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Maintaining professional face: deceptive impression management in community sport coaching

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ABSTRACT

This article breaks new ground in the sociology of sports work through its novel exploration of workplace deception and the associated development of an original typology of deceptive impression management. Analysis of data collected from a two-phased research design, comprising online interviews and survey responses from 102 participants, revealed that community sport coaches employed deceptive impression management to display emotional control, an ideal practice of their work, and to feign expert knowledge. These types of deceptive impression management consisted of disguising disdain, flattering insincerely, camouflaging alternative approaches, covering-up mistakes, hiding a lack of expected knowledge, and reporting favourable metrics. Drawing on theories of dramaturgical analysis [Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor, Goffman, E. (1967). *Interactional ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviour*. Aldine Publications, Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.] and emotional labour (Hochschild, A. (1979). *Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551–575., Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. The University of California Press] as used in constructing a professional image, we examine how the coaches used deception to cope with challenging work circumstances that endanger projecting a professional appearance. The present article not only advances our sociological understanding of sports work but raises important questions for the preparation, development, and support of sports workers.

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Introduction

Reflecting developments in the wider social science literature (Grills & Prus, 2019; Voronov & Weber, 2020), researchers in the sociology of sport have recognised the need to critically examine the social, relational, and emotional dynamics that are an inherent feature of sports work (e.g. Gale et al., 2019, 2023; Hall et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2024; Ives et al., 2021; Potrac et al., 2017; Roderick et al., 2017; Roderick & Collinson, 2020). At the heart of such inquiry is

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the desire to develop a fine-grained and nuanced knowledge base that explicitly addresses the ways in which sports workers (e.g. coaches, athletes, support staff, and managers) 'attempt to navigate the ongoing, and, at times, problematic joint actions with one another' (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 3). This includes, how sports workers, as well as those with whom they interact, variously a) interpret what they do; b) do things together (be it reluctantly, in opposition, or willingly); and c) strategise their actions to respond to formal and informal performance expectations (Grills & Prus, 2019). The overarching purpose of this research is to challenge the traditionally dominant, unitary representations of sports work, by illuminating the ways in which human agency and social interaction inform the interactive construction, revision, and, sometimes, remaking of organisational life (Grills & Prus, 2019; Hall et al., 2021, 2024).

In recent years, scholars committed to the intellectual project outlined above have increasingly examined sports workers' experiences, meaning making, and actions from a dramaturgical perspective (e.g. Gale et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2013; Roderick & Collinson, 2020). This work, which primarily draws upon the conceptual frameworks developed by Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974) and Hochschild (1979, 1983), respectively, has illustrated how sports workers, as both 'targets and tacticians of influence' (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 80), use various strategies (e.g. dramaturgical discipline, dramaturgical loyalty, dramaturgical circumspection, and surface and deep acting techniques) in their pursuit of organisational and, indeed, individual goals. For example, researchers have illustrated how coaches (e.g. Britton et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2024; Jones, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Partington & Cushion, 2013; Potrac et al., 2002; Potrac et al., 2017), athletes (e.g. Roderick, 2006; Roderick & Collinson, 2020), strength and conditioners (e.g. Thompson et al., 2015), and performance analysts (Huggan et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2023) engage in strategic interaction and utilise various impression management strategies (Goffman, 1959, 1967) to favourably shape how others (e.g. athletes, administrators, fans, parents, and sponsors) perceive, and responsively, treat them. Similarly, scholarship addressing the emotional features of sports work has illustrated how, for similar reasons, coaches (e.g. Nelson et al., 2013; Potrac et al., 2017) and athletes (e.g. Magill et al., 2017) may use surface and deep acting techniques (Hochschild, 1983) to purposively manage their emotional displays in line with the socially learned, subcultural feeling and display rules. Collectively, these studies highlight how the participants' manipulation of self-image was inherently tied to the social dealings, identity norms, issues of power and hierarchy, and the (sub)cultural values that comprised everyday organisational life (Jones, 2006; Nelson et al., 2013). Indeed, living up to the expectations of others, fulfilling their workplace roles in socially desired ways, avoiding discrediting acts, and, where necessary, attempting to conceal potentially stigmatising aspects of the self were core aspects of their everyday efforts to navigate what they considered to be especially uncertain and unforgiving workplace environments (Jones, 2006; Magill et al., 2017; Roderick, 2006).

Notwithstanding the progress outlined above, there remains significant scope for expanding our critical understanding of the dramaturgical features of sports work. One such line of inquiry is to consider when, how, and why sports workers may engage in purposefully deceptive acts. That is, rather than interacting strategically and using impression management strategies to powerfully communicate an authentic professional front to audiences, they, instead, use them to deliberately mislead audiences (Bolino et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2024; Shulman, 2007, 2011). Here, inspired by the ground-breaking work of Shulman (2007, 2011), deception is primarily defined in relation to Goffman's (1974) concept of fabrication. That is, deception is understood to be 'the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on' (pp. 83-125). While not being an explicitly or substantively engaged with issue, existing work in sport settings (e.g. Gale et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2016, 2018, 2021) has hinted that deceptive practices were, for example, a feature of community sports coaches' everyday practice. Gale et al. (2019) reported how the participant coaches utilised various covert interactional strategies (i.e. uncovering moves, secret monitoring, fabrications, and setting traps) to make judgements about the perceived trustworthiness of their workplace colleagues. Relatedly, Ives et al. (2016, 2018, 2021) have documented how community sports coaches

variously a) prioritised the collection of participant details and attendance records over the delivery of expected planned activities; b) delivered sporting and nonsporting (e.g. video games) activities that deviate from the original scheme of work and associated initiative objectives to optimise participant engagement and enjoyment; and c) suppressed the anger and frustration they experienced in response to the anti-social behaviours of youth participants to sustain their attendance.

In contrast, scholars studying workplace deception within the mainstream social sciences have explored the different types of deceptions that workers enact (e.g. Hodson, 2001; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017, 2020; Ruane et al., 1994; Shulman, 2007). This research suggests that workers may purposefully mislead others for a variety of reasons. These include a) obtaining an edge in negotiations; b) claiming to have achieved goals despite falling short of them; c) keeping confidential information secret; d) avoiding conflict and reconciling different self and organisational interests; e) bypassing rules and regulations that block preferred ways of working; and f) gaining revenge on irritating customers and co-workers (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Grover, 2005; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020; Shulman, 2007, 2011). Importantly, this evolving body of scholarship has illuminated how deceptive acts ought to be examined as more than a blemish of individual character and actions individuals take to conceal crimes and unethical behaviours. They emphasise that examining and understanding workplace deceptions as a normal feature of social life can illuminate how they may be routine features of organisational culture, employment conditions, and market pressures. That is, the examination of workplace deceptions is capable of exposing more than ethical flaws in individuals and can, instead, reveal occasions and situations where social expectations, in a normative sense, urge misleading an audience (Ruane et al., 1994; Shulman, 2007, 2011).

In seeking to break new ground in the sociological investigation of sport coaches' work, this study utilised a multiple method approach (i.e. in-depth interviews and an online survey) to critically examine community sports coaches' understandings of, and engagements in, deceptive actions in their respective workplaces. Importantly, through the rigorous generation and analysis of a substantial dataset, we were able to generate original knowledge in the form of a typology of seven different, though overlapping, types of deceptive practices that the participants connected to their own and others' efforts to maintain a professional image and, relatedly, avoid the loss of face in the workplace (Goffman, 1959). These were a) concealing fatigue; b) disguising disdain; c) flattering insincerely; d) camouflaging alternative approaches; e) covering-up mistakes; f) hiding a lack of expected knowledge; and g) reporting favourable metrics. In addition to providing new empirical insights, we believe the findings provide important food for thought in terms of how deception is understood and engaged with in professional education and development programmes.

Methodology

To develop original and rigorous knowledge regarding the deceptive practices of community sport coaches, this empirical study used a two-phase research design. In Phase 1 data were gathered through individual, online, interviews with 16 participants. In Phase 2 data were generated via an online survey with 86 participants. The data from both interviews and survey were analysed thematically. Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was received from the lead author's Institutional Research Ethics Committee [SPA-REC-2018-346].

Phase 1: online interviews

In Phase 1, data were generated via online, one-to-one semi-structured, interviews with 16 community sport coaches recruited via a three-stage purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, criteria for selecting participants were created: a) 18-years and over; b) currently licensed and employed as a community sport coach; and c) willing to talk openly about their deceptive practices. The study was then advertised via existing networks. Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to find

additional participants by asking recruited individuals to share the contact details of other community sport coaches who met the above stated criteria. The final interview sample comprised 13 male and 3 female coaches with an average age of 30 years (21-50 range) and between 5–30 years of experience (12 on average). Nine participants held full-time community sport coaching positions and seven were employed on a part-time basis. Each participant held a UK Coaching Level 1 qualification or higher.

Semi-structured guides were shared with participants seven days prior to their interviews so that they could familiarise themselves with and think about the questions. This approach helped participants to share rich insights and associated personal experiences regarding the topic of study (Gale et al., 2023). The interview guide required interviewees to share illustrative examples of a) who they sought to deceive and why; b) what they were attempting to deceive other(s) about; c) where the pressure to deceive originated; d) whether the deception was an individual or collaborative effort; and e) their perceptions regarding the success of this deception attempt. In other words, the interview sought to examine the places, players, presentation, purpose, and product of deception in the sporting workplace (cf. Shulman, 2017). Before commencing each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose, the nature of their participation and associated ethical implications. All participants had an opportunity to ask any additional questions regarding the study. All participants provided written and verbal informed consent before being interviewed.

All participants were interviewed by the lead author via Microsoft Teams. Each interview averaged 54 minutes (min. 37 minutes; max. 75 minutes) and the total volume of data generated were 865 minutes. For each interview, the lead author worked through the interview guide, actively listened to participant examples of deception, used follow-up probes (e.g. open-ended elaboration and clarification questions), made notes and asked curiosity-driven questions as unexpected or interesting dialogue emerged. On average, each community sport coach discussed 5 distinct deception attempts (3-8 range), with 81 examples shared in total throughout this phase. All interviews were audio-visually recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants, organisations, and any other individuals mentioned.

The interviews were analysed thematically in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: a) Familiarising ourselves with the interview data; b) generating initial codes; c) searching for themes; d) reviewing potential themes; and e) defining and naming themes. All research team members played an active role in this analytical process, sharing thoughts, ideas, and interpretations of the data via emails, virtual meetings, telephone calls and face-to-face conversations. This process led to the construction of seven different, though overlapping, types of deception: conceal fatigue; disguise disdain; flatter insincerely; camouflage alternative approaches; cover-up mistakes; hide a lack of expected knowledge; and report favourable metrics. Rather than entering the sixth and final phase of thematic analysis (i.e. writing up the final report; Braun & Clarke, 2006) an online survey was conducted to better understand the prevalence of these identified forms of deception. The survey permitted the generation of additional, nuanced, and in-depth understandings of deception in the sporting workplace by capturing the diverse perspectives, experiences, and sense-making of a larger number of community sport coaches (Braun et al., 2021).

Phase 2: online survey

To develop additional insights regarding how often community sport coaches used these forms of deception, an online survey was constructed and distributed via Jisc. The survey comprised sections devoted to deceptive acts identified through analysing interview data. Here, participants stated via a YES/NO question if a) they had enacted this form of deception and b) seen or heard about other community sport coaches performing it. If the participant responded YES to one or both of these questions, they then had to qualitatively explain their answers via two open-textbox questions. The first textbox asked participants to share a real-world example of that deception. The second textbox required comments on the regular use of that deception in their workplace.

The following approaches were implemented to distribute the survey and secure respondents: a) Phase 1 participants were asked to share a link to the online survey among their respective community sport coaching networks; b) the survey link was shared (via email, SMS message and WhatsApp) with community sport coaches known to the authors, inviting them to complete and share the survey with colleagues; and c) the online survey was promoted across social media (i.e. Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram) via the authors' personal accounts. The survey remained open for one calendar month. 86 participants (68 Male and 18 Female) completed the online survey. Respondents were on average 32 years (19-74 range) and held 10 years coaching experience (0-53 range). 31 participants identified as holding a full-time contract, 22 part-time, five zero-hours, and 28 coached voluntarily. Most participants held a UK Coaching qualification (i.e. Level 1, 2, 3, or 4), and some were studying towards (or had completed) an undergraduate and/or postgraduate sport coaching related degree. After the survey closed, analysis of answers to the YES/NO questions enabled generation of descriptive statistics for each deception type. Open-textbox responses were deductively organised in relation to the typology of deception developed in Phase 1. Here, survey responses were placed alongside thematically organised interview data. Qualitative survey and interview data were then subject to a further process of inductive analysis to identify sub-themes where present. The analysis of qualitative data therefore comprised inductive and deductive phases.

The deceptive practices of community sport coaches

Analysis of data produced seven types of deception listed and defined in Table 1. In considering the common conditions surrounding these deceptions, we organised them by what function a respondent thought using them accomplished and by the descriptive context in which they were used. These three functions in the workplace were a) to maintain emotional control in challenging situations; b) to create a sense that work was being practiced at an ideal level; and c) to feign expert knowledge. They were used to present a legitimate professional face and image in the workplace.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, generated via analysis of the online survey, on how community sport coaches across different employment statuses (i.e. volunteers, zero-hours, part-time and full-time) varied in using specific deceptions. Table 2 provides a sense of incidence and prevalence of workplace deception by employment status. When recording who enacted or observed a type of deception being utilised, there are similarities in reported percentages across employment statuses. Findings show that respondents in each employment status perceived similar amounts

Table 1. A typology of community sport coaches' deceptive practices.

Type of Deception	Description of Deception Type
<i>Goal: Emotional Control</i>	
Conceal fatigue	Presenting an artificially positive, enthusiastic, and energetic exterior despite feeling fatigued to meet expectations for how one is supposed to appear while working.
Disguise disdain	Presenting the appearance of professional objectivity when feeling frustration towards others to smoothen out interactive work.
Flatter Insincerely	Insincere use of praise during interactions with working others to secure favourable outcomes.
<i>Goal: Expert Knowledge</i>	
Hide a lack of expected knowledge	Concealing having limited knowledge, experience, and relevant qualifications relating to aspects of work where expertise is expected.
<i>Goal: Ideal Work Image</i>	
Report favourable metrics	Presenting inaccurately favourable evaluative data to evidence effectiveness in the workplace and to secure desired ends.
Camouflage alternative approaches	Concealing a lack of planning, the adjustment or abandonment of planned activities, and deviations from expected schemes of work.
Cover-up mistakes	Using excuses to cover-up errors that if known might cause working others to question individual and organisational reputations.

Table 2. Percentage and number of survey respondents, per deception type and employment status, that had enacted or heard about other coaches engaging in workplace deception.

	Volunteer (V)		Part-Time (PT)		Full-Time (FT)		Zero-Hours (ZH)		Totals	
	Enacted by Self	Enacted by Others	Enacted by Self	Enacted by Others	Enacted by Self	Enacted by Others	Enacted by Self	Enacted by Others	Enacted by Self	Enacted by Others
Conceal fatigue	82.1% (23)	53.6% (15)	86.4% (19)	40.9% (9)	87.1% (27)	64.5% (20)	100.0% (5)	20.0% (1)	86.0% (74)	52.3% (45)
Disguise disdain	89.3% (25)	50.0% (14)	72.7% (16)	45.4% (10)	67.7% (21)	38.7% (12)	80.0% (4)	60.0% (3)	76.7% (66)	45.3% (39)
Flatter insincerely	60.7% (17)	60.7% (17)	36.4% (8)	59.1% (13)	58.1% (18)	56.6% (16)	60.0% (3)	40.0% (2)	53.5% (46)	55.8% (48)
Camouflage alternative approaches	42.9% (12)	35.7% (10)	31.8% (7)	27.3% (6)	58.1% (18)	45.2% (14)	40.0% (2)	20.0% (1)	45.3% (39)	36.0% (31)
Cover-up mistakes	32.1% (9)	21.4% (6)	27.3% (6)	22.7% (5)	35.5% (11)	22.6% (7)	20.0% (1)	20.0% (1)	31.4% (27)	22.1% (19)
Hide a lack of expected knowledge	14.3% (4)	21.4% (6)	22.7% (5)	22.7% (5)	19.4% (6)	6.5% (2)	20.0% (1)	20.0% (1)	18.6% (16)	16.3% (14)
Report favourable metrics	10.7% (3)	17.9% (5)	22.7% (5)	22.7% (5)	9.7% (3)	16.1% (5)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.8% (11)	17.4% (15)

of deception types occurring at work. This finding, with some small variations across a few employment statuses, indicates a relative consistency in perceived incidence of different types of deception in this workplace. So, as a measure of frequency of kinds of normal deceptions, participants reported concealing fatigue, disguising disdain, and flattering insincerely as more prevalent forms of workplace deception. This prevalence indicates a particular importance for maintaining emotional control at work. Camouflaging alternative approaches, covering up mistakes, hiding a lack of expected knowledge and reporting favourable metrics occurred less frequently.

Deceptions demonstrating emotional control

Conceal fatigue

Concealing fatigue was the most frequently cited form of deception, with 86% (n = 74) of survey respondents indicating having presented an artificially positive and energetic exterior and 52.3% (n = 45) stating having seen or heard others do so. When discussing this form of deception, coaches expressed that 'sessions can be mentally exhausting and require genuine feeling to be hidden.' (S18, PT) While the regularity of this deception tactic ranged from 'every single session' (S2, PT) to 'not often' (S79, PT), needing to conceal fatigue was exacerbated for practitioners who delivered multiple sessions within a single day and/or across consecutive days:

It's a three-day course and essentially the business relies on how well the coaches deliver those soccer camps to generate income [...] You have very long days, and there can be times where you feel a bit fatigued and lacking enthusiasm and energy. You're looking after 20, maybe 30 children. But as a coach you've got to ensure that you don't show that side of yourself. You've got to make sure that you're always showing an engaging front and you're happy to be there and you want to be there. But at the same time, there may be instances where [...] it can be mentally and physically taxing. (I15, PT)

Alongside regularly concealing fatigue from working with 'early years children' (S48, PT), participants also used this strategy when working with 'kids that show anti-social behaviour' (S49, FT). Participants also spoke about concealing fatigue resulting from feeling unwell, parenting a new-born, dealing with the everyday demands of social life, as well as serious illness or death among close family or friends. Needing to disguise fatigue while 'projecting an energetic and enthusiastic profile in order to meet the expectations and needs of other stakeholders (e.g. parents/carers, participants, other coaches/staff) as well as social/role norms more broadly' (S85, V) was of paramount importance.

Voluntary and part-time coaches concealed their fatigue frequently when delivering sessions following long and/or challenging days at their primary place of employment: 'Often after a full day's work I am exhausted and don't really want to be at the track dealing with 20 screaming children so will put on a positive presentation to ensure engagement rather than facilitating my true feelings of telling them to go away' (S8, V). The central message these participants conveyed was, 'It doesn't matter if something has happened in your personal life, you are there to coach a session' (S30, PT) and that coaches should try to 'hide fatigue and add energy' (S54, PT). As one coach put it, 'Concealing your own fatigue is key to having a successful session and, in most cases, actually helps you shake off any weight left on your own shoulders' (S56, FT).

Disguise disdain

Analysis of the survey responses revealed that 76.7% (n = 66) of coaches had disguised holding others in disdain. 45.3% (n = 39) also observed that other coaches did too. Coaches were candid about disliking participants who were 'continuously disruptive in sessions' (S49, FT), 'regularly do not listen to instructions' (S11, V) and 'very rude and even aggressive' (S32, ZH). However, while coaches often felt this way towards misbehaving participants, they recognised needing to 'keep it a secret' as 'you can't go round voicing your dislike for someone' (S65, PT). That is, they sought to disguise their intolerance for challenging participants and groups: 'I

remember a coach dealing with an athlete with behavioural difficulties and the coach was quite obviously trying to hide their frustration and then after the session came over and in rather colourful language expressed frustration once the athlete had left' (S8, V). Besides hiding frustrations associated with disruptive participants, the coaches also spoke about needing to conceal their disdain towards certain client groups:

One of the main projects we've been funded for recently is a programme for domestic abusers. Not the people who've been abused, the people who committed the thing. [...] Yes, I should be giving them a chance, but what they've done, it's something I can't accept. [...] I've actually worked with quite a lot of youth offenders in the past, and I've worked with people who've been committed of underage sex crimes. [...] I'll park my car outside the session, big deep breath, fake smile on and then you go in and you deliver the session and you walk out and you're just like you almost have a shower to rub your skin for some of the people you've worked with. [...] It's certain individuals you don't want to work with, and it's very much pretending you like them and pretending you're happy to be in their company and you're glad to help them. (I3, FT)

Coaches also mentioned disguising disdain for 'pushy parents' that 'shout from the sidelines [...] and make comments about every decision' (S45, PT) needing to 'remain positive and upbeat' (S63, FT) when working with challenging colleagues. In short, participants communicated to us that 'you just can't like everyone [...] you're going to dislike people and be disliked' (S2, PT), but such disdain must be disguised when working and interacting with contextual others. Disguising disdain therefore is a form of deception intended to create an appearance of professional objectivity that respondents do not feel. This form of deception addresses managing frustrations with coworkers, trainees, and other stakeholders to smoothen out interactive work.

Flatter insincerely

Over half of the survey respondents (53.5%, $n = 46$) claimed that they had flattered significant others insincerely or knew about other coaches (55.8%, $n = 48$) doing so, although respondents suggested that this technique was used irregularly. For example, coaches spoke about how they had falsely conveyed to participants that 'they have mastered a technique even if they haven't' (S51, PT) and 'awarded player of the week to participants who are not necessarily the best player that week' (S46, V). Coaches also admitted expressing to parents and guardians that their 'child is doing well and is progressing no matter if it's the truth or not' (S29, V). Collectively, these deceptions aimed to increase 'confidence' (S85, V) of participants and to support parents to secure their continued engagement:

We do a [cycling scheme about] teaching kids to ride a bike, and it's genuinely startling that the majority of children get there and they can't, [ride a bike]. It's excruciating for the parents, and it's very much like trying to tell the parents, 'Look this always happens. I've done this course about 150 times this year and this happens on every single course. Don't worry about it.' I mean it was only the third course I delivered this year, but it's trying to reassure them that their child isn't useless, isn't terrible, and they will get there. [...] If you're looking at it quite cynically, if they're successful at riding their bike by the end of it, it's going to look better on me and on my project [...]. So you tell the parents how well they're doing so they bring them back. (I13, FT)

Examples of insincere flattery also included pretending to befriend colleagues and clients to appear popular, secure continued support and gain favourable working conditions. For example, the following coach talked about needing to flatter insincerely to gain continued paid employment:

One of our remits was to recruit more primary schools for our enrichment outreach programme. I offered this particular school a free six-week block of coaching sessions throughout the spring term as a sort of good will gesture. At the conclusion of my final session, both the head teacher and school sports coordinator greeted me at reception and thanked me for my efforts; they had received great feedback from teachers, TAs and students. Given their compliments, I felt obligated to return the favour. [...] In reality, though, I absolutely hated delivering those sessions. Honestly, the kids were absolutely awful; they didn't behave or listen. [...] That said, I was starting a postgraduate degree in September and needed the extra money [...] so it was in my best interests to flatter my way into the school for another term or two. More to the point, if I had failed to get the school on board after offering so many free sessions, my line manager may not have trusted me enough to offer me similar work in the future. (S72, PT)

Deceptions of feigning expert knowledge

Hide a lack of expected knowledge

Hiding expected knowledge was identified less regularly in the survey, with 18.6% (n = 16) respondents reporting having enacted this themselves. 16.3% (n = 14) knew about other coaches doing so. Those performing this deceptive tactic suggested that its use resulted from limited knowledge and experience: 'Throughout my early career it was extremely difficult to hide my inabilities to either coach a specific group or deliver something I had little knowledge on,' so they 'blagged (i.e. persuading someone in a slightly dishonest way) a lot of it' (S62, PT). Participants explained they had led and seen other practitioners coaching sport and physical activities for which they held limited knowledge, experience, and relevant qualifications. Others shared being underprepared for the realities of the profession and having to learn how to effectively manage challenging and disengaged participants on the job: 'Not knowing how to manage poor/anti-social behaviour early in my coaching career' required 'masking this and working on a trial-and-error basis in order to produce a confident front to participants and relevant others' (S85, V).

Some coaches were particularly critical of their UK Coaching qualifications, arguing that these courses often failed to prepare them for the actual environments in which they had to coach. While these awards provided a battery of training drills, many participants suggested these ideas were idealistic and not easily implemented in community settings (e.g. coaching groups comprising diverse ages, experiences and abilities, ethnicities, disabilities, and social-economic statuses):

My level 2 didn't prepare me. I can hand on heart say that there was no mention of the term diverse population groups. [...] I was delivering a [programme which was] aimed at 8-to-11-year-olds. And in the first session, first week, like meeting new kids for the first time, a parent came up to me and made me aware that their child was autistic. [...] When she told me, I just tried to comfort her really and just said, 'Don't worry about it. It's not a problem. I've coached a lot of autistic children before,' which was a lie, I haven't. [...] Deep down I'm thinking, 'if she's (i.e. the child) heavily autistic I could potentially struggle here.' [...] It only takes a couple of minutes to see that I'm out of my depth from her perspective as a parent. [...] I just didn't want to be perceived as a coach who is inadequate and unable to deal with that. (I6, PT)

The participants' desire to hide limited knowledge was largely driven by a determination to appear competent to the benefit of themselves and their organisations. The regular use of this type of deception varied depending on level of coaching experience, with practitioners acknowledging more use by neophytes. That said, some participants recognised that certain circumstances could require more experienced coaches to occasionally enact this form of deception.

Deceptions of presenting an ideal practice of work

Camouflage alternative approaches

Analysis of the survey data revealed that 45.3% (n = 39) of respondents camouflaged a lack of planning as well as deviations from the intended session focus, with 36.0% (n = 31) of the coaches stating that they had seen or heard other practitioners implement this strategy. For example, the participants shared that it was common for attendance at sessions to be lower than expected. As one coach put it, 'You plan the training session based on the number of players you think you will have, but you actually end up having significantly less players than intended' which requires you to 'think on your feet and adapt the session to cater for the number of players that are actually there' (S40, V).

Coaches also talked about making in-session adjustments based on the technical, tactical, and physical ability of their participants: 'I have concealed a change of plan when I have realised the second part of the session was inappropriate because the skill level was poorer than I thought in the first activity' (S52, V). Other examples included abandoning sessions plans that were ineffective or extending activities that participants liked. Essentially, the participants conveyed that 'plans are deemed flexible' as 'sessions often evolve in the moment' (S31, V) and 'you have to adapt the session at the time to make it best fit the participants' (S65, PT). Alongside this, others conveyed

purposely concealing having deviated from the aims, schemes of work, and intended activities of various coaching programmes:

Within my previous workplace it was very much a one session fits everyone. For example, because a boccia session worked really well for 60+ in one locality I was told to run a boccia session in a different locality and they expected the same results. It was clear from the first engagement they didn't like this and wanted to try something different. I introduced different games to the group and they decided they particularly enjoyed new age curling as that satisfied the various needs of the group. (S76, FT)

Cover-up mistakes

31.4% (n = 27) of the survey respondents identified having covered-up coaching mistakes, with 22.1% (n = 19) suggesting that other coaches also disguise known errors. Some coaches viewed this deception as necessary. However, analysis of received responses revealed that it was used 'infrequently' (S55, V) 'as and when mistakes occur' (S46, V). This form of deception reflected a desire to maintain 'professionalism' (S15, PT) and 'protect individual/organisational reputation' (S85, V) by using excuses. For example, participants shared how they would use 'hospital appointments and things that are accepted as it keeps the reputation of the company up' (S61, FT) to justify cancelling training sessions and competitive matches; when the real reasons included 'being out the night before (e.g. socialising)' (S51, PT), undesirable 'weather' (S55, V), 'personal reasons' (S3, PT), 'mental health reasons' (S8, V) and 'other commitments' (S76, FT).

Excuses were given to hide their own and colleagues' mistakes to preserve individual and organisational reputations. Examples included fabricated explanations for the non-attendance and late arrival of coaches, having to replace practitioners at short notice, inappropriate conduct, inadequate levels of coaching performance, and failure to follow correct policies and procedures. For example, a coach shared why he concealed a colleague's mistake:

One of our lead coaches couldn't make it to a session because he'd left his keys in one of the other coach's cars, which meant he couldn't get into his own car to drive to the session. [...] A parent was very disgruntled about it. As the site manager, I had to have the discussion with them. [...] So I fabricated a story of his car having broken down. [...] I didn't want the company image to be tarnished by something quite stupid and so I wanted to effectively come up with a story which took blame away from anyone. [...] The premise behind using that fabricated story was to try and help save face a little bit for the company. [...] I just tried to make the image of the company as positive and as professional as possible. (I5, FT)

Report favourable metrics

Reporting favourable metrics was the least common form of deception. 12.8% (n = 11) of survey respondents indicated they had reported auspicious numerical data for personal and/or organisational benefit and 17.4% (n = 15) suggested other coaches present fabricated data. While some coaches stated that this form of deception was implemented regularly, many believed it was used infrequently. Coaches shared with us how they would occasionally 'tell white lies' to athletes about their coaching session data, knowing that the truth 'would be a barrier to them completing the session' (S8, V).

Presenting favourable data about participant outcomes was also used to demonstrate and justify the positive impact of schemes that coaches were responsible for delivering: 'In a previous company, we had a tracking system to show a child's development across a year and were told that no matter how good the child is at the start, to mark them down and to equally make sure all children show progression in the data by the end so they can show the school the impact of us working there' (S9, FT). Coaches also discussed instances 'where organisations would double up on metrics or exploit a lack of clarity in reporting parameters to make performance look more favourable' (S70, FT), as illustrated in the interview quote below:

When I worked with nationally funded programmes [...] each of those had different KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) that needed to be hit. [...] They were quite grey in that area. For example, if I went and delivered in a

session after school, I could then count that against my [X programme], even though I knew, and my sort of lead of my programme knew that wasn't what the money was designed to do. But to keep the funding for the wider programme she was like, 'yeah, we can count those numbers.' [...] It's deception on my front, but also deception on a wider organisational basis that was sort of talked about quite openly in meetings. [...] There was a lot of double counting and stuff like that just to satisfy the funders. [...] In a way, it felt like it was something that just went from almost top to bottom. [...] We were always made acutely aware that the funding run would come to a close. So, if the funding didn't come through, there wasn't a job! (I9, PT)

Evaluative feedback was another area that coaches exploited for personal and organisational gain: 'I have also seen colleagues use figures such as 100% success rate however only asking 4–5 people that they know would give positive feedback' (S76, FT). At the core of this type of deception was a desire to 'highlight the most positive outcomes from the data' (S63, FT) when reviewing programmes to secure continued financial investment and associated occupational security.

Discussion: a dramaturgical reading

Analysis of the presented research findings revealed that, according to the participants, deception is an undeniable feature of community sport coaching work. Indeed, only 2 out of the 102 participants suggested never engaging in or having observed any form of deception at work. At the core of these workplace deceptions were efforts to sustain a desirable professional image or *face* as a coach in the eyes of working others. The idea of face, in dramaturgical theory, is an image of self that reflects approved social attributes, one's reputation in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959). Since one's face is a positively valued social identity, people do *facework* to counteract threats to that identity (Goffman, 1967). When embedded in an occupational setting, a face encompasses a professional standing that is important for keeping one's job and career advancement. Work experiences include interactions where workers risk losing face. Responding with facework to meet that situation connects to what Goffman (1959) refers to as *defensive practices*; actions people take to protect a projected identity and/or a projected definition of a situation. Protecting their face was clearly of importance to these coaches, something they tried to achieve using what Goffman (1974) labelled *fabrications*. That is, their coaching performances intentionally sought to 'manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on' (Goffman, 1974, p. 83).

Concealing fatigue, disguising disdain, flattering insincerely, camouflaging alternative approaches, covering-up mistakes, hiding a lack of knowledge, and reporting favourable metrics each represented attempts by the coaches to induce false understandings in targeted working others through the judicious use of fabrications. In this sense, the coaches' practices are examples of what Carlson et al. (2011) termed *deceptive impression management*, evidenced by the fact that they 'engaged in multiple, ongoing, and concurrent deceptive interactions [...] focused on the management of an impression through deception' (Carlson et al., 2011, pp. 499–500). Deceptive impression management emerges where there is a need to conceal discrepancies between conducting work ideally as a professional versus acting less than ideally because of one's actual working conditions. To convey convincing performances required the coaches to present themselves as being in emotional control, as practicing work superlatively, and possessing the expert knowledge to cope with challenging situations.

Emotional control refers to displaying emotional expressions that reflect an image of professionalism when practitioners do not really feel what is portrayed to an audience, such as when disguising fatigue or disdain. Expertise-related deceptions refer to situations such as a coach concealing that they lack the training or experience needed to handle a particular situation. Appearing to practice work in an ideal fashion, a form of impression management captured in Goffman's (1959) term *positive idealisation*, here refers to presenting training and work-related events as occurring in a more ideal fashion than they do. Importantly, the discussed types of deception need to be understood in the context of a professional workplace that demands a particular image. Analysis of our findings revealed that these efforts were aimed at minimising reputational damage and

consequential impacts on attendance and/or future funding as well as one's career trajectory. The deceptive acts that our participants shared, therefore, were not rooted in a lax professional morality of individual community sport coaches. Instead, the different types of deceptions that they described arguably reflected theirs' and others' efforts to simultaneously provide an *idealised image* (Goffman, 1959) for stakeholders in their working contexts because there are inherent factors in the workplace, such as difficult participants, parents, working conditions and problems that cannot be handled as perfectly as ideals would dictate.

Consistent with Goffman's (1959, p. 138) theorisation, the participants not only spoke of having to act with discretion but emphasised concealing 'actual affective responses,' stressing that 'an appropriate affective response must be displayed.' As alluded to above, the coaches' deceptive impression management also required them, where deemed necessary, to enact 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' to fulfil their working role (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Through the management of their emotions the community sport coaches tried to avoid giving away any deceptive aspects in their work performances. Here, we can usefully learn from Hochschild's (1983) discussion of *emotional dissonance*, which refers to mismatches between the internal emotions people feel and alternative expressions of emotion that they fake for others. To hide one's fatigue or to disguise disdain when coaching, as examples, means managing an impression that conceals emotional dissonance. Biss (2023) emphasises an organisational dimension to professional work in decoupling 'the *experience* of emotion from the *expression* of emotion.' A worker does not need to authentically feel and experience an emotion to express that emotion publicly on an organisation's behalf or for oneself. Workers are often tasked with representing an organisation's particular values to help preserve an organisation's face. A professional role comes with expectations of appropriate emotional displays. The instrumental motivations of the community sport coaches (i.e. to appear professional as well as keep their participants and employers happy) then, meant that their emotional management demanded conformity to display, rather than feeling, rules (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Bolton, 2005).

Considering the above, it is important to acknowledge that these coaches had to take on an additional stress in managing their emotions to sustain their desired performances and associated front. The important point here is identifying a doubled workplace stress. First coaches encounter stressful situations that carry their own impacts and then also deal with a secondary stress derived from having to pretend that no stress is there and that things are going more swimmingly than they are. Our findings not only reinforce the theoretical connection between deception and acts of emotion management (Shulman, 2011) but raise the question: What are the hidden emotional costs of concealing stress that would appear unprofessional to reveal? If professionals fear losing face by acknowledging difficulties, then remedying those difficulties is harder. Deception is a coping measure to avoid looking unprofessional and a form of band-aiding sources of stress rather than addressing them more fully.

Conclusion, recommendations, and practical implications

Within this article we present original knowledge through the presentation of a typology of deceptive impression management practices used by coaches to maintain a professional image and, relatedly, avoid the loss of face in the workplace. The participant community sport coaches disguised disdain, flattered insincerely, camouflaged alternative approaches, covered-up mistakes, hid a lack of expected knowledge, and reported favourable metrics. Analysis of our findings revealed that the community sport coaches' uses of deception formed part of workplace performances aimed at sustaining desired impressions in the eyes of significant working others. Their deceptive impression management required them to be dramaturgically disciplined so as not to give away the fabricated aspects of their coaching performances, which included the management of emotions. In doing so, this study extends scholarship that has begun to examine sports workers' experiences, meaning making, and actions from a dramaturgical perspective (e.g. Gale et al., 2019;

Hall et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2013; Roderick & Collinson, 2020). We recognise, of course, that the findings of this study cannot be unproblematically assumed to apply to other coaching settings and, indeed, forms of sports work. However, we do believe that the insights provided in this paper have some naturalistic (i.e. insight generated through reflecting on the issues described in this study) and analytical (i.e. the typology of deceptive acts shared in this paper) generalisability (Grills & Prus, 2019; Smith, 2018). Indeed, our findings may represent sensitising devices for future research seeking to explore the utility of our analysis for understanding the deceptive practices of coaches in development and performance domains. We also encourage scholars to consider its applicability to the work of a diverse range of sports workers and its utility in other occupational settings, including if other forms of deception are identifiable empirically. Future inquiry should also seek to investigate those generative forces that contribute towards (sport) workers acts of deception as well as the impacts of deceptive impression management on the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

This study has important practical implications. Over recent years, scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of preparing practitioners for the social realities of coaching environments by equipping them with those social sensibilities required to effectively read, understand, and navigate their work, workplace relations, and social interactions. Coaches in the present study were clearly of the opinion that deception was an undeniable feature of their own and others' coaching work; a reality that cannot and should not be ignored by coaching scholars and coach educators. This is not to suggest that practitioners should be actively encouraged to engage in unnecessary (and potentially harmful) acts of workplace deception for personal gain at the expense of working others. Clearly, this is not our position. Rather, it is our belief that those responsible for educating coaches should help raise the awareness of its workforce about why deception features in the social fabric of working life. If threats to professional face are sources of stress, then both those threats and the stresses involved in concealing them should be discussed more openly to help people prepare to encounter them. To achieve this end, coach educators might usefully encourage practitioners to reflect critically on their own and others' acts of workplace deception and to think about integrating real-world examples into professional education. From our perspective, such pedagogical endeavours must avoid traditional, unhelpful as well as unrealistic, binary understandings of deception whereby all acts are labelled inherently good/bad or appropriate/inappropriate. Rather, coach educators would do well to help practitioners to contextually locate deception attempts in relation to the social realities of the situations in which they originally occurred. Only then will coaches begin to develop a critical consciousness about this topic and the place of deception within coaching work.

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