, in a similar way to Goffman's asylum inmates. Since the 1990s, alongside democratic transformation that has challenged Korea's militaristic regimes, an increasingly loud chorus of voices called for reflection on the authoritarian practices in high-performance sports settings. The mounting pressure, in turn, led to the emergence of sports reform movements from the mid-2000s onwards (Nam et al., 2018).

The need for sports reforms in Korea has been promoted in the media and through (non-)government activities. On one hand, the media exposed rampant corruption and abusive practices in the high-performance/elite sports environment. High-profile cases, involving heavy-handed training, (sexual) violence, rigid hierarchy, athletes' chronic absences from school classes, bribery, and illegal entrance into university, were publicised through special features on television (e.g., Chung, 2008) and in newspapers (e.g., Kim,



2009). On the other hand, the government officially launched investigations into high-performance sports by organising a task force to mediate the issues in the public spotlight. Successive inquiries into the Actual Conditions of Student-athletes' Human Rights in 2006, 2008, and 2010 were undertaken by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRC). The 2008 survey, for example, revealed that 78.8% of the respondents (i.e., Sport-speciality Students [SSS]s, or student-athletes, in secondary schools) had experienced physical/verbal violence, and 81.1% had no access to supplementary school lessons that could make up for absences owing to excessive training requirements and competitions (NHRC, 2008).

Responding to the need for a significant overhaul of high-performance sport policy and practice, government organisations, including the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (MCST), put forward countermeasures to shift traditional practices conducted in athletic teams, such as a scheme of eradication of violence against SSSs in 2005 and a plan for an advanced management system of school athletic teams in 2010 (MCST, 2018). Given that high-performance sport development within Korea is mostly dependent on the school education system (Park et al., 2020), many of the initiatives have specifically been introduced to *school* settings. Since the School Sports Promotion Act was enforced in 2013 with the intent to protect the human rights of school-aged SSSs, more practical initiatives have been implemented, including academic criteria for SSSs and mandatory school/university coach education (Kim & Dawson, 2022; MCST, 2018). Under the management of government education organisations, coaches of school athletic teams have been subjected to stricter monitoring and inspection by the Offices of Education in each metropolitan city or provincial region.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2014, the government initiated a project, 'Integrity Enhancement of School Athletic Team,' which aimed to eliminate corrupt practices that were conventionally prevalent in athletic teams in schools (MCST, 2018). This project assigned greater responsibilities not only to school principals to oversee their

It is within this contemporary societal and sporting setting that Korean high-performance/elite coaches are situated. In the wake of democratic reforms more broadly, coaches are frequently described as the main contributors to the gruelling, coercive, and abusive practices within high-performance sports, as they are believed to have accumulated and replicated what they had experienced as athletes in the former authoritarian sporting environment (Kim & Dawson, 2022). Owing largely to the enduring spectre of the former, abusive world of high-performance sports in the nation's imagination (see Kim et al., 2020), current-day coaches are assumed to be perpetuating the behaviours that they were once subjected to at the hands of their own coaches. On this point, we agree with Goffman's (1963) claim that the central issue regarding stigmatised groups is not specific attributes *per se*, but rather "their *place* in the social structure" (p. 151, emphasis added). Guided by our interest in the historical, political, and institutional shifts, both in the wider society and in the high-performance/elite sports milieu, we offer an analysis of the symbolic *and* structural formation of coaches' stigma in Korea following an explanation of the methodological approach of the study.

## **Methodology**

The present study is part of a larger research project investigating a long-term identity construction process of high-performance coaches in Korea. This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach (Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015) to gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between coaches' identity, their social relations, and the broader structural factors that inform the Korean sporting context. Data were collected from documents and

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respective school athletic teams (including conducting annual appraisals of coaches), but also to school supervisors to carry out more frequent and stricter inspections of school athletic teams with the intention of handling integrity issues more effectively.

semi-structured interviews by the first author. Regarding documentary materials, we consulted public statements of (non-)governmental institutes, research reports on sexual/physical violence in high-performance sport, government documents on schemes to protect SSSs' rights, and media coverage of news reports and television shows, in order to deepen our understanding of the setting under study and contextualise the contents of the research interviews (Rapley, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 individuals. Since interviewing is a process of interacting with social ideas, shared emotions, and cultural frames, which are emergent from aggregated individuals in society (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022; Wuthnow, 2011), we were able to gain insights into meso-level and structural factors that shaped coaches' experiences of stigma.

To understand the topic under investigation from different angles and probe the three levels of interconnection under consideration – identity, interaction, and society – two different groups of research participants, namely coaches and non-coaches, were recruited via a combination of the use of gatekeepers and a convenience sampling approach (Tracy, 2020). The numbers of participants in both groups were determined by the 'saturation' technique – terminating recruitment when additional cases do not provide any new information about the research topic (Schreier, 2018).

The coach group was purposively selected based on the following criteria: (a) having had an athletic career competing at a high-performance and/or elite level in Korea; and (b) being full-time paid high-performance/elite coaches being employed to train school athletic teams or running their own athletic clubs/squads in which SSSs trained. In total, 23 high-performance coaches with varying years of experience as athletes (six to 22 years) and as coaches (two to 37 years) were recruited from 10 different sports (swimming, diving, fencing, judo, wrestling, rugby, soccer, shooting, volleyball, and boxing). Echoing Tyler and Slater's (2018) concern with "where stigma is produced, by whom and for what purposes" (p. 721),

we have chosen deliberately not to dwell on coaches' individual differences, personal traits, and unique coaching experiences. Instead, in recognition that our participants operated in the past as athletes and are currently operating as coaches under the state-led high-performance sporting system of Korea (Kim et al., 2020), we are focusing on their *collective career trajectories* from athletes to coaches as a key site of stigma development. This focus allows us to ask bigger questions about where stigma originates, who perpetuates it, and why it is reproduced in the Korean context, rather than concentrating on whether different coaches experience stigma differently. To this end, the coaches were asked about their experiences regarding their present-day coaching roles and the changes in the coaching setting resulting from the sports reforms.

The non-coach group constituted an important dimension of the site of stigma development as individuals who are members of the wider society *beyond* the high-performance/elite sporting settings. They offered a slightly different angle compared with current coaches, thus enriching the information on the societal perception of Korean coaches. Our participants in this group included six people who were involved in the school environment and interacted directly with high-performance coaches: three teachers (managing athletic teams in their schools), two school supervisors (overseeing and inspecting school athletic teams in their jurisdictions), and a vice-principal (of a state-funded elite sport school). The years of experience working with high-performance coaches or observing the coaching setting among this group of participants ranged from four to 21 years. Interviews with this group revolved around their observations of the former and current environments of Korean high-performance sports and general perceptions/attitudes towards coaches. Given that identities are constructed relationally (Jenkins, 2014; Scott, 2015), the vantage points of these non-coaches offered unique and more nuanced insights into the origins and reproduction of stigma than what we could glean from the coaches alone.

All interviews were carried out face-to-face at the participants' preferred time and location and ranged from 60 to 150 minutes. They were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, categorised by themes, and translated into English later by the first author. Where translation resulted in a loss of meaning, participants' words were paraphrased. Being Korean, the first author is familiar with the geopolitical context. Moreover, her athletic career competing at an elite level and teaching career at secondary schools in Korea not only facilitated access to and trust among both groups of participants, but also provided insider knowledge that proved useful for data analysis and interpretation. The work presented here represents a fragment of the larger study, meaning that we had to carefully select which voices to represent to address the issue of structural stigma specifically in keeping with the research purpose and the chosen theoretical framework of this paper.

The data were analysed by using a theoretically informed interpretative approach in conjunction with abductive reasoning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). We remained open not only to analysis from other perspectives, such as a critical approach that considers power, discourse, and/or social reproduction, but also to claims to authority of the existing theories, such as Goffman's argument.

Data analysis was conducted in four stages with different levels of interpretation. First, all the documentary evidence and interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times and categorised into potential themes both in typed and hand-written notes. These themes were then collated to develop major analytical categories, such as collectively patterned cases of coaches' interaction with others, non-sporting people's perceptions of coaches, inspection practices of school athletic teams, coach education practices/programmes, and public issues pertaining to coaches' physical and/or sexual misconduct. Data sources were then cross-checked by the authors and triangulated. Specifically, interview transcripts that contained participants' insider knowledge and subjective experiences were scrutinised through the lens

of the documentary materials (Rapley, 2018) in order to discern anecdotal evidence from significant claims. The categories were, in turn, re-reviewed and conceptualised through repeated reflections on the existing literature and Goffman's analysis of stigma (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Where we were unable to interpret our findings through Goffman's classic approach, we employed a critical approach by: (a) questioning the shortcomings inherent in Goffman's work and problematising the currency of dominant interpretive patterns in the existing literature (e.g., Jones, 2006; Thompson et al., 2015); and (b) reviewing and adopting a more contemporary concept of symbolic interactionism (i.e., Hannem's concept of 'structural stigma') to understand the unresolved phenomena in the collected data. The final analytical stage entailed shifting iteratively between the empirical data and our preliminary interpretations to arrive at three key findings about coaches' stigma, which we discuss below.

### **Discrediting, Prior-known, and Power-laden Stigma**

Athletes-turned-coaches in contemporary Korean society are not unlike Goffman's (1961) asylum inmates, in that they have prior experience of performing under the regimented, hierarchical arrangements of the institution of Korean high-performance sports (Kim et al., 2020). At the point of transitioning to their coaching roles, they believed that they would – metaphorically speaking – be set free from the ascribed roles of asylum inmates. Yet, simultaneously, they came to obtain a *prior* record as ex-athletes who had dwelled in the Goffmanesque total institution. Amid the introduction of sports reform initiatives, coaches became aware that their interactions with people beyond the high-performance sports setting were not going smoothly (Kim & Dawson, 2022). They felt dishonoured and disparaged by the negative perceptions of coaches held by those beyond the sporting context. Despite

wanting to be recognised as experts or elites in the field of coaching, coaches felt that their authentic sense of self was degraded by others' moral judgement of their roles or titles and/or their former careers as high-performance/elite athletes (Kim & Dawson, 2022). Bolstered by Hannem's insights into structural stigma, our empirical work extends Goffman's (1963) understanding of the stigmatised-normal distinction to discern three key features of Korean coaches' stigma: discrediting, prior-known, and power-laden stigma.

### ***Discrediting Stigma: A Fixed Image of Coaches' Stigmatic Traits***

Negative perceptions about what it means to be a coach in Korean society were particularly evident in conversations with non-coach participants. Our earlier work (see Kim & Dawson, 2022; Kim et al., 2020) in which we reflected on current coaches' formative years as athletes explains why these negative perceptions might arise. One of the teachers who participated in this study depicted coaches as those who had been "troublemakers, showed violent behaviour and had tough characters." Two other non-coach participants reiterated this imagery of present-day coaches:

Since coaches had experienced military culture before, they have become violent. ... Because they have never been concerned about their quality of life and happiness, they couldn't help growing up in the wrong way. [In their athletic life] they should have had diverse experiences, like learning to play music and art, so that they could grow up as a whole person. But they never had these opportunities. All the experiences [that coaches underwent during their athletic life] have been embodied in themselves, and their thinking ability stopped growing. (A school supervisor)

After retiring [from their sports], they become a coach because what they can

do for a living is only to coach athletes. But they only learned cursing and hitting [during their athletic time], so they coach their athletes in the same way they learned. ... They take for granted the environment where they grew up in the past and are living at present, so they don't have any perception that what they are doing now is wrong. (A teacher)

These comments suggest that some people beyond the immediate high-performance sports setting in Korean society presume that coaches' previous experiences have rendered them unable to change and unreflexive. This expectation of coaches held by non-sport-related people can be understood using Goffman's (1963) explanation of the socially shared "codes or lines [of conduct]" that are given to a stigmatised group (p. 133). Such codes, implicitly or explicitly, stipulate what kind of conduct is appropriate for people with a stigma in interactional contexts. For instance, "the cripple [*sic*] has to play the part of the cripple, just as many women have to be what the men expect them to be, just women," to ensure that the normals are not confronted by unexpected behaviour, which could cause an interaction situation to become awkward (Carling, 1962, as cited in Goffman, 1963, p. 134).

In the eyes of people outside the high-performance sports realm, the conduct of a typical high-performance coach was frequently expected to be ignorant, aggressive, inarticulate, and immoral. For instance, Coach 1 frequently heard others saying that "those who were involved in high-performance sports coaching were idiotic." Coach 2 also offered his observation that "in coach education, every remark made by the educators made it sound as though all coaches sitting there were barbarians and ignorant people." Furthermore, one of the school supervisors stated that sports coaches are often perceived by head teachers as a social threat, likening them to "the potential nuclear bomb ... [due to] the fear that coaches would make problems."



When an individual coach's behaviour and appearance are contrary to such general expectations of coaches, or coaches do not, in reality, possess the assumed traits, they are regarded as unnatural, or abnormal, in the eyes of others. Even if the stigmatic traits are unnoticeable, interactions between coaches and others seem not to proceed smoothly. In our study, coach participants provided several examples that highlighted their experiences of being confronted with the fixed image of being a coach. Coach 3 mentioned that the staff of the Offices of Education often viewed her as a quarrelsome "fighting cock" whenever she summoned the courage "to raise awareness about some of the challenges faced by the school athletic teams." In addition, as Coach 4 pointed out, when coaches actively participated in the political movement seeking "to improve coaches' current poor working conditions", they were "regarded as outlandish", or deviant, and viewed as pushing themselves forward too much. It appeared that non-coaches, although *assuming* that coaches were aggressive, nonetheless *expected* them to be submissive. It was as though others demanded that coaches take responsibility and show remorse for the shameful legacy of high-performance sports coaching under the former regime. In asserting themselves politely, or raising seemingly reasonable concerns, as Coaches 3 and 4 did, coaches contravened the expectations of others, which led to unpleasant encounters.

As with most instances of stereotyping, when coaches were deemed too intelligent and trustworthy to be within a social category of coach, they were singled out as an exception. This is illustrated in Coach 5's experience where the teacher in charge of managing the school athletic team often encouraged him to "quit the coaching job and become a school teacher", with genuine, good intentions of helping Coach 5 to escape from the stigmatised-coach category. At first glance, the teacher's attitude seems to contradict the general tendency to discredit coaches. However, the comments from the teacher ultimately underscored the dominant beliefs that intelligence and trustworthiness are incongruent with

the assumed traits of a ‘typical’ coach, as they did not actively challenge societal prejudices about coaches and instead deemed Coach 5 to be too good to be a coach.

The interaction pattern between coaches and others in this study contrasts with Goffman’s (1963) taxonomy of stigma. The stigmatic traits associated with Korean coaches can be considered a blemish of individual character, which, according to Goffman (1963), can be manageable, or invisible, within an encounter if the bearer of this type of stigma successfully conceals their stigmatic marks. Such people are not discredited, but rather discreditable. However, in this study, coaches’ stigma was seen as *discrediting*, rather than discreditable. Even though coaches did not possess or reveal the tainted traits in interaction situations, they often experienced interaction with others as unpleasant or uncomfortable. Coaches were discredited merely by virtue of their identification as coaches, whether or not their stigmatic attributes were apparent in social relations. Below, we discuss this invariably discrediting stigma further, with respect to information about coaches’ stigmatic traits, which has been shared by members of society *before* coaches interact with others.

### ***Prior-known Stigma: Disseminated Information about Athletes-turned-coaches***

Interview data revealed that other people already had prior knowledge about coaches’ stigmatic information. Whether strangers or not, the people whom coaches encountered seemed to know about the coaches’ biographical records as ex-athletes who had been socialised in the total institution (Kim et al., 2020). Coach 6 talked about being faced with a disdainful view on the collective career trajectory among Korean coaches:

When I was hanging out with one of my friends one day, he was with another friend of his whom I had never met before. I said I wanted to have other jobs instead of coaching. Then he dismissively told me: “What else can you do for a living? Is there anything you can do, except for coaching? Coaching or

manual work<sup>2</sup> is the only thing you can do, isn't it?"

It became apparent to Coach 6 that, regardless of the slow but steady reforms that are underway to improve the sporting environment, broader society's perspectives about coaches have not shifted. Indeed, documentary evidence in the form of a national survey reflects positive progress since the introduction of sports reforms in Korea. For instance, a survey conducted by the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee (2016) revealed that sexual and physical violence against athletes by coaches had declined considerably. The incidence of physical violence diminished from 69.2% in 2010 to 29.9% in 2016, while sexual harassment was reported to have declined from 62.9% in 2010 to 29.3% in 2016. A more recent national survey by the NHRC (2020) revealed a similar decline: physical abuse among school aged SSSs was reported to have dropped to 14.7%, and the occurrence of sexual abuse was down to 6.7%. Despite the documented evidence of improvements in the setting of high-performance sports, negative social constructions of sports coaching in Korea remain pervasive, which suggests that there is still much work to be done to ensure that progress is more widely acknowledged in society.

Many of our coach participants contended that most people's views about coaches tended to reflect the past. Our earlier work (Kim & Dawson, 2022; Kim et al., 2020) offers insights as to why this is the case. As we argued there, the negative depictions of present-day coaches are rooted in incidents of a bygone era involving coaches who practised under the former regime and are not, in fact, based on the behaviour of people who are *currently* employed as coaches. Nonetheless, this negative image of coaches seems to have been

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<sup>2</sup> There is a prevalent social stereotype in Korea that associates manual labour jobs with lower socioeconomic status and a lack of education, which further reinforces the negative perception of these occupations (Kwon, 2009). Due to the strong emphasis on academic achievement in Korean society (e.g., Kim & Tak, 2023), manual labour occupations are often stigmatised as options for those who – like coaches – are assumed to be poorly educated or do not pursue higher education (Kwon, 2009).

incorporated as an inflexible part of Korean society's worldview. As discussed by Coaches 7 and 5:

Young coaches are now good at running and managing their teams or gyms, and have improved their computer skills. So honestly, coaches aren't abusive anymore, unlike coaches used to be in the past. These days, coaches have become much smarter and more professional, but the image [of coaches] hasn't changed. Parents still inevitably have prejudices when they think of the sport their child is going to do. (Coach 7)

People who didn't take part in high-performance sports don't know how extremely hard we worked in the past. They just know about coaches' problematic issues, like corruption, factional strife and beating athletes up. ... So, for those ordinary people, it's so natural to think that there's no doubt that these issues are still deeply involved in high-performance sports. ... In fact, the current coaching field has been much improved. But, whenever I met athletes' parents, I realised that they still view us very negatively. (Coach 5)

The pre-existing, perpetuated assumption about coaches in Korea is pertinent to what Goffman (1963) called "known-about-ness" – having prior information about a person with stigma *before* interaction takes place (p. 49). Goffman (1963) distinguished 'known-about-ness' from "visibility" and placed more emphasis on the latter (p. 64). For Goffman (1963), 'visibility' was crucial for understanding stigma because it is a matter of the extent to which stigmatic attributes are noticeable in speech, appearance, and manner within the circumstances of a chance encounter. However, Goffman (1963) underplayed the importance of 'known-about-ness' in *generating* stigma. As Hannem (2012) put it, "a stigma need not be

‘visible’ to be *known about* in a small town, or social circle, where gossip is prevalent, and the individual need not have first-hand knowledge of the stigma to ‘know about’ it” (p. 16, emphasis in original). Insofar as Korean coaches are identified by their occupation, their experience of stigma in this study is bound to a matter of other people already knowing about the tainted traits informed by society’s categorisation, rather than a contingent or unforeseen matter as Goffman (1963) understood.

This contrast may arise from Goffman’s (1963) overriding concern with contingent interaction, which is *symbolically* constructed in individuals’ day-to-day life. Despite Goffman’s (1963) subtle allusion to macro-structure, his analysis of stigma is of limited value for explaining the emergence of stigma among coaches in Korean society as it was largely divorced from power relations and contextual structure (Hannem, 2012; Kusow, 2004; Tyler, 2018). Therefore, further insights are needed regarding the process through which coaches are socially and politically categorised as stigma possessors. In this regard, we relied on Hannem’s (2012) assertion that the conceptualisation of the stigma-normal relationship should be understood at a *structural* level. In our discussion of the third feature of coaches’ stigma, we present an analysis of the link between coaches’ stigma and the institutional power of sports reforms.

### ***Power-laden Stigma: Stigmatising Process of Sports Reforms***

The stigma experienced by coaches in Korea is deeply rooted in the social process of defining coaches’ identities. Social movements and political initiatives that seek to transform the former authoritative regime of high-performance sports have been influential in shaping what it means to be a coach in Korean society. Much like Hannem’s (2012, 2022) argument about structural-level identifications of stigmatic attributes, coaches’ stigma is tied to the sports reforms that contribute to framing coaches as the embodiment of corrupt and violent

practices. Thus, coaches' stigma is a power-laden process that unfolds *beyond* the Goffmanesque face-to-face interaction. We argue that an array of sports reforms has exerted a stigmatising power. This power is performed as sports reform movements and policies inform society's perception of, and attitude towards, coaches in a stigmatising way. Coaches' stigma originates out of a social and political categorising process (i.e., stereotyping) in which an entire sub-population is collectively defined as deviant or dangerous by structural power (Foucault, 1970; Taylor et al., 2016). The data from this study highlight two social and political processes involved in the stigmatisation of coaches: the influence of mass media and integrity initiatives of the Offices of Education.

### *Mass Media*

Mass media was one of the sources that served to construct and diffuse a stereotyped image of what kind of person coaches are. In seeking to understand our coaches' assertions that people beyond the high-performance sports world tend to see coaches through the lens of the past rather than as agents of transformation, we found that high-profile abuse cases of high-performance sports in media coverage, such as television shows (e.g., Chung, 2008) and news reports (e.g., Kim, 2009), not only fuelled a 'moral panic' (Donnelly & Sparks, 1997; Malloy & Zakus, 2004) that seeped into public consciousness, but also contributed to the entrenchment of the demonised image of coaches. This occurred notably in media reports that generalised scandals in sports settings, giving the impression that coaches are the main culprits. For example, a regular columnist of one of the most influential Korean newspapers referred to practitioners in coaching fields in very unflattering terms, which contradicted the findings of the survey data that we reported on above:

In an atmosphere where only 'national prestige' is emphasised, the old, evil practices of sports culture have become more pervasive. It is a 'deep-rooted

evil' that no one knows how to deal with. ... It is hard for anyone to deny tragic incidents and dreadful cases that occur because of the deep-rooted evils [in sporting settings]. ... Physical violence and sexual abuse by sports coaches have continued recently. (Jeong, 2018, translated)

The following newspaper extract about an assault scandal in 2018 by a national short-track speed skating coach (see Kang, 2018) provides another example of such generalisation. This impresses on the reader that such behaviour is common among coaches and merely a repetition of their own previous experience as high-performance athletes:

Why do coaches keep beating their athletes up? Probably the reason might be very simple. The reason why they hit [their athletes] is because they were beaten up, and they do not know other ways [to coach], except for physical violence. Coaches and their athletes must have been getting closer and attached to each other by beating them up and being beaten for a long time. (Chung, 2018, translated)

Media reports on high-performance coaches in Korea seem to select and depict only sensational issues to attract public attention, at the expense of more nuanced accounts that capture other meaningful aspects of high-performance coaches. Commenting on the lingering negative impression of high-performance sports coaches during the conversation, the interviewed Vice-principal remarked that there is an overrepresentation in the media of stories that link high-performance coaches to violence and scandals, and “only the bad image is left, and people get to think that that’s the way sportspersons are.” Similar sentiments were captured among our coach participant group. Coach 8 felt that “mass media make just one rare case out to be a very common problem, like a handle for gossip. Whenever TV news

reports those kinds of cases, it always makes a sweeping criticism of us, all together.” Coach 9 also provided his view on media reports:

Some coaches have been experimenting with innovative coaching approaches by incorporating coaching techniques and methods from other sports. ... The media should have highlighted these positive examples, which will create positive images [of coaches]. But the media have reported only abusive and immoral cases, which seems worthless. It is true that Korean people tend to be drawn to and interested only in news about corruption, incidents, abuse, and that sort of thing.

The influence of mass media in associating coaches with violence and crime identified in our study supports the claim by Garratt et al. (2013) and Piper et al. (2013) that frequent media coverage on coach misconduct contributes to producing and perpetuating an image of coaches as abusive and risky. Equally, as observed by Corrigan et al. (2004), a representative collection of media stories that recurrently spotlight the dangerous nature of a particular group of people produces structural stigma. Korean mass media is a critical source of information that has shaped popular opinion about coaches in Korean society. It produces structural stigma that creates and reinforces an impression of coaches as those who have indelible character blemishes. While these media narratives reflect certain aspects of Korea’s history regarding high-performance coaches (see Kim et al., 2020), they are out of step with current practices in Korea.

### *Integrity Policy*

The integrity policy of the Offices of Education is another form of social power that categorises coaches as a troublesome population. It has been implemented in the 17 Offices



of Education across the nation as part of the Annual National Assessment of Organisation Integrity in Korea (MCST, 2018) – a systematic survey to assess levels of corruption in each governmental organisation and classify them according to their integrity scores (Lee & Jung, 2010). In line with the bureaucratic practices of the government educational institute and their organisational goals to improve integrity scores in the National Assessment, sports reform countermeasures adopted a proactive approach to the management of school athletic teams. Starting from the assumption that coaches are ‘risky people’ (Hannem, 2012), the Offices of Education initiatives have centred on averting individuals’ corrupt and/or violent behaviours in an athletic team. Such an institutional approach takes the form of pre-emptive social regulations to control the *assumed* improper conduct of individuals with stigma (Falk 2001; Hannem, 2012).

A range of statements by coach participants highlights the regulatory practices of the Offices of Education. According to the coaches, inspection of athletic teams is just a form of “control over coaches”, being performed perfunctorily by “the staff [of the Offices] who never consider, in effect, athletes’ holistic development” (Coach 10). Moreover, coach education was conducted simply to “warn and deter coaches”, rather than provide them with useful resources “to change the coaching setting into a safer environment” (Coach 11). This heavy-handed institutional stance echoes a series of work by Piper and her colleagues (Garratt et al., 2013; Piper et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2016), concerning the oversight of safeguarding measures in sporting sectors of the UK. The institutional approach of the Offices of Education in Korea mirrors the ways child protection policies were implemented in the UK sport context, which seems to be rooted in worst case thinking (Piper et al., 2013), or risk aversion and prohibitions (Garratt et al., 2013).

The Offices of Education, as authoritative government apparatuses, place themselves in a privileged position over a particular population that ostensibly belongs to them (Rose,

1989), that is, the coaches. Under their avowed aim of increasing integrity, the Offices of Education – emboldened by mass media – are able to cast a population uniformly as the main problematic subject, as reflected in Coach 12’s utterance that the coaching field has been increasingly represented as a “hotbed of crime.” “[J]ustified by the rhetoric of risk-management” (Hannem, 2012, p. 23), coaches are subjected to institutional intervention that seeks pre-emptively to remove the possibility of unwanted outcomes. Thus, sports reform initiatives by the Offices of Education function “as a means of formal *social control*” (Goffman, 1963, p. 165, emphasis added) by exercising power to locate and regulate the spaces where coaching is assumed to be a site of concern (Taylor et al., 2016).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, we argue that the chain of social forces – mass media and institutional policy – has affected the stigmatisation of coaches. The institutional structure of sports reforms in Korea has shaped and facilitated social order (Goffman, 1983), or the particular patterns of individuals’ behaviours in face-to-face interactions, such that coaches are stigmatised. Not unlike Goffman’s (1963) understanding that the stigmatised-normal division is not about persons themselves, but rather about *performing* social roles opposite each other, people beyond the high-performance sports setting are carrying out the socially curated roles of being the normals, in line with the ‘scripts’ that are informed by popular and institutional discourse about sports reforms. These scripts govern everyday interactions between two parties; stigmatised coaches and the normals beyond the high-performance/elite sports milieu who are devoted to playing the opposing role in relation to coaches. Consequently, coaches’ stigmatisation is a social process that is *structurally* facilitated by sports reform itself and

related to popular discourse, but also *symbolically* supported by those who diligently play the part of the normals.

By locating this study within scholarly discussions of transformation in sport and coaching settings, we have examined the way in which coaches' stigmatised identity, their everyday interaction and the societal reform initiatives within high-performance sports are intertwined. Utilising Goffman's (1963) classic account of stigma and Hannem's (2012) contemporary interpretation of structural stigma, and drawing on our original empirical evidence, we claim that Korean high-performance coaches' stigma is discrediting, prior-known, and power-laden. We demonstrated that stigma was not entirely seated within the stigmatised person, but rather it emerged within a social, institutional, and political context that defined coaches uniformly as deviant and objectionable. The significance of our work lies in its novel contribution to the existing literature on stigma of individuals in sporting and coaching settings, specifically that it shifts the focus away from the narratives of individuals to consider the impact of the institutional context on shaping the collective experience of stigma.

The findings of this article resonate strongly with Piper and her colleagues' (e.g., Piper et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2016) observation that coaches in the UK are increasingly disempowered as safeguarding initiatives begin to be introduced. Our work mirrors theirs in revealing that particular measures operate in sports coaching contexts to regulate coaching practices and shape coaches' social interactions with others in negative ways. Moreover, the findings of this article may be informative for policy-makers, given the contention around whether sports reform initiatives are designed to implement concrete and practical measures that achieve their original objectives, or whether they serve merely to shift the responsibility for managing problems onto individuals, effectively turning the individual into the problem.

While we acknowledge that the findings of this article cannot be generalised across other contexts, we contend that it makes a worthwhile contribution to the research fields of sociology of sports as well as sports coaching. By discussing stigma as something dependent both on *symbolic* interaction and the *structural* context, we support Hannem's (2012) extension of Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma beyond the focus on face-to-face contingencies. Furthermore, by examining sports coaches' stigma in terms of historical, political, and institutional factors within a society, our analysis provides insights into the process through which stigma is generated through popular discourse and policy implementation that facilitate stigma-normal categories (Tyler, 2018). We hope that our theoretical insights in this regard will encourage others who work in this area to pay greater attention to the ways in which past and present social structures shape perceptions of collective identity, which, in turn, impact on how individuals see themselves.

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