

RACISM AT WORK

The Danger of Indifference



Subtle racism in football

Eniola Aluko is a professional footballer with a long and distinguished career. She has played for Birmingham City, Charlton Athletic and Chelsea in the English FA's Women's Premier League.

She won 102 England caps and played at three women's World Cup finals and two women's Euro finals. At the 2012 London Olympics she represented Great Britain. She has been called 'the Wayne Rooney of women's football'.

Despite these achievements, she is likely to be remembered for the allegations of racism she made against the then England manager Mark Sampson. The allegations centred around remarks that he had made to some of the black players, Aluko included.

The FA conducted an internal enquiry, carried out by a black barrister. The conclusion was that there was no wrong doing. The allegations were leaked and created a huge debate. Opinions are divided as to whether the actions could even be regarded as racist at all. Some criticised Aluko, claiming that she had found a way of getting back at the manager for not selecting her for the England team.

It is difficult to state definitively the merits or otherwise of the case, but it does demonstrate how our view about racism in football needs to be debated. What constitutes a racist act?

In the past, racist behaviour was tolerated and seen as acceptable by white fans, players, coaches and journalists. These days overt racist acts are condemned and the perpetrators punished. This has corresponded with a change in attitudes towards race in society more generally.

However, whilst there are more black British footballers than there have ever been, very few manage to sustain a career within the sport once they stop playing. 'Micro-incivilities' are the small, daily, racist acts that make minorities feel less valued, undermined and unwelcome. Aluko's case highlighted just such an instance. There is a world of difference about whether actions constitute unlawful discrimination and whether they may have a detrimental sense on a person's sense of belonging to a team.

One manifestation of the subtle and covert ways that racism operates today is the exclusion minorities experience when seeking to move into managerial and executive positions within a football club. Stereotypes of black people as athletic, but less intelligent, is one reason why they can be accepted as players, but not as managers and coaches.



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The dilemma that Aluko faced - to report the incidents or not - is one that black players have regularly been confronted with. 'Banter' is defined by the OED as "the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks". In many work environments, including football, self-deprecation and the ability to give and take a joke is appreciated. As the OED definition states however, it is intended to be friendly. 'It was only banter' is a commonly used reason to explain racially based comments and jokes that have hurt someone. To complain against such behaviour can and often does lead to the individual being outraged. However, to let comments pass can mean that the behaviour continues and can escalate. Aluko herself felt that her teammates rallied around the manager once her complaints became public. Complaining would also be seen as evidence for stereotypes of black footballers, in which they are portrayed as lacking 'character', 'resilience' or 'bottle'.

James Hussaney was a young player at Chester City FC. His manager, a former Everton player, Kevin Ratcliffe, finding Hussaney had put the wrong studs into his football boots, called him a 'black c...'. Hussaney was dissuaded from lodging a complaint by the chairman, Mike Gutterman, who said that no other club would go near him if he did. Having not put in a complaint, Hussaney found still at the end of the season that he would not be given a professional contract with the club. He took the club to an independent tribunal where it was found that whilst the reason for his dismissal was due to footballing reasons, he had suffered racial abuse.

Racism today is exhibited in a number of oblique, indirect ways. Each individual behaviour and comment can be seen as relatively innocuous. But it is their regular occurrence that makes them problematic. One joke could be seen as a mistake - we all say things we didn't mean some point, or as banter. However, when such 'jokes' and 'comments' keep being directed at the same people on the same topic, they can become a source of anxiety and distress for individuals. It is precisely the combination of these incidents which become problematic for individuals who are on the receiving end and who are then faced with the dilemma of how they should respond.

