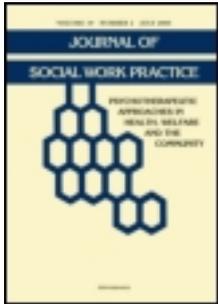


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# Helen Spandler, Alastair Roy and Mick Mckeown

## USING FOOTBALL METAPHOR TO ENGAGE MEN IN THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT

*This paper is an account of a small scale exploratory study about the use and value of football metaphor as a device for facilitating therapeutic work. It is based on an evaluation which used a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In this paper, we selectively draw on the qualitative data to provide examples to inform our discussion. We illustrate various ways in which football metaphor can support therapeutic change: by aiding initial engagement, facilitating mutual support, enabling self-understanding and motivating change. We relate our analysis to the literature about the therapeutic value of metaphor and highlight the salience of using football metaphor in a group-based setting for men who are often seen as 'hard to engage' in therapeutic support. With some caveats, we argue that football metaphor offers a potentially rich and flexible therapeutic resource.*

**Keywords** metaphor; football; therapy; men; masculinities; language

### Introduction

The cultural centrality of football in many societies means that it carries a heavy symbolic significance in the lives of many people (Giulianotti, 1999; Goldblatt, 2007). Its importance as a means of communication was well illustrated by the huge popularity of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, in which he used his love of Football (and Arsenal Football Club in particular) as a prism through which to reflect on his life and relationships (Hornby, 1992). In addition, the growth of various 'talk sport' shows readily demonstrates the way that many men express their emotions through football talk. Bearing this in mind, some people have suggested that football metaphor might be a useful tool for therapeutic engagement, especially those seen as 'hard to reach', such as men who often have a cultural and emotional connection to the game (Pringle & Sayers, 2004; Steckley, 2005; Jones, 2009; Pringle, 2009). As language is often seen as crucial to therapeutic engagement, and in a social world steeped in metaphor, it is perhaps surprising that the use of metaphor is under-theorised and utilised in health and social care settings. This paper draws on qualitative data from a small scale study of a

football and mental health programme to provide examples illustrating the therapeutic potential of football metaphor.

### The therapeutic use of metaphor

Metaphors are basically a means to understand one kind of thing by describing it in terms of another. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that metaphors are a fundamental feature of human thought and communication. For example, they suggest that our ordinary conceptual system is 'fundamentally metaphorical in nature' and metaphors help 'structure how we perceive, how we think and what we do' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3–4). In other words, metaphors help us to describe to others how we think and feel about ourselves and our social world. Perhaps because of this, metaphors have been used throughout human history as a way to communicate meaning and understanding. If metaphors are so central to human experience, then it seems reasonable to assume they can be utilised to help us make sense of our lives. For example, the therapeutic use of metaphor could help us to recognise and challenge the salience of previously unconscious metaphors and how we 'live by them' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 233).

In a research context, metaphorical consideration of treatment efficacy which likens psychotherapy to drug treatment with identification of 'active ingredients' has been decried as overly simplifying the psychosocial processes at stake (Stiles & Shapiro, 1989). Conversely, the deployment of meaningful metaphor in the practice of therapeutic support has a long and rich history, even though its usage is underdeveloped. What is especially attractive about the therapeutic use of metaphor is that it is not dependent on any particular therapeutic approach and can be used across therapeutic disciplines to aid understanding, provide a shared language and facilitate change (Witztum *et al.*, 1988). Proponents of the use of metaphor believe that exploring and processing the meaning of metaphors can transform the metaphor itself and the feelings that are attached to it, and as a result, can enable personal change (Allen, 2010).

Indeed clinicians of diverse orientations have discussed the use of metaphor in psychotherapy (see, for example, Kopp, 1995; Witztum *et al.*, 1988; Stott *et al.*, 2010). The use of metaphor fits well within 'narrative therapy' (White & Epston, 1990) in which clients are supported to free themselves from being 'stuck', in (often inflexible and unhelpful) stories of their own lives. In psychoanalytic therapy, metaphors are often used to bridge conscious and unconscious perceptions, in which the person's hidden (or inexpressible) feelings are seen as potentially revealed through symbols and metaphors (Sharpe, 1940; Sledge, 1977). In cognitive behavioural therapy, the use of metaphor can be traced back to the early days of cognitive therapy (Beck *et al.*, 1979). Here metaphors are seen as ways of building 'cognitive bridges' which increases 'cognitive flexibility' and enables people to see their lives in new and more helpful ways (Stott *et al.*, 2010, p. 33). In person-centred therapies, metaphor can serve as an interpersonal bridge between the client and the therapist (or worker), to effectively meet the person where s/he is at, so the client feels understood and accepted (Allen, 2010).

These multiple, cross-disciplinary and relational functions of metaphor are especially important, given that 'common factors', such as the therapeutic alliance,

are seen as more important to therapeutic efficacy than the specific ‘model’ of therapy used (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Tilsen & Nyland, 2008). Moreover, it seems likely that metaphor has therapeutic potential, beyond psychotherapy, and could be used in a variety of health and welfare settings, such as the mental health programme we discuss here.

Despite this, there is actually little research which specifically explores the efficacy of metaphor, either in psychotherapy, or in other health and social care settings. Therefore, to help address this gap, we draw upon qualitative data from an evaluative study of a football and mental health programme to explore the utility and meaningfulness of metaphor in supporting men’s therapeutic engagement. This exploration illustrates various ways in which football metaphor can facilitate psycho-social change. Our analysis contributes to the existing literature on the use of metaphor in therapeutic work in two main ways. First, we detail how *football* can be a particular useful and culturally relevant source of metaphor to engage men who are often seen as ‘hard to engage’ in therapeutic work. Second, we explain how the use of metaphor can be beneficial in *non-clinical* and *group* settings (rather than being only confined to one-to-one psychotherapy).

### The It’s a Goal! programme

In the rest of this article, we explore the therapeutic potential of metaphor by focusing on one particular initiative that specifically utilises football metaphor as a therapeutic tool. *It’s a Goal!* (IAG) is a programme primarily (but not exclusively) for men, with mental health needs, who are seen as ‘hard to reach’ and engage. More information about the history of the programme and its approach can be found elsewhere (Pringle & Sayers, 2004; Pringle & Sayers, 2006; Smith & Pringle, 2010; Spandler *et al.*, 2013b). Basically, it is a therapeutic group work programme, framed around football terminology to reduce perceptions of stigma, support engagement and promote therapeutic benefits. The programme is loosely based on cognitive behavioural type principles and is delivered by ‘lay’ therapists and mental health workers, not trained psychotherapists.

In 2010–2011 we evaluated an 18-month pilot of the programme in the north-west of England which was funded as part of the improving access to psychological therapies initiative. This region is characterised by a high popularity of football, especially as it is home to the largest concentration of big premier league clubs in the country (for example, Liverpool, Everton, Manchester United and Manchester City) as well as numerous other long standing football clubs. Our evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data including a ‘before and after’ well-being measure, and seven focus groups were conducted. We facilitated six focus groups with people who had completed the programme (40 participants in total) and one with the group facilitators (6 in total). Each focus group was facilitated by two members of the research team (two of whom were men and one woman). The majority of people who accessed the programme were white working class men, who were often unemployed and suffering from various psycho-social difficulties such as depression and anxiety, anger, low confidence and self-esteem, and problems with drug and alcohol use.

Our evaluation suggested that the programme resulted in a range of positive mental health benefits for those who completed the programme (Spandler *et al.*, 2012, 2013b) and this supported the findings of other evaluations (Pringle & Sayers, 2004, 2006; Smith & Pringle, 2010). This article draws on data from the focus group interviews to specifically illustrate and explore in more detail the therapeutic usefulness of football metaphor. Whilst some women did access and benefit from the programme, and two women attended the focus groups, the examples we use are all from men who more clearly expressed its value to them. In a later section, we relate our analysis to the broader literature about using metaphor in therapy, and the specific gendered potential of using football metaphor.

The following sections outline, in turn, how football metaphor was used to:

- aid initial engagement,
- facilitate mutual support,
- enable self-understanding and
- motivate change.

#### *Football metaphor as aiding initial engagement*

There were various ways in which the use of metaphor helped to aid initial engagement in the programme. First, engagement was enabled through the terminology used to introduce the programme itself. For example, the programme refers to ‘goals’ rather than ‘problems’, ‘players’ rather than ‘service users’, ‘coaches’ rather than ‘mental health workers’, and is made up of ‘matches’ rather than ‘sessions’. In this context, it is interesting to note that the term ‘coach’ has been described as a useful metaphor to characterise the role of a therapist (Stott *et al.*, 2010). This re-framing of mental health phraseology was especially useful in combating the stigma experienced by many in using mental health services. As this player put it:

It just makes it easier ‘I’ve got an appointment’ ‘oh where at?’ & you’re not saying ‘the hospital, the clinic, the doctors, the job centre’ but ‘it’s at the football club’, ‘oh, what’s that?’, ‘Oh it’s a bunch of lads getting together to talk about football and life an’ that’. (Player)

Second, as indicated by this quote, engagement was also facilitated via the use of football stadia rather than clinical environments (the ‘matches’ took place in a room inside the football stadium). This alternative setting was not only appreciated as being a non-stigmatising environment, but it was also associated with positive symbolism. One player described it as *inspirational, being inside a football ground, it was for me, seeing the pitch, feeling part of the club*. It is well known that the therapeutic environment can signify certain meanings to clients, and it seems that the football framing signified certain qualities and relationships which contrasted positively with more overtly clinical settings in which players often said they felt ill at ease, inadequate, stigmatised or simply out of place. Some of the men explicitly talked about being put off accessing mental health settings because they were experienced as professionalised or ‘feminised’ spaces in which they felt out of place and uncomfortable (see also Philipson, 1993;

Courtenay, 2000; Garde, 2003). In contrast, players seemed to experience the football setting as more familiar and safe.

Similarly, the language of football was experienced by many of the players as a less threatening, more familiar and shared. This language seemed to provide a safer and more acceptable way of engaging with mental health issues than the more clinical or medicalised language typically used in therapy and interactions with mental health professionals. This function is illustrated in the quotes below, from a coach and player:

The football was a carrot to induce them to come along in the first place, 'we've got this in common' kind of thing . . . they come along and talk football and I try and make it a relaxed environment, but then we can ease into talking about their issues. (Coach)

Football makes it interesting and easier to understand and relate to it, to associate with it . . . it'd be hard to find something else like that . . . it drew you in. (Player)

This was true even for men, and some women, who did not profess a deep affinity with football, such as the following player:

I think the main thing is that football is just a really good common denominator. Even if you don't support a team fanatically you can at least know what people are talking about. It's a simple thing that's a great ice-breaker. (Player)

Finally, people often found that initial engagement had been helped by the specific and judicious use of football 'banter' and humour. This was often used by coaches and players to 'break the ice' and enabled players to get to know each other and feel comfortable using the group.

Humour, banter. It helps relax you. As well as being serious, it relaxes the group, a couple of jokes thrown in. It helps others get involved. (Coach)

For example, at the beginning of sessions, fans of different teams would make their allegiances apparent and this often involved humorous engagement with the previous week's football results. For example, two of the coaches talked about the 'stick' they got because of the team they supported and how they often used this as an opening gambit to ease tension and enable players to relax and feel comfortable. In fact, as researchers, we found that football banter worked well as a conversational icebreaker, before and during the focus groups.

In particular, players felt that the football elements 'lightened up' what were often quite heavy-going conversations and made the programme sufficiently fun and engaging. This, in turn, helped players stay engaged with the programme:

A lot of it was heavy going and without the football making it a bit lighter it would be a bit too much. The football makes it more fun. (Player)

The metaphoric aspect of banter meant that the content of material discussed was once removed and therefore appeared to lessen the risk of people taking it 'too personally' or

being offended or upset. Humour also appeared to help players disclose difficult emotional material, for example by 'turning the heat down' and 'breaking the atmosphere' so they were not left feeling alone or overwhelmed with painful experiences and feelings. This dynamic was reflected on during the focus group with coaches:

One of the best things I noticed is when someone is bearing some personal deep stuff about themselves, and then they're pretty much coming to the end of what they want to say, actually using some kind of banter and humour at the end, appropriately clearly, cos it's a very delicate line to cross, can lift people a bit and have a bit of a laugh, and you're moving on without leaving everyone feeling down.  
(Coach)

Humour is often a tricky issue in therapeutic engagement. On the one hand, clinicians often caution against 'colluding' with humour as it can be considered a 'defence' against painful emotions. However, at the same time, it is recognised that judicious use of humour can facilitate therapeutic conversations and metaphor is an ideal mechanism for introducing humour into therapy in safe and engaging ways (Stott, 2010, p. 45).

Therefore, the structure and framing of the programme around football enabled engagement by capturing people's initial attention and providing an initial 'hook' or 'way in' to the more explicitly therapeutic aspects of the programme. The next section looks at how football framing also facilitated therapeutic alliances and social connectedness.

#### *Football metaphor as facilitating mutual support*

The programme is based on therapeutic group work and football is, after all, about teamwork. This was not lost on the players and coaches who consciously used this similarity for therapeutic purposes. Indeed players often remarked on their perception of their group being like a 'team' in which players encouraged, supported and looked out for each other. For example, emotional connections were often developed between players during the programme and they were keen to support each other to reach their 'goals':

the encouragement from others to achieve your goals, something to aim for, scoring the most goals or whatever, not wanting to let your teammates down.  
(Player)

For example, players recognised the importance of other people for their own personal learning. On occasions, this was made explicit within the focus groups when one player would recall something meaningful about one of their fellow players which had occurred in the group sessions. This was a means by which men reminded each other what they had achieved so far or reaffirmed their initial 'goals' or aims. In this way, the team often held the memory of other player's experiences, when they were unable to. This process was helped by the vividness of the football examples used which helped people to recall specific experiences during the programme.

Football was also used to reflect on a player's metaphorical 'position' in the team and this, in turn, helped players understand themselves through their interrelationships with others in the group:

It's interesting thinking about how football relates to different things ... For example, the way you play as a team and the need to anticipate each other and the way different positions on the field might relate to different personality types. (Player)

Players seemed to develop a sense of agency through an appreciation of the personal gains changes they had made in their own life and a sense of vicarious agency achieved through contributing to one another's change. For example, one group had spontaneously nick-named one of the players as their 'team captain'. This was, in part, about his seniority (in age), but it also reflected their recognition and appreciation of his considerable commitment to, and progress towards, meeting his life goals, from a very low starting point (prior to the programme he described being extremely isolated and depressed). There was a tangible sense in which the group appreciated the confidence boost he derived from being called 'the captain'. Sometimes the connections developed during the programme continued after the programme had finished and people continued to take an interest in each other's lives and to offer support.

The connections and relationships that developed within the groups often helped people to make new insights and understand themselves and others more. The next section explores how football metaphor contributed to self-understanding.

#### *Football metaphor as enabling self-understanding*

The use of football-related scenarios facilitated self-understanding by helping players to identify what kind of person ('player') they are, how they currently cope with situations and the limitations of their current coping mechanisms. For example, the first session would often start with players thinking metaphorically about what 'position' they think they play on a football team (a 'goalkeeper', for example, may feel under attack and isolated). Later sessions might draw attention to the posture and stance of particular football players to highlight the importance of 'keeping their heads up' when a team might be losing, or a player makes a mistake in a game. This could help players think about their own reactions to set-backs in life.

The use of football metaphor allowed players to 'step outside' their immediate preoccupations and to think about other people's lives that they are familiar with and can relate to (for example, either an abstract 'goalkeeper' or an actual, well-known football player). Contemporaneous events in the football world also became referents within the group, affording the opportunity to bridge the metaphoric to the real. For example, players specifically related their lives to the suicide of the Wales national team manager, which happened during the programme.

What seems important here is that the football examples are similar, but also sufficiently different enough, so people can relate to them, *indirectly* from a distance at first. For many of the players, this was a more acceptable, safer and less threatening way-in to talking about personal difficulties, and as a result it helped facilitate personal disclosure. The following quote illustrates this well:

I liked the way football was used as a way into discussing people's problems ... It's not like some places you go, where they sit you down and ask you 'so what's

your problem?' . . . It is less direct way-in that people can relate to it. This helps you open up more. (Player)

There were many examples in the programme in which metaphor offered a safer way to access emotional material. The coaches were conscious of the emotional attachment many men have to football and were able to utilise this in-group discussions to enable men to talk about more difficult emotions and especially their vulnerabilities:

I usually draw the metaphor that anyone watching a football match would see, and you can see this many, many times, is that it's one place that men display their emotions. The classic example of this is at the end of the season when the BBC TV goes round on a minute-by-minute basis, ground to ground to see who's going up or going down, or whatever . . . When they realise that, it helps them to relax and feel more comfortable to release their emotions, because they associate it, either with being in the ground, where they've cried or laughed themselves, or watching others, and therefore it comes more naturally or easy to them, than they would otherwise, outside the ground. (Coach)

This process of relating particular football situations to themselves was often facilitated via a discussion about the qualities required of different players in a team (e.g. goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders and strikers). The players were able to relate this to their own lives and their own personal characteristics to 'positions' on the football field. Players described this in the following way:

It certainly helps when you look at the different players and the different positions and how they all fit into a different slot and it's the way it links the football into your mind set then you relate those characteristics to your own life. (Player)

The attributes of particular players, the player that helps the defence out, strikers having confidence, midfielders needing to hold things together and all that, you see the attributes that they need and you see what you might be struggling with . . . it provided a good way of looking at my own issues. (Player)

Coaches often drew attention to the necessity of *all* the different players in a football team in order to 'score' (or to achieve one's goals in life). In other words, not only did this metaphor help players realise that sometimes they needed other people for support, it also helped them to recognise the diversity of qualities they needed to develop in order to become a 'well-rounded player' on a 'successful team'. This was described by one of the coaches in the following way:

the differentiation between what a defence does, what the midfield does, and what an attacker does and how you can create that in someone's head. So in the defence you're dealing with your demons that are coming at you, or however you want to see that, or whatever language you want to put on that, it doesn't matter, you've got to resolve that before you can move up the pitch and be creative and score goals. (Coach).

In particular, the idea of the ‘defence’ became an especially relevant metaphor during the programme. The players could easily understand and appreciate the necessity of football teams having a good solid ‘defence’:

It’s like when any new manager comes in, he has to start at the back . . . Basically, teams that do well, teams that win stuff, have to have a good defence and everyone understands that. That, and the teamwork aspect, everyone understands that. (Ex-player/Coach)

This metaphor was especially useful and flexible as players could adapt it to make sense of their own lives. Some players gave examples of how they used this metaphor to understand their own ‘defence’ or coping strategies. One player described it like this:

Learning about your defence, how you would defend against certain problems that come in your life and how you would attack these problems and deal with them. It works, you can associate with it. (Player)

Players referred to other associations they had made to this idea. For example, ‘letting in goals’ became synonymous with ‘not dealing with problems very well’ or feeling ‘under attack’. Others saw their ‘defence’ as underlying difficulties that they had not addressed. Indeed most of the examples given were about the ‘defensive’ aspects of the game. This was probably partly because, as the men pointed out, it was hard to focus on the ‘striking’ aspects of the game (‘scoring goals’) until they had addressed their ‘defence’. Also the programme was relatively short (11 weeks) and the players often had long-term difficulties which were not always easy to change in such a short time. One of the coaches gave the following example:

Someone else’s defence was the massive issues he had with his dad. So I spent the entire 11 weeks with him on sorting his defence out, the holes in his defence so to speak, it was leaking so he couldn’t do anything else, it was poisoning him. Until he got that sorted out, he couldn’t be creative or move forward. (Coach)

The process of insight and change was often facilitated by Coaches sharing (or ‘modelling’) the ways they had been able to apply these metaphors to their own lives:

The goalkeeper is also important to me, that’s about me taking my medication cos if I’m not sorted on my medication then I can’t concentrate on my defence . . . And if you don’t sort your defence out you keep leaking goals, your problems, you’re just fire fighting all the time, you can’t move on, score goals. (Ex-player turned coach)

### **Football metaphor as *motivating change***

Finally, not only did football metaphor aid self-understanding, it also helped players to reframe their lives and situations and illustrate alternative, and potentially more helpful, ways of reacting to difficulties. This, in turn, helped player’s feel more

motivated to make changes in their lives. In one notable example, a player talked about how the football examples helped him to acknowledge and understand that sometimes he needed to ask for help from others:

the way you play as a team, sort of anticipating and, like we were saying before, the goalie having no fear . . . but they've got others to rely on to help. So you realise that like in a football game, as a goalie, you've got the defence that can help you. In life they are different agencies and different people that can help you and can and help us and we've got to be willing to go down that route. (Player)

If situations were viewed through the (indirect) light of football-related stories and scenarios that players could relate to, it appeared to open up different choices that players felt more able to consider (than if the discussion had been more directly related to themselves). A good example of this was the use of sporting references (such as 'fair play') to address difficult group dynamics such as anger, aggression and prejudicial attitudes. One coach recalled using a football metaphor to open up discussion about and challenge potentially offensive comments expressed by one of the members in the group:

I said to the guy, 'well that might be your perspective, but that's all it is' and that opened up a whole discussion about different people can have different perspectives and how we might all be standing watching the same game of football and yet we all have a completely different perspective about what's happening on the pitch! And no one's opinion is necessarily more valued than anyone else, or necessarily true. (Coach)

Often it appeared that the same metaphors were used and developed during the course of each group, according to the needs of the players in that group. These metaphors could then be referred back to as an aide memoire. This helped players remember key insights and appeared to both capture and sustain the changes players experienced in themselves and witnessed others. For example, some groups celebrated who was the 'top goal scorer' in terms of achieving the most success in reaching their personal goals. This whole process seemed important in helping players to start to become more positive and optimistic about making changing in their lives. Similarly, others have shown how football can be used as a 'means of personal evaluation and therapeutic growth, using allegorically the league tables and current club form' to help motivate and sustain change (Jones, 2009, p. 491). We have already referred to the way that the posture and stance of football players was often used in the programme and a number of players noted that, as one person pointed out: 'You leave here with your head held high'.

### **Discussion: the therapeutic use of football metaphor**

This section relates our analysis to the available literature on the therapeutic use of metaphor. Given that the programme was loosely based on cognitive behavioural principles, we explicitly utilise some of this literature (e.g. Stott *et al.*, 2010) as well as

literature from other therapeutic disciplines to understand how football metaphor ‘works’ therapeutically. We specifically explore how football metaphor appeared to be particularly applicable to men who find it difficult to engage in therapeutic support; and how the utility of football metaphor was enhanced in a group context.

In the literature, the essence of the therapeutic use of metaphor is that people’s presenting difficulties can be compared to something different, but which the person finds easier to understand and relate to (Stott *et al.*, 2010). Metaphors must provide sufficient *similarity* (to the person’s perception of their difficulties) to facilitate resonance and identification, but they also need to be sufficiently *different* in order to provide a safe means of engagement. The *distance* provided by a metaphor enables an initial empathic response to problems in a different situation and, over time, the issues evoked by the metaphor can be related to the person’s own situation. Stott *et al.* (2010) suggest that the more vivid and memorable the metaphor, the more the person is able to recall the discussion which surrounded the application of the metaphor to their situation and the new meanings acquired. In other words, metaphors are ‘more valuable and effective if its “source” material is well-understood and can be assimilated by the listener’ (Stott *et al.*, 2010, p. 42).

Because of its cultural presence, football is clearly ‘well understood’ and related metaphors can provide vivid and memorable images that players can understand, relate to and remember.

Whilst there is no intrinsic reason why women could not benefit from football metaphor, especially given women’s increasing interest and involvement in the game, there are a number of reasons why the use of football metaphor may be especially appropriate for engaging men. Given that many men often struggle to access therapeutic support, it may be that football metaphor offers an alternative means of engaging men who find it difficult to talk about emotions and ‘open up’ about personal difficulties (White & Witty, 2009; Tedstone Doherty & Kartalova-O’Doherty, 2010; Ridge *et al.*, 2011). In our culture, men often develop a cultural *and* emotional connection to the game (Steckley, 2005; Donaghy, 2006; Duffin, 2006; Robertson, 2007; Jones, 2009) and this was evident in many (albeit not all) of the male participants on the programme.

Some commentators have suggested that it is not that men cannot ‘do emotion’, but they often do emotion *through action* (Robertson, 2007). In other words, men often express their distress *indirectly* and in a language that is not immediately recognised by others. As a result, they often do not get the support they need. It has been argued that this may account for the high suicide rate amongst men and the fact that many men who commit suicide have had no previous contact with services (McQueen & Henwood, 2002; Scourfield, 2005). In this context, metaphor may be especially useful with people who find it easier and more comfortable to express their feelings *indirectly* (Kok *et al.*, 2011) and football may be a space in which men are able to *do emotion* in a safe way (Spandler & McKeown, 2012).

It has often been pointed out that services need to find ways of engaging men in emotional or therapeutic support without them feeling like they are ‘losing their masculinity’ (Gough, 2006). In our observations, football metaphor, talk and banter opened up avenues in which ‘doing emotion’ became a more acceptable way of being stronger, more capable and independent, hence disassociating these activities from more passive, ‘soppy’ or ‘feminine’ associations (see also Jones, 2009). Therefore, whilst men often use football to *avoid* intimacy, in this programme the careful and

therapeutic use of football metaphor enabled some of the men to develop intimacy and interdependence *on their own terms*. In this respect, it seems to be a promising way of enabling intimacy and connectedness amongst men, and this may have a knock-on effect on their wider relationships.

One of the useful things about metaphor is that people can take different meanings from the same metaphor and relate to them, in their own way, according to their personal biography and circumstances. Put another way, individuals can 'project' their own feelings and thoughts into the story or scenario and extract their own sense of meaning. By encouraging people to de-focus on their personal difficulties and focus instead in the metaphoric domain, it can help to deactivate defences without heightening a person's anxiety. In psychodynamics terms, metaphors can become a 'container' for powerful emotions to be processed in a safer ways. Similarly, we could say metaphor operated as a 'transitional object' (Winnicott, 1971) or an 'intermediary language' to enable difficult experiences to be owned, made sense of and communicated.

This particular programme involved players considering the adoption of roles and positions in the team and relate this to their wider lives. Theory from social and developmental psychology suggests that the development of a stable identity and social competence depends on the ability to take on roles, to imagine how we are being perceived by others and to react appropriately (Hardy & Conway, 1988). Role theory suggests that learning how to perform and adapt to different roles is an important life skill and it is also possible that modern masculinity involves the ability to perform a more complex range of roles than was required in earlier times. In this programme, people took on and negotiated roles in an imagined team and used these imagined roles to test perceptions, beliefs and actions about their place in the real world (Courtenay, 2000). The beauty of metaphor is that individual *and* collective associations can be made and our analysis suggests that football metaphors can provide a safer language in which difficult experiences can be approached safely and (to use football language) 'kicked about' and 'played with' before relating them to real-life situations.

In particular, the use of football metaphor seemed to be especially suitable in a group context. By its very nature, the group basis of the programme mirrored the football context and therefore provided constant opportunities for 'team'-based football discussions and associations. In addition, it has been argued that metaphors can be 'thrown onto the table' and 'opened up' for discussion to enable us to view difficulties from *different perspectives* (Stott 2010, p. 43). The presence of other players helps to provide these different perspectives. The flexibility of meanings available in metaphor shows how one person's situation can be viewed differently both by themselves (for example, at different moments in time) and by others (who potentially provide more helpful ways of viewing things). This, in turn, opens up the possibility of people finding new ways of understanding and responding to difficulties and therefore, introduced new coping mechanisms. The group setting also helped prevent discussions feeling individually intrusive or threatening because the focus could move from one person to another, without being on one person for too long. Therefore, the therapeutic use metaphor within a team setting seemed to facilitate 'insight' but also enabled the application and integration of new perspectives – gained from the interchange in the metaphoric field – into these men's lives (Witztum *et al.*, 1988; Stott, 2010).

We end this discussion by making a few comments about how this approach might be utilised in practice. Participants in this particular programme appreciated its non-

clinical ethos especially the groups being facilitated by people who they felt they could relate to and were prepared to share some of their own personal struggles. What seemed important was that the facilitators could appreciate, understand and relate to using football as a means to understand personal difficulties. Notwithstanding the complexities involved in the negotiation of professional identities, flexible boundaries and self-disclosure, it seems clear that this particular programme can, and perhaps even should, be delivered by people who do not position themselves as mental health professionals. Health and social care professionals could certainly play an important role in supporting the development of, funding for and referrals into programmes like this.

Moreover, whilst this paper has used examples from a project which frames a whole therapeutic programme around football metaphor, it also raises the question of whether football metaphor could be incorporated into health and social care practice in other ways. Whilst it seems important to avoid the use of football metaphor becoming professionalised or medicalised, there is still scope for its wider application. The use of metaphor may be helpful in various health and social care settings, including public health. Social workers and other health and social care professionals could consider incorporating metaphor into conversations with clients and their families, both in one-to-one and in group work sessions, and even in supervision and training (Guiffrida *et al.*, 2007). This could be used to enhance communication and understanding, especially with people who find it difficult to express their concerns and needs directly. In turn, this may be one means to improve the all-important client–worker relationship (Trevithick, 2003). In understanding the value of any ‘intervention’, feedback from clients is always essential. Therefore, before we conclude, we note a few caveats to our endorsement of the positive benefits of football metaphor.

### Some caveats

First, it is important to note that our focus groups were made up of players who completed the programme and were therefore likely to find the programme beneficial. It is possible that other players found the football framing less acceptable or appropriate. Second, and related to this, it is important to bear in mind that whilst football talk might make some people feel relaxed and safe, it may make others feel anxious and unsafe. Football talk can be exclusive as well as inclusive, especially in relation to women and other social groups who have historically been excluded from the game and because of the competitive nature of football talk (Robertson, 2003; Spandler & McKeown, 2012; Spandler *et al.*, 2013a). This is one of the reasons why football metaphors (or indeed any metaphors) are not *inherently* helpful. Indeed there are many unpleasant aspects to sport, and football in particular. For example, it can induce a sense of valuing certain qualities such as competition and aggression which might not be very helpful to one’s mental health ‘off the field’ (Stott *et al.*, 2010).

Some have even argued that football is often expressed in militaristic terms, by which matches are seen as a ‘battle’ and there are clear winners and losers and shame in defeat (Bergh, 2011). Indeed the increasing pressures involved in professional sport may have some bearing on the social and emotional problems within the game, for example depression, alcoholism and suicide amongst players (Carlisle, 2013). Therefore, any simplistic equation of football as necessarily therapeutic is clearly problematic. Ultimately,

the value of any metaphor depends on the flexibility, skilfulness and sensitivities of the practitioners who introduce and use it.

We witnessed an example of the unhelpful use of football during our study when a marketing department decided to use the (football-related) slogan 'Get off the bench!' to promote the programme. This was interpreted by many of the coaches and players as tapping into the negative aspect of the game which involves shouting and humiliating players, rather than supporting them. This is why it is important not to use football metaphors as endorsing a particular way of being and relating to others, but rather to appreciate and examine the *differences*, as well as the similarities, between people's experience and the metaphor. Indeed it may be precisely the realisation that a particular football example is *not* helpful that can help create insight and change. For example, many players reflected on examples from the football field to appreciate why some ways of relating are unhelpful or counterproductive (e.g. abusing other players, arguing with the referee and so on).

In addition, [Miloni \(2007\)](#) has highlighted some dis-empowering ways that metaphor can be used in psychotherapy. Examples are given where client generated metaphors were hijacked and misused by therapists to fix meaning or impose their interpretations on clients. As we have indicated, it is possible that the group-based nature of the IAG programme prevented meanings being imposed because power became more dispersed and metaphors could be played with by the group members, and their meaning and ownership could be shared. Ultimately, any benefit derived from the use of metaphor depends on *how* they are used. It seems clear that metaphors need to be used sensitively, carefully and the 'meaning' of metaphor needs to be co-constructed within trusting therapeutic relationships.

## Conclusion

The cultural and emotional salience of football, especially to many men, means that football metaphor provides a rich and potentially effective therapeutic resource. Whilst there may be nothing inherently therapeutic about football *or* metaphor, we have outlined how it can aid therapeutic engagement, develop mutual support, self-understanding and motivation, all of which are important to facilitate psycho-social change. Whilst the use of metaphor in practice has tended to be confined to individual psychotherapy, we suggest that it could be a useful resource in other health and social care settings, and certainly beyond the narrow confines of individual psychotherapy, psychology and counselling. In particular, football metaphor appears to be especially well suited to group contexts. Finally, the therapeutic use of metaphor has the potential to suit the demands from mental health service users to work with and alongside their own narratives and understandings ([Spandler \*et al.\*, 2013b](#)).

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