It’s not as simple as black and white: challenging racisms in English professional football through locally grounded multi-agency collaboration

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It's not as simple as black and white: Challenging racism in professional football through locally grounded multi-agency collaboration
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Introduction

This chapter will begin by considering the ways in which racisms and racialised exclusions have impinged upon and been generated by English football culture and the impact on patterns of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) participation across all levels of the English professional game. The chapter will also provide some contextual background on the shape and scope of national interventions designed to challenge racism in football and the efficacy of efforts to engage professional clubs in the idea and practice of anti-racism, in particular with respect to recent work around the Kick It Out Racial Equality Standard for Professional Clubs (KIO RES).

The main section of the chapter will then examine the distinctly local application of this generic equality framework at Port Vale FC: a small professional football club situated in the Midlands of England. Evaluation here will draw on my own substantial ethnographic experiences in leading a locally grounded multi-agency partnership specifically designed to assist in this process and help re-position Port Vale FC as a more accessible and culturally relevant local social institution. In doing so, I shall first outline the shifting local political and football landscape which stimulated and enabled the development of this intervention before moving on to look in a little more detail at the following three main areas of focus: combating spectator racism and promoting a more inclusive match-day experience; building bridges between the club and local BME communities; and encouraging best racial equality practice within the operational infrastructure of the club. The chapter will conclude by offering some critical evaluation of the conceptual and practical strengths and limitations of multi-agency anti-racist interventions of this kind at the local level.

Racisms in professional football in England

The issue of racism in professional football in England first became the subject of public and academic concern in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to overt forms of racist chanting from spectators targeting the growing number of black players in the
game. Since this time, a number of authors have alluded to the multiplicity of ways in which racisms are manifest in football spectator culture from more obvious forms of individual and orchestrated abuse which utilise a series of demeaning racial epithets (Cashmore, 1982; Williams, 1992; Holland, 1995; Vasili, 2000) to patterns of cultural interchange and coded discourse that takes place across white spectator formations and which is often premised on shared racially structured antipathies and the celebration of homogenously white and racially closed birthplace localisms (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, 1998; Robson, 2000; Nash, 2000).

The connections between English football, the activities of hooligan ‘crews’ and the allure of racist politics and agendas has also been well documented, especially with regard to support for the national team where right wing ideologies have chimed most obviously with historically embedded ideas around ‘race’, nation, and cultural exclusivity (CCS, 1981; Williams, 1984; Garland and Rowe 2001; Back, Crabbe, and Solomos, 2001). More recently, an emergent body of academic work has alluded to the complexities of English spectator identities and conscious efforts to encourage and shape more inclusive forms of national spectatorship (Carrington, 1998; Williams, 1999; Perryman, 1999, 2002).

Despite the recent cultural reinvention of football and the increased marketability and appeal of the domestic game from the 1990s onwards to incorporate new, more diverse, middle class, female and family audiences, incidents of spectator racism have continued to exhibit some uneven but residual permanence. Large scale survey research conducted around the turn of the century suggests that around one third of fans at all professional clubs in England had witnessed racism aimed at players during this period (Williams 2001a, 2001b). The more subtle and nuanced ethnographic work of Back, Crabbe and Solomos (1998, 2001) is also particularly instructive in identifying the incidence of more banal ‘respectable’ racism expressed by fans from a range of social backgrounds and across different sections of stadiums on match-days.

The historical legacy and continuation of racism of this kind has (along with issues of cost) contributed significantly to the relative paucity of BME fans attending live games. Most professional clubs at the elite level attract fewer than 2% of their home crowd from BME communities despite the significant local residential presence of BME populations (Williams 2001a, 2001b; Bradbury, 2001; IFC 2005).
Beyond the increasingly corporate and modernising impulses that characterise the English professional game, there are also strong signs that a series of racially closed institutional practices embedded within the dominant and largely unchallenged white hegemonic structures at clubs has impacted disproportionately on the shape and scope of BME participation as players, coaches, managers and administrators. These practices are especially evident in narrow ‘traditional’ approaches to talent identification which have historically failed to incorporate a range of sites and local settings in which young Asian players are present (Bains and Patel, 1995; Bains, 2006; Burdsey, 2004) and in the inability and apparent unwillingness of some clubs to ‘open up’ a series of relatively closed recruitment practices which have sustained inequalities of access to administrative employment opportunities (Bradbury, 2001).

The invisible centredness of whiteness and the occlusion of any sense of inward gaze within the institutional core of professional clubs has arguably enabled dominant racialised assessments to lay responsibility for changing local practices firmly at the door of ‘problematised’ BME communities and placed them outside the local cultural catchment of clubs. The non-acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of racisms and their multiple applications at the individual and institutional level has also allowed clubs invariably to deny the existence of racism, to position themselves as ‘neutral arbiters’ in the fight against racism, and/or to apportion blame to anti-racism initiatives for importing racism into clubs where, as if in some kind of magical sporting and societal vacuum, it did not otherwise occur (Long, 2000). It is towards the shape, scope and efficacy of the work of national anti-racism interventions with professional clubs to which this chapter now turns.

National anti-racism interventions and professional football in England

The emergence of national interventions against racism in football first began in 1993 when the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in conjunction with the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) launched the ‘Lets Kick Racism out of Football’ campaign as a result of concerns regarding the ongoing incidence of racial abuse aimed at black players and the relative inaction of professional clubs and the sports governing bodies in this respect. Initially the campaign focused mainly on issues of spectator management and was supported by a high profile poster and magazine promotion. Further, the developing national spread of the PFA Football in the Community (FIC) scheme offered a potential conduit through which to address young people directly on issues of anti-racism (Williams and Taylor, 1994).
The initial symbolic success of the campaign gradually attracted interest from national governing bodies in football and by the beginning of the 1995/96 season a new multi-agency grouping was established under the moniker ‘Advisory Group Against Racism and Intimidation’ (AGARI). Launched under the twin themes of ‘Let’s Kick Racism’ and ‘Respect All Fans’ AGARI had notably shifted focus to include anti-social behaviour: an agenda emanating from the concerns of the campaign’s new football governance partners to be seen to be busily cleansing the game of the social ills connected with spectator misbehaviour which had dogged the development and market potential of football in the recent past.

A prescient critique of early national interventions suggested that the overly moralistic and distinctly national emphasis of campaigning largely ignored the specificities of local fan cultures and negated any sense of direct ownership of such campaigns by fans and their clubs (AGARI, 1996). The tendency of these early national campaigns to over-emphasise racist caricatures and the ‘racist/hooligan’ couplet also probably did little to challenge or disrupt the incidence of more banal and routine racism inherent within normative fan cultures (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Garland and Rowe, 2001).

The shift from the ‘symbolic’ to more purposeful national anti-racist intervention was arguably cemented when the national Kick It Out (KIO) campaign was established in its present form in 1997. KIO is financially supported and ‘managed’ by the CRE (now Equality and Human Rights Commission), the PFA and football’s governing bodies to co-ordinate and deliver a relatively sophisticated and ongoing national campaign against racism ‘on behalf of football’. The campaign has assumed a certain permanence over time and has become the central organising body for anti-racist activity within both the professional and amateur games, although it has no legislative powers and remains peripheral to the institutional decision making policy powers of the football establishment. While KIO has offered a continuation of broad rhetorical and occasionally moralistic narratives and maintained a high media profile in this respect, it has, also, sought to engage educationalists at the local level through conscious attempts to link anti-racism with the wider citizenship agenda in schools (Kick It Out, 2002). The work of the national Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC) campaign has arguably exercised a more consistent singular focus on work of this kind and has since 1996 offered increasingly subtle rationalist pedagogical approaches to overcoming individual prejudice through the production of engaging
educational resources targeting youth audiences. Central to the success and effectiveness of the SRTRC campaign over time has been its capacity to work closely with the FIC schemes of professional clubs, and local schools and to utilise professional footballers as anti-racist role models to this end.

KIO differs markedly from the SRTRC campaign and prior national interventions in its wider ranging and more ambitious focus to address institutionalised barriers which continue to have an impact on the shape of inclusion and exclusion in the game. In this respect, KIO has consistently sought to be pro-active in setting the agenda for anti-racism in the sport, both domestically and increasingly in a European context. Success here has been varied and has to some extent been conditional on managing emergent tensions between the broader egalitarian focus of the campaign and the distinctly corporatist agendas of some of its more conservative and financially powerful funding bodies.

Nonetheless, central to the initial focus of KIO has been a much more intensive process of seeking to establish local anti-racist partnerships involving professional football clubs and key local ‘enablers’ such as local racial equality councils, local authorities, fan groups, and BME community organisations. Work to establish localised initiatives of this kind was recommended by the Football Task Force (1998) and is considered essential to engendering effective locally grounded responses to the specificities of racisms embedded within specific fan cultures and in terms of helping professional clubs shift from positions of relative cultural isolation towards developing more ‘open’ relationships with ethnically diverse local populations. However, for KIO, progress in this area over time has been challenging, time-consuming and poorly resourced. Between 1997 and 2002 KIO was able to facilitate the development of around 20 local anti-racist working groups involving professional clubs. While partnerships of this kind differed markedly in their scope and impact, few exhibited any longevity (Bradbury, 2002).

Translating the rhetorical support of professional clubs for anti-racism into real and meaningful local action during this period was often compounded by prior fractious relationships between the economic agendas of professional clubs, the public service remit of local authority and voluntary service providers and the historical and cultural distance of BME communities from the aforementioned institutions. The relative non-response of many professional clubs towards implementing some of the most basic measures outlined by successive national anti-racism interventions or by the Football
Task Force has been documented by a series of consecutive evaluation reports (Mcardle and Lewis, 1997; Bradbury, 2001; CRE, 2004; IFC, 2005). These reports also alluded to the lack of any critical engagement with - and some real cultural resistance to – ideas and practices around ‘equity’ at a significant number of clubs and highlight the conceptual and practical difficulties faced by KIO in facilitating this process.

Since 2004, KIO has noticeably refocused its efforts on this score through the development of the Kick It Out Racial Equality Standard for Professional Football Clubs (KIO RES): a framework document designed to guide and assist clubs to implement best racial equality practice across all levels of their operational infrastructure. The KIO RES is modelled on the Sporting Equals ‘Equality Standard’ (see Spracklen and Long in this collection for a critical evaluation of the use of charters and standards to promote anti-racism in sports) and is intended in the first instance to formalise clubs’ rhetorical commitment to anti-racism through engendering greater senior management level buy-in, and establishing some strategic clarity and inter-departmental cohesion around equity issues at clubs. Central to this process is a strong emphasis on issues of corporate responsibility with particular regard to embedding more equitable employment and recruitment practices and the delivery of a series of actions encouraging targeted community outreach work and more inclusive marketing to help engender a positive ‘brand perception’ of clubs within local communities.

By the end of 2009, some five years after its official launch, a total of 32 (out of 92) ‘professional’ clubs had achieved the preliminary level of the KIO RES (or its successor, the generic Equality Standard), including 17 (out of 20) Premier League clubs. Eleven had gone on to achieve the intermediate level of the standard. While the Premier League has provided financial support the Football League has not, and success is markedly less apparent in the lower echelons of league football where just four (out of 48) professional clubs have achieved the most basic level of the KIO RES since 2004. The lack of financial and only limited advocacy support from the Football League may have disadvantaged many smaller professional football clubs in this respect. However, while the relative inaction of many clubs here is also underscored by some very real operational and infrastructural capacity issues, it is probably also the case that many clubs of this kind have exhibited little obvious commitment to engage in this process, nor have they exercised any sense of critical inward gaze at the way in which their normative everyday practices might continue to shape the
boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in negative ways for local BME communities. It is towards an examination of multi-agency efforts to assist in the implementation of the KIO RES at one such club to which we now turn.

**Port Vale FC and the Valiants Against Racism (VAR) campaign**

*The development of VAR*

Port Vale FC is situated in Stoke-on-Trent: a medium sized post industrial city (pop: 240,000) in the Midlands of England. Since the 1970s the city has experienced a gradual economic downturn affecting key industries of steel-working, coal-mining, and large scale pottery and earthenware manufacture. Many of the city’s local ward areas feature prominently on national measures of multiple deprivation, including those multi-ethnic inner city locales in which longstanding Pakistani and Black Caribbean, and newer, diverse, Black African, Iraqi and Kurdish asylum and refugee communities are resident and which taken together account for around 7% of the city populace (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2004). Stoke-on-Trent is also an area of acute racial tensions and strongly openly expressed racist sentiment. Casual conversational racism in private and public spaces is commonplace and in recent years more organised racism and xenophobia has become increasingly manifest in the local political arena. Since 2001, the neo fascist British National Party (BNP) has made significant electoral gains within local council governance, especially (but not exclusively) in economically deprived and predominantly white ‘sink’ estates, and has run a very close second in the city’s elected mayoral race on two consecutive occasions.

The rise (and disproportionate national focus) of the BNP in the city has not gone uncontested, most notably through the efforts of the leftist alliance North Staffordshire Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (NORSCARF), and through the mobilisation of physical resistance by local Asian youth in some locales (Pegg, 2001). Local racial tensions have also been ‘played out’ within the predominantly white, male, and distinctly local, working class, spectator formations of Port Vale FC. During the 2000/2001 season 29% of Vale fans reported witnessing racist abuse aimed at players (Williams, 2001b) and in the 2002/2003 season around 200 Vale fans engaged in orchestrated racist chanting at a match in Oldham. Beyond some limited success in recruiting locally born black players, the club has exhibited little obvious cultural connection with local BME communities in terms of administrative
In recent years, the fiscal affairs of Port Vale FC have mirrored that of the failing local economy and by the close of the 2002/2003 season the club had drifted into financial administration. By the beginning of the 2003/2004 the club had assumed new ownership through the efforts of a collective of local businessmen and the financial shareholder contribution of more than 500 club supporters. Importantly, the new directorial regime offered strong rhetorical support for shifting the shape of local relations from the markedly defensive silo mentality of the previous administration towards a much more democratic, transparent and community orientated approach, which included intentions to develop a more progressive relationship with fans and an apparent open-ness to engagement with new (multi)cultural markets.

These new developments chimed positively with my own voluntary intentions and the organisational brief of the local Racial Equality Council (REC) and the national KIO campaign to offer practical support in helping tackle racism and engender much more positive relations between the club and local BME communities. My own experience on this score was not insignificant. I had recently completed a long term academic study (Bradbury, 2002) examining racisms and the efficacy of anti-racist interventions in the English game during which time I liaised extensively with the national Kick It Out campaign and focused the bulk of my ethnographic efforts on two progressive club-based anti-racism campaigns in Leicester (Foxes Against Racism) and Sheffield (Football Unites, Racism Divides), and was familiar with models of best anti-racist practice to this end. I was also a ‘third generation’ Port Vale supporter with links to local organised fan groups and a strong familial and cultural connection to inner city Stoke-on-Trent.

In Autumn 2003 with the support of Kick It Out and the local REC, I chaired the first of several ‘open forum’ meetings at a local multi-cultural community centre near to Port Vale FC. These initial meetings were essentially designed to evaluate local interest in - and shape the future agenda of - a potential initiative to tackle racism at Port Vale FC and involve the club more closely with its local BME communities. These meetings were well attended by representatives of the new ownership team at Port Vale FC, its FIC scheme, fan groups and a range of local BME community organisations.
Facilitating this process was challenging. Between the historically polar positions of the club and local BME communities there was an apparent vacuum of knowledge and understanding of each other’s organisational operations and cultural practices. Attempts to shift debates towards more institutional processes of racial exclusion proved difficult for club representatives and its FIC scheme especially. There were also some barely concealed local tensions and competing community agendas within BME networks which needed to be managed and overcome in order to establish a unifying collectivist narrative outlining not just what it was we were all against, but also what it was we were all for, and how we might best achieve it. These challenges were not insurmountable. The clear and respected national ‘brand’ of KIO, the successful management of local community politics by the REC, my own organisational autonomy, and the significant goodwill and commitment of (almost) all partners all helped in quickening the pace of momentum. The group soon adopted the moniker ‘Valiants Against Racism’ (VAR) as a means of establishing a clear identity and brand association with Port Vale FC (The Valiants) and a forthright statement of intent against that to which we were collectively opposed (racism).

VAR was officially launched in late 2003 at a high profile event at Port Vale FC where representatives from all membership organisations publicly ‘signed up’ to the VAR Racial Equality Charter: a visible representation of the stated aims and objectives of the campaign:

- To combat racism at matches involving Port Vale FC and to create a safe and welcoming environment for fans from black and minority ethnic communities

- To encourage the greater inclusion of local black and minority ethnic communities in the activities of Port Vale FC as players, spectators and administrative and match-day staff

- To assist Port Vale FC in the implementation of a clear and structured strategy for racial equality and equal opportunities

- To establish Port Vale FC as a truly community club representative of the Potteries diverse multi-ethnic communities
The mission statement and comprehensive VAR Racial Equality Action Plan (VAR REAP) incorporated the preliminary and intermediate level of the newly developed KIO RES, featuring nine key areas for attention: stadium and safety issues, fan activities, attracting BME supporters, community and educational initiatives, inclusive marketing strategies, equal opportunities for non-playing staff, equal opportunities for young players, race equality training and support for club staff, and the development and sustainability of VAR. Responsibility for the implementation of the VAR REAP was apportioned to relevant lead partners and was centrally co-ordinated through the newly constituted VAR working group which met at regular intervals on a total of 38 separate occasions between November 2003 and April 2008. All honorary officer positions were elected annually and I acted as Chair of VAR throughout this period until stepping down in April 2008.

**Combating spectator racism and promoting an inclusive match-day experience**

Central to the aims of the VAR campaign was a stated intention to combat racism at matches involving Port Vale FC and to create a safe and welcoming environment for fans from BME communities. To this end VAR sought to engage fans creatively in support for anti-racism measures and to promote a new more inclusive fan culture. In the first instance, VAR helped plan and co-ordinate five annual anti-racism match-day events as part of the KIO national week of action. Activities included players and club match-day staff wearing KIO branded apparel, public statements against racism over the PA system, banner parades, penalty shoot-outs and colourful 'street-dance' displays by local school-children. These events were supported by around 30 VAR volunteers drawn from a broad cross section of Vale fans, including some club directors, who distributed badges, stickers and leaflets to all (5,000) fans entering the stadium. Many fans offered positive comments in support of our efforts, although others appeared non-committal. These ‘turnstile promotions’ also probably did little to disrupt the more deeply embedded racism of those fans who openly refused offers of badges and stickers or that of one middle aged woman who snatched a KIO magazine from her own child’s hand and threw it into a nearby bin with the words ‘Paki lovers’.

The significant presence of VAR at annual club ‘Open Day’ events provided VAR volunteers with opportunities to engage fans more conversationally and to articulate more fully the aims and objectives of the campaign. Work here was supported by a variety of interactive educational mediums such as display boards, a locally tailored
history of black footballers exhibition, video presentations and personalised badge making facilities for children. At one event of this kind, more than 400 Vale fans and the Port Vale players bought specially designed wristbands and signed a petition in support of a wider campaign to challenge racism in North Staffordshire. The launch of the VAR website in 2007 further publicised the activities of the campaign to the clubs growing internet community of local and more geographically dispersed fans and has provided a useful conduit for users to explore the work of other football based anti-racism initiatives in England and Europe.

The extent to which the work of VAR has contributed to a reduction in spectator racism is empirically difficult to evaluate. Anecdotally, at least, there have been no recent incidents of mass racist chanting although some low level individualised racist abuse of black players does still occur, more so at nearby away fixtures which offer opportunities for heavy drinking ‘lads away days’ and a more intense atmosphere than is the case at home games. Further, engaging with the club safety team on issues around dealing with spectator racism was often difficult and fractious. There was a general denial that spectator racism occurred and some hostility towards our evidenced assertions that when racism did occur stewards showed little confidence or were poorly motivated to deal with the offenders. Offers from VAR to provide free cultural awareness training to all stewarding staff around what constituted racist language were sharply declined. More promisingly, the relatively small cluster of BME fans attending games as part of ‘targeted’ ticketing arrangements reported positively on their match-day experiences and the ‘friendly’, ‘family club’ and ‘community feel’ of Vale home matches. However, visible BME fan audits undertaken by VAR volunteers during this period indicate that while the attendance of black and Asian fans at home games has marginally improved it remains relatively low and almost exclusively male.

Building bridges between Port Vale FC and local BME communities

The VAR campaign was keen to encourage a much greater engagement between Port Vale FC, its fans and local BME communities in ways which went beyond the predominant funding driven and relatively limited school-based football coaching and educational work of the club FIC scheme and the rhetorical claims of the club’s Directors. The aims of VAR here also chimed strongly with emergent local and national social inclusion agendas which were keen to utilise sports as a mechanism of encouraging racial integration and community cohesion. To this end, VAR devised
and co-ordinated the delivery of four annual VAR Community Shield football tournaments at a local leisure centre in the shadow of the Vale Park stadium. These events specifically targeted and successfully attracted around 100 male adult players drawn from some of the city’s poorer multi-ethnic locales and featured teams representing long-standing Black Caribbean and Pakistani heritage communities and newer Black African and Kurdish asylum and refugee communities. The tournament also featured more racially mixed teams and, importantly, teams made-up of white Vale fan groups. Tournament costs were funded by a range of partner organisations and matches were voluntarily officiated by qualified referees including the club Chairman. Post tournament refreshments and trophy presentations were held in the Directors suite at Port Vale FC and were attended by club players, the local constituency Labour MP and local media.

These often fiercely contested encounters were played in a mutually supportive and integrative community spirit and were notably successful in increasing the ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Putnam, 2000) of some asylum and refugee groups and in addressing some issues around cultural stereotyping amongst white Vale fans. The tournament also provided an ideological and physical space in which all participant communities offered a visible riposte to the attempts of the British National Party to undermine local community relations (Robinson, 2007). A little more problematically these events garnered little organisational or officiating support from the club’s FIC scheme or from the Staffordshire County FA despite repeated requests from VAR: a disappointing response from bodies which should be leading the way in extending football provision to excluded communities and which alludes to the limited capacity and cultural scope of both organisations.

As the work and profile of VAR gathered pace, the group attracted interest and encouraged membership from a range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations with a strong organisational focus on issues around local regeneration, community development and educational initiatives. As a result VAR became increasingly well positioned to help the club shift from its traditional position of relative cultural isolation towards a much more central position within these vibrant community networks. VAR itself also played a key facilitation and management role across a range of new multi-agency delivery based partnerships designed to promote social inclusion. Most notable here was partnership working with the club and the Federation of Stadium Communities (FSC) to access local regeneration funding to establish the Vale Park Community Initiative, a programme designed to use the power of sport to tackle
inequalities in health, education and employment for economically deprived local populations.

However, realising the full potential of these relationships was often undermined by the lack of any one member of club staff with operational responsibility for co-ordinating community liaison. The consistent non-attendance of club representatives at a range of relevant community partnership meetings became an increasing source of tension over time and called into question the capacity and commitment of the club to deliver on those elements of the VAR REAP which required their lead.

Encouraging best racial equality practice at Port Vale FC

From the outset the VAR REAP offered a clear framework to assist Port Vale FC to implement and embed a clear and structured strategy for racial equality and equal opportunities. In the first instance, VAR assisted the club to conduct an ethnic monitoring audit of club staff and sought to help review and rewrite the club’s existing, but limited, equal opportunities policy. Progress to complete these relatively simple tasks was slow and made apparent the disorganised operational infrastructure of the club and the lack of inter-departmental cohesion in this respect. For some senior administrators at the club the attempts of VAR to embed more equitable working practices were seen as ‘meddling’, ‘political correctness’ and ‘anti-white’ and were thought to be of little relevance to the main business of the club. Further, throughout this period the club continued to operate relatively closed ‘personal networking’ recruitment practices. Its existing and new staff are all white.

To try to address some of these individualised and more institutional processes of racial exclusion the VAR campaign embarked on a comprehensive process of delivering ‘cultural awareness and anti-racism’ training to all personnel involved in the administrative management and delivery of services at Port Vale FC and members of the clubs FIC scheme. A three hour training session, run on three occasions, attracted 37 members of staff. The sessions were facilitated by the Vice-Chair of VAR who had significant professional experience of delivering cultural diversity training across a range of public sector and more commercial settings on behalf of the REC, and were supported by me. This pedagogical approach was intended to help overcome some of the perceptual and behavioural discriminations which had thus far limited the progress and scope of VAR and to help embed racial equality
practices at the club and aimed to increase the knowledge, skills and confidence of staff to better deal with issues of cultural diversity.

The sessions were lively interactive affairs and club staff offered a range of ‘forthright’ perspectives on issues of ‘race’, racism and cultural diversity. A small number of staff drawn mainly from the corporate hospitality section of the club seemed keen to reflect on their own experiences and their potential to provide a more inclusive service to communities which had previously remained absent from their professional radar. For many other staff this sense of critical reflection was much less apparent, especially amongst the dominant core of white middle-aged and older male administrators. Populist misconceptions and limited understanding around issues of ‘race’ and racism in its varying forms were commonplace, as were the propensity for crude biological and cultural stereotyping which marked out BME, specifically Asian, communities as culturally incompatible with the activities of the club and with local (white) societal relations more broadly. While our educational efforts during the sessions were able to engender some attitudinal shift and more appropriate use of language and terminology, the longer term behavioural and policy impact was probably much more limited. We encountered even less success during the final training session where one member of the club administrative staff exhibited an odious, misinformed and unmoveable scorn of Asian and, especially, asylum and refugee communities, and proudly announced her voting intentions towards the British National Party. The ever optimistic Vice Chair of VAR later reflected ‘her views were so ugly, they made ours seem attractive’. He was probably right. But it didn’t seem so at the time.

Some concluding comments

Drawing on his own similar dual experience as an academic and anti-racist activist, Hylton (2009: 115) has recently suggested that ‘most anti-racism philosophies are useful conceptual tools, however practice tends to deviate from those neat views of how things ought to be’. In this chapter I have sought to offer a broadly descriptive and critically reflective account of the extent to which one such locally grounded intervention was able to translate its situated, democratic and informed ideological activism into meaningful and productive anti-racist practice with varying degrees of success. Work to involve and create ownership of anti-racism amongst fans was creatively delivered and often positively endorsed. That spectator racism at Port Vale matches remains a relatively rare and individualised occurrence should not be under-
estimated in a city where the British National Party has significant electoral support and where openly expressed racist sentiment is commonplace (even amongst some club employees). It is not the intention here to suggest that a ninety minute ‘race’ silence from supporters constitutes success in tackling racism, but, rather, that the work of VAR, however temporary and partial, has had some effect in challenging the racism of some fans and empowering the anti-racism of others, and has provided a solid foundation upon which the club might build in terms of actively seeking out new fans from BME communities. The club is certainly better placed to do so and should have a greater knowledge of local community networks than has been the case in the past.

It also continues to be the case, though, that much of the responsibility for building and sustaining community relations is deflected towards the club’s poorly resourced and relatively insular FIC scheme or is passed onto specific ‘short straw’ directors who have little daily contact with club operations and only limited understanding of local regeneration and social inclusion agendas. Further, in the absence of any obvious directorial management, the power of key senior administrators within the club to act as gatekeepers to the process of implementing or denying opportunities for best racial equality practice seemed especially strong and largely dictated the (slow) pace and (limited) end result of the progress of VAR in this respect. Educational efforts to address the way in which individual attitudes and behaviours had contributed to colonising and shaping racially closed operational practices within the club met with only limited success and the capacity to effect positive change seemed more likely to be premised on the abilities of key members of the VAR group to establish productive personal relationships with key ‘sympathetic’ club staff. While the establishment of these important connections afforded the opportunity for VAR to assist the club in achieving the preliminary level of the KIO RES in 2006 it is less clear the extent to which the clubs key power brokers fully understood the social, moral, or business case for engaging in this process. As a result it can be argued that the KIO RES has engendered little ongoing integrated organisational commitment towards combating racial exclusions or addressing issues of equality of opportunities at the club.

It is probably also the case that these issues are not peculiar to Port Vale FC, but, rather, are relatively commonplace at many more ‘traditional’ and less ‘modernised’ professional clubs in the lower echelons of the Football League. Whilst the limited or non-engagement with the KIO RES on the part of most smaller professional clubs is
probably underscored by some very real infrastructural capacity issues at clubs and at KIO, it is probably also the case that at many clubs of this kind there is little recognition of the relevance of - or commitment towards addressing - racial equality issues, especially (but not exclusively) at clubs situated in predominantly ‘white’ small town locales. Further, at Port Vale FC and at other similar sized clubs where vibrant and productive partnership working has enabled a positive shift towards combating racism and promoting greater racial inclusion, there seems little obvious commitment or organisational impetus from within clubs to advance beyond the preliminary level towards the intermediate level of the KIO RES or to take greater lead responsibility for practices that would support a more deeply embedded culture of equal opportunities.

Limited operational progress here also reflects the inherent shortcomings of multi-agency ‘third way’ approaches to dealing with racism in professional football at the local level. In this case, the limited power of VAR to do little more than recommend and encourage the implementation of policies and procedures and its over reliance on the patronage of its key stakeholder organisation Port Vale FC without whose consensual and in-kind participation few practical gains could be achieved. It was also the case that the practical focus and scope of VAR increasingly tended towards those areas of the VAR REAP for which the professional expertise and voluntary commitment of VAR members was most strong. While this significantly helped sustain the interest, momentum and longevity of the campaign for many community activists, it probably also lessened the potential of VAR to address its original stated aims and objectives and to disrupt the centrality of white hegemonic structures within the club and concomitant practices of racially inflected institutional closure. In football parlance, the home record of VAR (where VAR took the lead role for actions with the broader support of the club) was good, but contrasted sharply with our less impressive away record (where the club was expected to take the lead role for actions with the broader support of VAR).

This conceptual separation of VAR and Port Vale FC is intentional and is arguably reflective of how the club came to perceive the campaign as something which was run on their behalf by willing volunteers or a charitable body (akin to the club’s fan organisations and FIC scheme) rather than something for which the club might assume a more central ownership. This conceptual separation was also compounded by the tendency of some club administrators to exhibit an underlying disregard for the significant professional skills, expertise, and experience of the voluntary workforce of
VAR premised on a false dichotomous understanding of VAR members as unpaid, unskilled, club outsiders, and club staff as paid, skilled, club insiders. These misplaced perceptions on the part of club administrators ultimately limited the club’s engagement with VAR and undermined and destabilised the equanimity, cohesiveness and effectiveness of the partnership.

The experiences of VAR in this latter respect is probably not unique, and alludes to a much wider social malaise within the professional football industry in England as a whole in which many clubs remain constricted by modes of operational insularity and a largely rhetorical and markedly defensive engagement in collaborative multi-agency partnerships designed to assist them to combat racism, promote racial inclusion, and embed equitable working practices. This remains a disappointing response from professional football clubs, especially within the context of the growth and increased maturity of a nationally co-ordinated, accessible and enabling anti-racism industry in the sport, and the wider post 1997 political backdrop in which the New Labour government has actively encouraged ‘third sector’ partnership solutions as a means of addressing social problems such as racism and racial inequalities at a local and national level. In this latter respect, the strengths and limitations of the consciously consensual (rather than conflictual) ‘critical friend’ approach of VAR has been informed by - and is reflective of - the dominant political paradigm of the time and has arguably both enabled and limited the scope and impact of the campaign to this end.

This framework for local action and the processes featured within it should, of course, be open to critical evaluation in ways which offer opportunities for conceptual reflection and practical re-adjustment. As the experiences conveyed in this chapter have shown, challenging racisms and their multiple applications in professional football through local multi-agency collaboration is most certainly not, nor should we expect it to be, as simple as black and white.

References


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