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“Just because he’s black”.

Identity construction and racial humour in a German U-19 football team

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Abstract

Despite its status as the global game, football has been noted for having problems with racism, and yet relatively little research has actually looked at this topic from a discourse analytical perspective. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the use of racial humour in a German male under-19 football team. Drawing on audio-recordings of interactions among the players on the sideline and substitutes’ bench during, before and after football matches and training, as well as interviews with players, and team observations, we analyse and critically discuss some of the ways in which team members make humorous comments about specific racial, ethnic or national groups when constructing and expressing team membership and negotiating their own and others’ identities within the team. Findings illustrate that, on the one hand, team members express their appreciation of the cultural diversity within their team in an attempt to maintain or enhance team cohesion, but on the other hand, they often use racial humour to create distinctive subgroups thereby fragmenting the team and assigning and foregrounding racial identities.

Highlights:

- Humour is one of the discursive strategies through which racism in football is expressed
- The players of an U-19 team frequently use it to make racist and potentially discriminating comments
- In this context, racial humour functions a means for bonding and signalling group membership
- But it also achieves the opposites, namely creating distinct sub-groups and fragmenting the team

Introduction

Despite its status as the global game, football has been noted for its problems with racism (Doidge, 2015; Garland & Rowe, 2001; Kassimeris, 2008; Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). Racial discourses and their discriminatory effects have a tradition of condemnation (Kassimeris, 2009; Müller, van Zoonen & de Roode, 2007), and racial abuse of players with black skin colour, in particular, has a long history in sports and particularly in football (Bimper Jr, 2015; Collins, 1998; Jones, 2002; Kahn, 1991; Kassimeris, 2009; King, 2004). Fans, hooligans and also players have repeatedly come under fire for race-based utterances during football matches around the globe. Even recently, in Germany, for example, just before the start of the UEFA Euro 2016 football championship, a heated racist debate was initiated by right-wing politicians and individuals about the skin colour of some of the players in the German team (Wehner & Lohse, 2016). Through high profile campaigns such as *'Kick it Out'* (Kick It Out, n.d.) and *'Show Racism the Red Card'* (The Red Card, n.d.), football governing bodies and charities world-wide have attempted to use professional footballers to promote messages of anti-racism. And yet, in spite of this prevalence of racism in football, relatively little research has actually looked at this issue from a discourse analytical perspective, despite the potential these studies would have for greater understanding of the way race talk functions in this domain. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the use of racial humour in a German male under-19 (henceforth U-19) club football team. Our particular aim is to illustrate some of the discursive processes through which race and ethnicity are used as sources for humour, and how attempts at constructing humour are responded to by the players of this particular team. Through their use of humour, team members frequently make potentially racist and discriminatory comments, while at the same time creating solidarity and signalling their status as in-group members of this particular football team.

Racial humour: norms and functions

Humour is a complex and multi-functional discourse strategy that may perform diverse, and sometimes ambiguous and even contradictory functions (Schnurr & Plester *et al.*). It may be used to create solidarity and signal in-group membership, but also as a social boundary marker explicitly excluding others (e.g. Holmes & Hay, 1997; Holmes & Marra, 2002). The specific ways in which humour is used and the functions it performs are highly context dependent and vary from social group to social group (e.g. Holmes & Marra, 2002; Habib, 2008). Moreover, a close link exists between the use of humour and identity construction (e.g. Schnurr, 2009). Previous research has established that different groups often develop specific norms regarding what are considered to be appropriate ways of using humour for members. In other words, norms and expectations about what kind of humour is appropriate and unmarked, what are acceptable and taboo topics for humour, who is allowed to make fun of whom and what, and how humour is responded to, vary considerably across groups, and by regularly adhering to these norms, speakers signal their group membership and portray themselves as integrated members of this particular group.

These norms of appropriate humour behaviour also apply to racial or potentially discriminatory humour, which may be considered appropriate in the context of one group and highly inappropriate and causing offense in another. For example, in their study on lay understandings of everyday racism, Walton, Priest and Paradies (2013) show that racial joking was considered to be more tolerable among close friends than among acquaintances or strangers.

Moreover, racial humour may not only be used to signal and reinforce membership in a particular group, but also highlight differences and mark boundaries between different groups. For example, in a study of Maori and Pakeha adolescents in New Zealand, Holmes and Hay (1997) observed that humour is used as an ethnic boundary marker by members of these different ethnic groups, and that the members of the minority Maori group, in particular, frequently used humour as a means to emphasise similarities among group members while at the same time othering members of the majority group. The authors argue that “by agreeing through shared amusement on the existence and significance of such boundaries, speakers strengthen connections between themselves” (Holmes & Hay, 1997: 148). They use humour to send up negative stereotypes about their own group and thereby “construct[...] and reinforce[...] cultural identity” (Vine et al., 2009: 126).

These claims are in line with Davies’ (1990: 311) argument that ethnic jokes are often used by members of the group who are the butt of this humour as “a means of asserting their distinctive identity”. In his study of intergroup humour in Bosnia, Vucetic (2004) also found that ethnic stereotypes often functioned as boundary markers and as important elements of the speakers’ identity construction. And in a study of ethnic jokes about Jewish immigrants by Israelis, Shifman and Katz (2005) argue that the humour carries the dual message of welcoming and including immigrants, while at the same time expressing ethnic superiority of more established members of the community and reminding the newcomers of existing group norms. The authors note that due to this ambiguity, many of the jokes “can be regarded as both hostile and benign” (Shifman & Katz, 2004: 856), a feature that is also noticeable in the data analysed here.

(Racial) humour in sport

While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on humour in friendship, family and workplace contexts (e.g. Habib, 2008; Hay, 1995; Everts, 2003; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Schnurr, 2009), with a few exceptions, the sports domain has been largely overlooked (e.g. File, 2016; Hester, 2010; Kuiper, 1991; Chovanec, 2011). This is despite humour being noted as a pervasive aspect of the sporting domain (Snyder, 1991). Most of these studies, however – with the exception of Kuiper’s (1991) seminal study on locker room talk among the members of a New Zealand rugby team, and Hester’s (2010) study of collegiate baseball

players in the US – focus on the use of humour of coaches and managers (File, 2016; Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014).

Kuiper (1991) describes how banter is established as part of the routine formulae between male rugby players. Regularly using banter and mocking each other is one of the linguistic routines team members use to create group solidarity and maintain group cohesion (Kuiper, 1991). Hester (2010) also found that much of the humour used by collegiate baseball players had a positive impact on team cohesion. Similarly, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) outline various positive functions of humour when used by sports coaches, and File (2016) illustrates how the managers of sports teams may use cynical humour to express their disagreement with controversial referee decisions in post-match interviews.

Although the topic of racism and discrimination in the sports domain is widely acknowledged (e.g. Adair & Rowe, 2010; Collins, 1998; Holland, 1995; Kassimeris, 2009; King, 2004; Müller, van Zoonen & de Roode, 2007), there is very little research on the existence, norms and functions of racial humour in this context. One of the few studies on racial humour in sports was conducted by Burdsey (2011) who found that in Western sports athletes display and constantly reproduce colour-blind ideologies, and racist remarks are often downplayed by the victims and brushed away as being just banter and jokes. Similarly, Long, Carrington and Spracklen (1997: 258) describe “dressing room banter” as an example of how racial stereotypes are manifested and normalised within the language and culture of English rugby. In addition, Snyder (1991), who identified racial humour as part of the humour spectrum characteristic of the sports domain, convincingly argues that racial humour can promote negative stereotypes and discriminate against minority groups.

The current study builds on and addresses gaps in this research into racial humour in sport by exploring the discursive strategies through which the members of a German male U-19 football team make humorous comments about specific racial, ethnic or national groups. A particular focus is the construction of the humour, as well as the responses it generates, and the functions it performs with regards to constructing and negotiating team players’ identities (La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Snyder, 1991).

Racial humour as a tool for identity construction

The strong link between humour and identity construction has long been established, and research has illustrated some of the complex ways in which humour contributes to identity construction (e.g. Collinson, 1988; Westwood & Johnston, 2011; Richards, 2006; Labrador, 2004). Humour is not only a useful tool to assist interlocutors in making identity claims for themselves and assigning specific identities to others, but it also enables them to negotiate and combine occasionally competing identities (e.g. Schnurr, 2008, 2009; Schnurr & Van de Mierop, fc).

We take a social constructionist stance and understand identity as a dynamic and inherently collaborative process that is enacted as interlocutors orient to each other and negotiate their own and each others' expectations and roles (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Identities are thus not constructed in isolation but are discursively enacted and negotiated (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; De Fina, 2010), and are always to some extent co-constructed among interlocutors and related to other identities (Hall et al., 1999). Group identities play a particularly crucial role in this process. By positioning themselves in relation to larger collectives, in which interlocutors either claim or reject membership, they at the same time construct their individual identities. In this sense, as Jenkins (2008: 35-6) maintains, "the individual and the collective are routinely entangled with each other". Moreover, identity construction does not take place in a social vacuum but is always intricately tied to the concrete social context in which an interaction takes place and the specific practices through which meaning is constructed and negotiated in and through discourse (De Fina, 2010).

Taking this emphasis on the social context and interactional practices as significant, we illustrate some of the complex discursive processes of identity construction and negotiation among the players of a German male U-19 football team. We show how these processes are closely linked to the racial humour norms and practices that characterise this specific community of practice (Wenger, 1998) – a concept which we elaborate in more detail in the next section. In line with previous research, we use the term 'racial' humour to describe those humorous instances, which are specifically targeted at specific ethnic or racial (sub-) groups (Apte, 1987; Bell-Jordan, 2007; Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Juni & Katz, 2001; La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Pérez, 2015; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Schnurr, 2010; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013).

Theoretical framework, methodology and data

U-19 team as community of practice

The U-19 German football team that forms the case study of this paper consists of 25 male semi-professional players who were all born in Germany between 1997 and 1999. Most players have a migration background with parents coming from Ghana, Greece, Palestine, Albania, Iran, Algeria, Portugal, Macedonia and Croatia. The team meets three to four times a week for training sessions and for matches on the weekend. The team is very successful, and at the time of data collection was at the top of their league table.

This football team can be described as a community of practice (henceforth CofP) as it meets the three defining criteria set out by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998): team members meet regularly around a mutual engagement, i.e. to play football competitively with the aim 'to win and [...] stay in first position' in the league table as one of the players commented in the interview. This goal of athletic success, as Wilson (2011)

argues, is an important criterion of joint enterprise as it binds the team members together into a social unit (Wenger, 1998). In the course of this regular interaction the players have developed a shared repertoire of discursive strategies. By regularly drawing on elements of this joint repertoire, they express their membership in the group and at the same time construct their identities as players in this particular team. Among the easily recognisable linguistic strategies that index membership in this particular team are the use of familiarisers such as 'dude' ('Digger'), 'mate' ('Alter') and 'man' ('man') to refer to other players, and a generally 'rough tone' among players, which according to Wilson (2010) may serve to form solidarity between the players and display membership in this CofP. The use of insider jokes and racial humour is another salient feature of this discursive repertoire, as we illustrate below.

Data collection

Data collection took place during a four-week period in May 2016. Ethics approval was received prior to data collection, and all names of players, clubs and teams have been anonymised in this paper to protect participants' identities. For the collection of data we combined participant observation and semi-structured interviewing with the audio-recording of authentic interactions. This enabled us to gain different perspectives, which according to Olive (2014) is desirable for qualitative research. The aim of the observation, in which we took the role as a "minimally participating observer" (Bryman, 2016: 436), was to gain a better understanding of what was happening and how it was happening with having only minimal influence on players' behaviour (Bryman, 2016; Cooper et al., 2004; Lindner, 1981; Geertz, 1994).

Short, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight players in the team and lasted around 10 minutes each. The interviews mainly consisted of open-ended questions in order to allow participants to "tell stories about experiences, relate memories, and offer reflections and opinions" (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 47) thereby "captur[ing] the voices and the ways [they] [...] make meaning of their experience" (Rabionet, 2009: 563). The interview data were particularly useful in helping to establish a deeper understanding of the attitudes and values held by the participants of this CofP about their team's cultural diversity as players often made comments about the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of team members, the relationship among team members, and what they thought made their team 'special' and so successful.

In addition to these ethnographic data sources, we were also able to audio-record some of the interactions among the players on the sideline and substitutes' bench during, before and after football matches and training. Overall, more than five hours of audio-recorded material were collected. It was of utmost importance to ensure that the recording was as unobtrusive as possible and did not interfere with the players' performance or negatively

impact on their concentration or preparation. It was thus considered most appropriate to keep the placement of the audio-recorder flexible, and so sometimes it was placed on the bench next to the players or held in hand by a member of the research team.

All data collected was in German and were translated into English by the first author and checked by the third author, who are both native speakers of German. Our translations are mainly functionally oriented, and we have tried to maintain the informal and often humorous tone of the originals in the translations. In those instances, where it was particularly difficult to identify equivalents (e.g. for certain discourse markers), we relied on our native speaker intuitions (the second author is a native speaker of English). The transcription conventions that we used are provided at the end of the paper.

Identifying instances of racial humour

During observation and data collection, racial humour presented itself as a relevant feature of the team's negotiated repertoire, and became the focus of our analysis. However, identifying and analysing humour is not without challenges (Schnurr, 2010) – especially since humour is inseparably bound to the context in which it occurs (Hay, 1995; Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Keltner, et al., 2001; Schnurr, 2010). Also, insider knowledge into the group norms is necessary to understand (and decipher) the humour (Bell, 2009; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Schnurr, 2010; Schnurr & Chan, 2011). Having outsider status in the football team, we thus decided to focus on those instances of humour that could be relatively easily identified as they were responded to by laughter. Although laughter is merely one among many possible response strategies to humour (Marsh, 2014; Schnurr, 2010; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Hay, 1995, 2000, 2001), it is relatively easy to identify, and it remains one of the most recognised support strategies discussed in previous literature (e.g. Bell, 2009; Caparoso & Collins, 2015; Gordon, 2010; Hay, 1995, 2001; Schnurr, 2010). Moreover, laughter was frequently used in our data. While this could mean that we may potentially have overlooked some more subtle instances of humour, it facilitated the selection of examples for in-depth analysis and helped us identify the most obvious instances of racial humour.

Analysis

Our analysis indicates that the topic of racism and racial humour is complex and closely linked to questions of cultural diversity and stereotypes. In the interviews in particular, many players commented on issues relating to perceived racial differences among the team, which tend to be presented rather positively, and which are often used as a source for creating in-group identity and signalling group membership. Humour seems to play an important role in this context. For example, players told us that they often made fun of one

of the players with Greek heritage for constantly being broke and in need of money, and they regularly teased the German players for their lack of a sense of humour. But participants also assured us that mobilising such stereotypes 'is all [in] good fun' and that no one feels offended. These claims are largely supported by our in-depth analysis of the players' actual interactions on the sideline and substitutes' bench recorded during matches and training, where we found ample evidence of joking about racial or cultural groups.

The analysis below contains two sections: in the first section we provide some relevant background information about the players' perception of their team, and in the second section we provide an in-depth analysis of several instances of racial humour that occurred during conversations among players.

Acknowledging and expressing an appreciation of cultural diversity in the team: interview data

In the interviews, players generally used the perceived ethnic diversity among team members as an important reason for the positive atmosphere and close-knit relationships that exist among them, describing the team as a 'family' and referring to other players as 'friends'. The coach also called the players 'my boys' ('meine Jungs'). This close relationship between players also extends beyond the football pitch, as players frequently interact with each other via various social network sites, and regularly meet and together go to parties and other non-football related social events. The following quotes illustrate this.

Example 1

weil man ist hier so wie so eine Familie ... das ist so alles sind Freunde abgesehen vielleicht ein zwei drei Leute die einen nicht so mögen aber das gibt's überall so (Jonah)

because here one is like a like family ... it's all friends except for maybe two or three people who don't like one that much. But one finds that everywhere (Jonah)

In this short excerpt Jonah describes the team as a 'family' ('Familie') and 'friends' ('Freunde'). By explicitly mentioning and mobilising these identity categories he creates a picture of harmony and unity, and foregrounds his identity as a member in this group. However, at the same time his description appears rather agentless and hence generic and distancing – for example by using the impersonal third person pronoun 'one' ('man'), and describing the team without including himself ('it's all friends' ('alles sind Freunde')), rather than using the more inclusive pronoun 'we' – as Ardian does in Example 2.

Example 2

wir haben halt auch viele Kulturen in der Mannschaft das finde ich auch witzig ... ähm ... ja wir passen eigentlich gut als Team zusammen und das sieht man ja auch wie wir spielen und ... macht richtig Spaß (Ardian)

We also have so many cultures in the team. I think that's also funny ... erm ... yeah we fit together quite nicely as a team, and one can also see this in how we play and ... that's really great fun (Ardian)

In contrast to Jonah's quote above, Ardian here frequently uses the inclusive first person pronoun 'we' in his description of the team, thereby constructing team harmony and positioning himself as part of it. Unlike Jonah, Ardian displays agency – for example by framing his claims as his opinion ('I think' ('finde ich')) – and provides evidence in support of these claims ('one can also see this' ('das sieht man ja auch')). This quote is also a good example of how players sometimes make cultural diversity a topic by explicitly commenting on it. In this instance Ardian uses 'many cultures in the team' ('viele Kulturen in der Mannschaft') as a way to describe what makes the group special and successful. The fact that he explicitly refers to different 'cultures' of the players is particularly noteworthy because all players are actually German nationals, who were born and raised in Germany – although some have a migration background. And yet, in many interviews, the players orient to specific cultural groups when talking about the team, thereby assigning identities to others and making identity claims for themselves based on (perceived) membership in these 'other' collectives. In addition to commenting on players' cultural identities, participants also frequently mentioned racial categories, such as 'the Blacks' ('Schwarze') and 'the Black guys' ('die Schwarzen'). By making explicit reference to this diversity within the team - for example by describing the players as a 'colourful mix' – members at the same time create distinct sub-groups within the team to which membership was assigned, claimed or sometimes rejected. Example 3 illustrates this.

Example 3

Also es wird immer unterschieden zwischen Ausländer und Deutsche ... und ja dann so die Ausländer sagen dann halt oft so Witze über Deutsche so ja weil Deutsche ja immer so streng sind und keinen Humor haben und so ähm da versucht man halt natürlich jetzt als Deutscher jetzt auch so das sozusagen 'Nein das stimmt nicht' und so und dann versucht man auch so ein bisschen wie die anderen zu sein. Aber letztendlich sind wir ja alle Deutsche so sag ich mal das nimmt halt so hin und ich würde jetzt genauso mit einem Schwarzen oder Türken reden wie ich mit einem Deutschen reden würde und deshalb ... die machen halt auch unter einander machen sie natürlich auch Spaß jetzt ... ein Albaner würde

auch was zu einem keine Ahnung Türken sagen halt aber da ist halt ... die größte Gruppierung ist eigentlich immer Ausländer und Deutsche so (Maxi)

Well, there's always a distinction between foreigners and Germans ... and then, well yes, the foreigners then often make fun about Germans so well yes because Germans are always so serious and don't have a sense of humour and so erm. So as a German you then of course now try to say that kind of 'no that's not true' and things like that, and then you try to be a bit like the others. But at the end of the day we're all Germans I'd say. So, really, you just take it, and I would talk the same way with a Black guy or a Turk as I would with a German. And that's why ... They also make ... well amongst themselves they of course also make fun now ... An Albanian would also say something to – I don't know – a Turk, well but that's well ... the biggest subgroups are actually always foreigners and Germans so (Maxi)

At the beginning of this excerpt Maxi makes an explicit distinction between 'the foreigners' ('die Ausländer') and 'Germans' ('Deutsche') before setting these two groups in opposition to each other, a tendency that we have also observed in other interviews. This is further intensified by his use of the article 'die' to describe 'Ausländer' ('the foreigners'), which appears rather derogatory given that 'Germans' is used without an article. After having described what, according to this view, members of each group do (i.e., accusing the Germans of a lack of sense of humour vs. rejecting such accusations), he then breaks down the demarcation lines between these two cultural or racial categories and blurs them by admitting that 'but at the end of the day we're all Germans' ('aber letztendlich sind wir ja alle Deutsche'). He thereby marks these subcategories – based on perceived cultural or racial belonging – as irrelevant. This effect is further enhanced by his claim that regardless of how he would categorise his interlocutors based on their membership in different cultural or racial groups (he explicitly mentions 'a Black guy', 'a Turk', and 'an Albanian'), this would not have an impact on how he interacts with them and whether he uses them as the source of his mockery. Thus, like the Hawai'ian people of different ethnic background researched by Labrador (2004: 310), Maxi claims that the idea that players can laugh at themselves "is understood as a celebration of the [team's] racial diversity and cultural differences" and even marks the team's uniqueness.

Interestingly though, at the end of this quote, Maxi returns to his initial statement and reinforces the distinction that he perceives to exist between 'foreigners' and 'Germans'. He thereby contradicts some of the statements made by his team colleagues about 'being a family' discussed above. By mobilising and orienting to these distinct identity categories based on membership in cultural or racial groups, Maxi, and some of the other players in the team who display similar behaviours in their interviews, make these perceived characteristics of players relevant and orient to them. They thereby construct specific identities for themselves and others, and foreground their group identities closely related to membership in these groups. They thus showcase two different and somewhat contradictory tendencies, namely to emphasise familiarity, intimacy and also similarity

(when they portray their team as a family), while at the same time commenting on and highlighting difference – especially along ethnic and racial lines (by explicitly mentioning and orienting to specific cultural or racial groups).

Maxi's utterances are characterised by a relatively high occurrence of pragmatic particles ('ja' and 'halt' in the German version), which could be interpreted as an indication that his account about ethnic or racial (sub-)groups within the team is constructed as a "(resigned) acceptance of an immutable [even if regrettable] constraint" (Hautli-Janisz & Butt, 2016: 11). In other words, these markers, which are typical for spoken German in informal contexts, and 'halt' in particular, reflect the speaker's attitude or pejorative mood, and may be used as "a superficial justification/excuse for a previous statement" (Sundaresan, 2000: 13). They thus enable Maxi to make potentially racist claims while avoiding the danger of being held responsible for them. This distancing positioning is further reflected in his frequent use of the generic pronoun 'one' ('man') and the direct speech 'no that's not true' ('Nein das stimmt nicht') which is not assigned to a specific speaker but is rather presented as what people 'as a German' ('als Deutscher') would say.

In the next section we look at players' actual interactions on the sideline and substitute's bench during trainings and a match, and explore how aspects of cultural diversity and racial stereotyping shown in the interviews are reflected in the players' actual interactions. Our particular focus is how the players construct and negotiate various identities for themselves and other team members by using racial humour.

Constructing and negotiating identities through racial humour

Instances of racial humour were common to this particular group, perhaps because of the salience that members placed on cultural diversity. We analyse three examples here to illustrate how team members in their talk on the sideline or on the substitute's bench regularly use racial humour – thereby constructing various identities for themselves and others in ways that often foreground racial identities. The humour in these examples performs various functions – often simultaneously. It has unifying, bonding tendencies by assisting the players in constructing themselves as members of the team and foregrounding this group identity – as in Example 4 but it may also have separating tendencies constructing sub-groups within the team and assigning insider and outsider identities often along racial lines, as in Examples 5 and 6.

Example 4

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's nationality is German but he has Ghanaian heritage and black

based on a perceived stereotypical foreignness (Caparoso & Collins, 2015). This is further developed by Yasin who also emphasises Jordan's racial background, thereby contributing to the racial humour (Pérez, 2015). By mobilising the identity categories of asylum seeker and African to describe Jordan, the players on the sideline portray Jordan as one of the refugees who live in asylum homes close to the football pitch. They thereby 'other' him and mark him as an outside and non-in-group member of their German football team. These stereotypical and potentially threatening comments, however, are interpreted as humorous among interlocutors as the frequent laughter and the collaborative development of the humour into an extended sequence of joint humour indicate.

In line 3 Yasin continues the humour by moving its focus away from Jordan towards African people in more general, who now become the butt of the joking (Snyder, 1991: 120). By claiming that in Africa losing the ball during a match is 'common', interlocutors may be implying that African people are not very skilled footballers. In what follows Maxi, Yasin and one unidentified player take turns in making fun of Africa by utilising degrading stereotypes about this continent and, by implication, Jordan, who they set up as being a member of this imagined group of Africans. Throughout the following turns, the players conjointly create a fantasy scenario (Hay, 2001) in which they further humorously describe Africa as a developing country – for example by claiming that 'they're playing with paper' rather than proper balls, as is proposed in line 6. This suggestion is then developed by interlocutors who add further detail and develop this idea by claiming that the players have to make the paper balls themselves (line 8) using newspapers (line 9) that someone has brought over from Germany (line 10). The players collaborate harmoniously in constructing the humorous sequence, which is characterised by frequent laughter, several overlaps and completing each others' turns, which are all signs of a heightened involvement in the exchange (Hay, 2001; Schnurr, 2010).

Moreover, by making fun of Jordan's mistake of losing the ball to the opponents and of Africa, the players actively create an 'us versus them' dichotomy in the form of distinct in- and out-groups (Dynel, 2008). They set up opposing subject positions for, on the one hand, African players and by association Jordan whom they assign membership in this category, and, on the other hand, themselves. This effect is further enhanced by the frequent derogatory use of the German article 'die' (rather than the grammatically correct plural pronoun 'they') (line 6, 10, 11) referring to Africans, which further contributes to 'othering' them (Jackson, 2014; Ridanpää, 2014). Putting down these (absent) 'others' – albeit humorously – also assists the players in creating an in-group for themselves. By jointly constructing a stereotypical image of Africa as a developing continent (line 6-10), where people have to make footballs 'out of paper and paste', the players emphasise common ground and strengthen solidarity (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Schnurr, 2010). This is further enhanced by their frequent use of the familiariser 'dude' ('Digger') (lines 3, 8, 10). The humour thus enables them to bond and express solidarity among the substitute players on the bench while also "express[ing] hostility to the victim, ousting the latter from

the social group” (Dyrel, 2008: 250). This excerpt is thus a good illustration of how humour can be used to build and maintain boundaries between groups (Holmes & Hay, 1997).

In this example, then, the racial humour performs both bonding and separating functions as it enables the team to express solidarity with each other, while at the same time distancing themselves from an out-group, in which they include (their team member) Jordan. They thereby actively construct distinct sub-groups within their football team based on perceived racial or ethnic characteristics of players. The next example further illustrates how the players make explicit reference to racial categories – albeit this time to players outside of their own team.

Example 5

Context: While the team is playing a match on the pitch, the substitute players are sitting on the bench talking about famous football players and discussing who they think is the best.

1. Jonah: Die heftigsten Bälle hat immer noch Boateng //Alter\
Boateng still kicks the sickest balls //mate
2. Player 1: /Was?\\ Oh mein Gott
/What?\\ Oh my god
3. Yasin: Was? Boateng? (unverständlich)
What? Boateng? (unintelligable)
4. Xabi Alonso nimmt ihn hoch
Xabi Alonso outclasses him
5. Player 1: Nein //nein nein\
No //no no
6. Yasin: /Oh mein Gott\\... //ich schwör\
/Oh my god\\... //I swear
7. Player 1: /Nein nein nein\\
/No no no
8. Player 2: Okay egal scheiß drauf abgesehen vom Mittelfeld nur ein Verteidiger und
Okay doesn't matter despite the midfield there's only one defence player
9. Player 1: und das ist Boateng
and that's Boateng
10. Yasin: Doch Piqué ... Piqué und (unverständlich)
Yes Piqué ... Piqué and (unintelligable)
11. Player 1: Bist du verrückt?
Are you crazy?

12. Player 3: Ramos Ramos
Ramos Ramos
13. Yasin: Hä nein Ramos ? Nein
Huh no Ramos ? No
14. Player 3: Ramos
Ramos
15. Player 1: Nein?
No?
16. Yasin: Toni //Kroos Digger\
Toni //Kroos dude\<
17. Jonah: /Boateng macht das\\ besser man
/Boateng does it\\ better man
18. Yasin: Boah nicht er schon wieder
Argh not him again
19. *(2.5 seconds silence)*
20. Jonah: Nur weil er schwarz ist weißt du ... deswegen
Just because he's black you know ... that's why
21. *[Joint laughter]*

(The substitute players go back to talking about the happenings on the pitch.)

The humour in this example occurs in line 20 when Jonah uses one of the inside jokes of the team 'just because he's black' ('nur weil er schwarz ist') as a shorthand to break the presumably uncomfortable and relatively long silence (line 19) that resulted from the players' different views about who they consider to be the most skilled professional football player. While Jonah quite strongly advocates Boateng, one of the footballers on the German national team (who, like Jonah, is black), the others vehemently disagree and express their differing views by providing names of other professional players (Piqué, Ramos, Toni Kroos). Jonah's rejection of these other suggestions and his insistence (line 17) that 'Boateng does it better man' ('Boateng macht das besser man') is responded to with a clear rejection by Yasin (line 18), which could be interpreted as relatively dismissive, expressing his annoyance ('Argh not him again' ('Boah nicht der schon wieder')) – as is reflected, for example, in his derogatory use of the article 'der' (rather than the more neutral personal pronoun 'him') to refer to Boateng. This interpretation is further supported by the subsequent marked silence (line 19) which could indicate a tension between the players. Against this background, Jonah's humorous comment in line 20, which is followed by the players' joint laughter,

seems to provide a welcome break and relieves some of the tension that has built up during the previous discussion (Snyder, 1991; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015).

The utterance ‘just because he’s black’ (‘nur weil er schwarz ist’) itself, however, is rather ambiguous and also foregrounds and assigns racial identities – to Boateng and Jonah himself. Using skin colour as an explanation for a particular behaviour or treatment, Jonah expresses the race-based preconception that black athletes are usually disadvantaged (Bimper Jr, 2015; Brown, Jackson, Brown, Sellers, Keiper & Manuel, 2003; Jones, 2002). It could be interpreted as lamenting that black people, like Boateng and himself, are not being sufficiently acknowledged for their abilities and contributions because of their skin colour. So, on the one hand, the humour primarily amuses the other players, breaks the uncomfortable silence and signals solidarity and in-group membership among the players of the team (given that this is one of the team’s inside jokes). But on the other hand, it at the same time also carries a critical message with a serious undertone, and could perhaps also be interpreted as a coping mechanism for Jonah to empower himself (Holmes & Hay, 1997; Saucier, O’Dea & Strain, 2016).

There are several more instances in our data where the phrase ‘just because he’s black’ (‘nur weil er schwarz ist’) was used with humorous effect by the players. It thus constitutes an element of the negotiated repertoire that characterises this CofP. In all cases the phrase was a reaction to a critique of a player with black skin colour. These observations show that skin colour is indeed a topic in this team – a topic, which is both, a means for bonding (as it provides the source for frequent in-group humour among all players) as well as race-based separation of members within the CofP (see also Hay, 1995, 2001; Raymond, 2014). By using this phrase for humorous (albeit critical) comments, the players also do identity work, and portray themselves as integrated members of the team (who are familiar with the team’s negotiated discursive repertoire), and also as members of a particular ethnic or racial group. They thereby simultaneously signal team membership while at the same time constructing distinct sub-groups within the team based on perceived racial or ethnic characteristics. Similar behaviour can be seen in Example 6.

Example 6

Context: The exchange takes place at the end of a training session, when coach Ollie calls for everyone to gather in a circle and explains that they are going to have a friendly mini tournament among the players on the team. He adds that the coaches will participate in the tournament and will therefore start picking their team members.

1. Ardian: Bitte keine Schwarzen haha
No blacks please haha
2. *[Joint laughter]*

3. Luca: Gewinnerteam Alter
Winning team mate
4. Maxi: //Nee nur die Deutschen\
//No only the Germans\<
5. Jordan: Afrika /Power\<\
Africa /power\<\<
6. *[Joint laughter]*
7. Ollie: Die DEUTSCHEN wir kriegen nicht mal ein deutsches Team zusammen
The GERMANS we can't even get together a German team
8. *[Joint laughter]*

In Example 6, team members joke about who they want or do not want to be on their teams for a mini tournament. The sequence starts off with Ardian's plea for 'no Blacks please' ('Bitte keine Schwarzen') (line 1). This potentially threatening utterance is considerably mitigated by his accompanying laughter, and is thus set up as humorous rather than offensive, which is successful as is shown by other players joining in with the laughter (line 2), and continuing of the humour in the following lines. Nevertheless, with this comment, race is immediately made a topic, albeit humorously, and in their subsequent contributions other players, and coach Ollie, orient to it and use it for further humorous effect. In line 4 Maxi states that he wants a team with 'only the Germans' ('nur die Deutschen'), which is then countered by Jordan's suggestion to have a team with only African players showcasing 'Africa power' ('Afrika Power'). These comments are clearly humorous and are used here to tease each other. The humorous sequence comes to an end with Ollie's ironic remark (line 7) about allegedly not having enough German players in the team to be able to form a German-only mini-team as initially suggested by Ardian. This comment is clearly ironic, as reflected in Ollie's tone of voice and the emphasis he puts on the utterance-initial 'the Germans' (die Deutschen'), as everyone on the team is well aware of the fact that all players are actually German – although some have a migration background.

Due to its inherent ambiguity (Alberts, 1992), teasing enables the speakers to express potential provocations or insults while simultaneously indicating that the comments are playful and non-serious, as is reflected, for example in the playful tone of voice not shown in the transcript (Dynel, 2008; Keltner, et al., 2001; Schnurr & Chan, 2011), and the frequent joint laughter it generates (lines 1, 6, 8). Previous research has established that teasing tends to occur in close relationships (Dynel, 2008; Schnurr & Chan, 2011) where speakers are relatively certain not to cause any offense. This also applies to this football team or CofP, where "people seem to prefer to tease those with whom they feel secure enough to practice 'playful biting'" (Kotthoff, 2003: 1400).

With their teasing comments, the players not only de-value each others' egos (Plester & Sayers, 2007) by excluding them from their respective teams in the mini tournament, but, more importantly perhaps, they make race an issue and create distinct (sub-)groups based on racial or cultural characteristics to which they then claim membership. By expressing their wishes to be in exclusively German, African or non-black teams, they construct their ethnic identities in relation to these collectives and portray themselves as integrated members in these teams. At the same time they assign membership in the 'other' groups to the other players. These collective identities are constructed and foregrounded at the expense of other, more individual, identities. Like in Example 4, this leads to the creation of 'us versus them' dichotomies – with demarcation lines based on race and splitting the team into different sub-groups. However, like in the previous examples, in the team context where they occurred, these comments – in spite of their racist undertones – are understood as humorous and probably as contributing to creating team solidarity as the frequent joint laughter in response to them indicates. Moreover, the distancing and separating tendencies of the players' comments are counterbalanced by the players' use of racial humour and teasing, which are important elements of the team's discursive repertoire. In other words, although they create distinct sub-groups through the (racial and potentially racist) content of their comments, they at the same time also signal group membership in the U-19 football team by drawing on the team's negotiated discursive repertoire and using inside jokes (around players' racial and national identities and the team's cultural make-up).

Discussion and conclusion

As with previous research, the findings presented above illustrate that racial humour is complex in its functionality, and provides a useful means to assist speakers in their construction and negotiation of identities. Our analyses have shown that the recurring construction of sub-groups within the team based on (perceived) cultural and racial differences, runs like a common thread through the discourse of the members of this male U-19 football team (see also Hay, 1995, 2001; Raymond, 2014). On the one hand, with their humorous and often teasing comments the players create solidarity with the other members of their football team (e.g. by drawing on elements of the team's negotiated discursive repertoire), but on the other hand, they at the same time set up distinct sub-groups along racial lines which potentially fragment the team's cohesiveness and unity (e.g. by emphasising and orienting to racial or cultural groups within the team). Discursively, this fragmentation is achieved by mobilising and orienting to different cultural and ethnic identities, speakers' choice of pronoun (which often contributed to the construction of an 'us versus them' dichotomy), and speakers' positioning of themselves and others in relation to larger collectives and potentially discriminatory and racist claims, which were often presented using generic forms. These behaviours were counterbalanced to some extent by the conjoint construction of humour, the frequent joint laughter, the generally collaborative

floor management (e.g. speakers' heightened involvement in the construction of the humour), the use of inclusive 'we' and various familiarisers throughout.

Since players typically combined these contradictory tendencies when constructing and negotiating their own and each others' identities, our findings indicate that in contrast to earlier research, which claimed that athletic identities may supersede racial identities in integrated, organised sports teams (Brown et al., 2003), in this U-19 football team racial categories form an integral part in the players' construction of their various identities as athletes and team members. Humour played a particularly important role in this context as it enabled the players to manoeuvre through this apparent contradiction, and to construct and negotiate their own identity by positioning themselves in relation to these different (often racial and ethnic) reference points.

The so-called "paradox of duality" (Meyer, 2000: 329) inherent in humour contributing to both unification and separation further illustrates that humour is indeed a "double-edged sword" (Meyer, 2000: 310), which may both bond and/or divide participants as well as audiences. In this sense, humour functions as both, a sword and a shield (Caparoso & Collins, 2015; Saucier et al., 2016) as it may victimize, belittle or stigmatise minority groups such as the black players of the football team described above, and it may also function as a defence mechanism – for example when racial humour is aimed at a disadvantaged (sub-) group that the speaker identifies with (Caparoso & Collins, 2015).

The observation that team members often used racial humour (rather than less ambiguous and potentially less threatening types of humour) to achieve these aims could be a reflection of the racism issues in the football domain, which has witnessed numerous instances of racial abuse of players (Jones, 2002; Kassimeris, 2008). Although we did not identify any malicious racial abuse in this particular U-19 football team, it could be argued that the racial humour frequently used by team members is part of normalised 'everyday racism' within this CofP.

While there is some disagreement among scholars as to the functions and effects of racial humour (e.g. Apte, 1987; Burdsey, 2011; Brown et al., 2003; Snyder, 1991; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013), the analysis of examples above has illustrated that in this particular football team racial humour is frequently used by the players to express solidarity and reinforce the strong bond that exists among players. Thus, rather than necessarily contributing to the marginalization of racial minorities, the normalization of racial discrimination, the promotion of negative stereotypes, and the enhancement of the (white) perpetrators (Burdsey, 2011; Caparoso & Collins, 2015; Snyder, 1991; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013), the racial humour used in this U-19 football team is an important element of the discursive repertoire of the members of this particular CofP, and is accepted practice and used with positive effects, as reported by the participants of this team (see also Plester & Sayers, 2007).

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether this racial humour feeds into and hence reinforces racial stereotyping and, therefore, keeps discriminatory boundaries alive (Caparoso & Collins, 2015). This dilemma of interpreting race-based humour as constituting racism is also discussed by Walton et al. (2013), who view the normalised existence of racial humour as a familiar feature of ‘everyday racism’ (see also Sharpe & Hynes, 2016) as it is “intricately linked to power-laden ideologies and unequal social structures” (Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013: 1594). As Sue and Golash-Boza (2013) have argued, it is problematic when the racial humour remains unchallenged as this contributes to legitimising racial stereotypes as harmless.

Case studies, like the one presented here, which explore the everyday discourse of football players, thus provide important evidence for the widely lamented claim that the racial practices often criticised in the football domain (e.g. Doidge, 2015; Garland & Rowe, 2001; Kassimeris, 2008; Podaliri & Balestri, 1998) and their possible antisocial effects might be hard to fight as they do not necessarily take place in public contexts. Rather, as our analyses have shown, they happen within the team and often take on relatively subtle forms (e.g. are disguised as humour) and are part and parcel of the group’s normative ways of behaving and communicating with each other. These findings indicate that any attempts at fighting racism in football should start early in a footballer’s career and need to consider ways of counter-acting and preventing racial discourse – even if it is humorous – at an early state of youth football and team formation in order to lay the foundation for greater awareness and sensitivity in professional football.

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Transcription conventions

[laughs]	Paralinguistic features in square brackets
...	Short pause (under 1 sec)
...//... \ .../... \	Simultaneous speech
(hello)	Transcriber’s best guess at unclear utterance
?	Rising or question intonation
VERY	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[...]	Section of transcript omitted

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