Team cohesion & sports teams: 
How team members negotiate cohesion through humour

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One-day symposium for UK Coaching
Get ready to debate!

Is banter good for cohesion?
Outline

- Example I
- Example II
- Banter & cohesion
  - What do the players say?
- Some concepts & ideas
- Discussion
- Some advice
Example I

Context: During a running exercise some players speak about riots and raids of local stores happening in their city (due to a controversial event). They start joking about wanting to clear out a famous electrical store and what they would steal. Before the below excerpt, they have humorously named several items including mobile phones, game consoles and more to steal. Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum // new fridge yees she'd be too happy then
3. / [Joint laughter]
4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right?
5. Fabian: [laughs]
6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out … Saw him at (area name) … Right Daniel?
7. Daniel: What?
8. Kevin: Don’t even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: ...

Background information: The media coverage about the riots was focused on the so called “black bloc” among others. It describes a tactic used by protesters who wear black clothing as well as face-concealing or -protecting items. They are said to be ready to use violence.
Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

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3. / [Joint laughter] \\n4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right?
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Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

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8. Kevin:  Don’t even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel:  Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood
10. Kevin:  [laughs]
Example I

Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

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3. (/ Joint laughter \) 
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5. Kevin:  One’s gotta watch out … Saw Daniel?
6. Daniel:  What ?
7. Kevin:  Don’t even need to put on a mask
8. Daniel:  Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood
9. Kevin:  [laughs] 

FUNCTION
- Humour support strategies: laughter & contributing more humour (banter)
- Irony: not literally meaning the said (laughter & tone of voice)
Example I

- Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

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CONTENT & FUNCTION

• Humour support strategy: laughter
→ Up until here: Harmonious humour episode
Example 1

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9. Daniel: Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood
10. Kevin: [laughs]

FUNCTION
- Continuation of teasing initiated in line 4 with further irony
- By using the pronoun ‘him’ Kevin is further othering Daniel by speaking about him
- Then addressing Daniel directly, Kevin puts him ‘on the spot’ awaiting a reaction

CONTENT
- Again suggestive of Daniel’s criminal energy
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3. / [Joint laughter] \\ 
4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right?

FUNCTION
• Finishes his humour frame (line 4) with a ‘punchline’ of racialised humour
• Suggestive, sharp remark → uses skin colour to mark differences
• In- and out-groups along racialised lines

CONTENT
• Suggestive remark → Links criminal activities / semblance of black bloc to Daniel’s skin colour

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9. Daniel: Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood
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4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right?
5. Fabian: [laughs]

FUNCTION
• Humour support: Joins the racialised humour with *self-directed* humour
• Accepts out-group position based on skin colour → Shows he can ‘take it’
• Joins the in-group of ‘humourists’
• Humour support of Kevin through laughter → Harmony and *cohesion* reinstalled

CONTENT
• Due to his black skin colour he only needs little face-concealing gear like a “cap and hood”

9. Daniel: Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood
10. Kevin: [laughs]
Example II

Context: During a football match a player on the pitch (Jordan) who is out of earshot loses a ball to the opposing team, which is commented by some of the substitute players on the substitutes’ bench. Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)
2. Peter: [laughs]
3. Yasin: Dude that’s common in Africa dude
4. [Joint laughter]
5. Maxi: Searching and // finding haha \n6. Peter: / Haha they’re playing \ with paper dude haha
7. [Joint laughter]
8. Peter: Building paperballs for themselves dude
9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \n10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste
11. Yasin: They don’t even have a street-walkers’ patch dude
12. [Joint laughter]
Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

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- Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

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12. [Joint laughter]

FUNCTION
- Humour support strategies: laughter and adding more humour building on Maxi’s humour frame
- Negative stereotype of Africa: ‘developing continent’ = poor performance
- Othering Jordan based on skin colour

CONTENT
- Associates asylum seeking with Africa → negative stereotyping
Example II

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12. [Joint laughter]

CONTENT
• Further derogatory comments about Africa (and per default Jordan)

FUNCTION
• Humour support strategies:
  • Joint laughter
  • Collaborative development of humour (adding more humour)
  • Overlaps (heightened involvement)
  • Finishing each other’s turns
• In-group of ‘humourists’ on the substitute’s bench vs. Jordan on field/Africans
• More negative and potentially threatening stereotypes
Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

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12. [Joint laughter]

FUNCTION
- Humour support strategy: Adding more humour (collaborative & harmonious)
- By joining the humour, Jonah (who is black himself) promotes the nonseriousness of the potentially threatening & racist humour
- In-group of ‘humourists’ on the substitute’s bench vs. Jordan on field/Africans

CONTENT
- Further derogatory comment about Africa in contrast to a resourceful Germany
Example II

- Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

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2. Peter: [laughs]
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12. [Joint laughter]

FUNCTION
- Humour support strategy:
  - Adding more humour
  - Joint laughter
- Denouncing out-group further
- Manifesting the before established in- and out-groups

CONTENT
- Slight shift in topic
- Still negative stereotype about how developmental Africa is
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What does this humorous episode mean for cohesion?

- Collaborative and harmonious floor management constructs cohesion among substitutes
- Cohesion of the team as a whole is temporarily threatened by sub-groupings (on-pitch players, ’Africans’, substitutes)
Is banter good for cohesion?

What do the players say?

“I think one shouldn’t take everything abnormally serious there are some who get carried away but“

“We all get along really well no one ever gets excluded no one is ever bullied”

“That exists in any team [...] one always laughs about one (or) two but those know that I believe ... just don’t show it ha ha [...] but one shouldn’t wear someone out the whole time or so [...] some just can’t help it ha ha ha“

“That’s just the way it is with us ... it’s just a joke ... it will never be serious“
Some concepts & ideas

- The humour norms of any social group are context-specific (e.g. Dynel, 2008, Schnurr, 2009, 2010) → what counts as acceptable behaviour is continuously being negotiated in these contexts (Schnurr & Chan, 2011)

- Despite divisive content of humour, it may functionally unite the team → cohesion is discursively negotiated (constructed, enhanced, and threatened)

- Humour as a ’double-edged sword’ simultaneously uniting and dividing (e.g. Meyer, 2000, Rogerson-Revell, 2007, Wolfers, File & Schnurr, 2017) → complex and multifaceted
Let’s discuss!

- You are with a coach and their team and you notice a lot of banter that you feel crosses the line
- What would you do?
Some advice

- When designing a response strategy, consider the context
  - What is the make-up of the team?
  - What performance level are they playing?
  - What is the point in time (pre-season, mid-season, etc.)?
  - What are the team goals?
  - Who is involved in the banter?
  - …

- Listen to what is being said, how it is being said and how it is reacted to
Thank you!

Want to hear more from me?
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