

# Is there a glass ceiling or can racial and ethnic barriers be overcome?

A study on leadership positions in professional Belgian football among African coaches

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### Introduction

Because of a rich history of international migration, Belgium epitomises a state whose current status has been formed by ethnic cross-pollination, and is shaped by the everyday interactions between native Flemish and Walloon people and both persons with a distinct nationality and individuals of foreign origin(s). Its cultural diversity is highlighted by the fact that 1,327,776 (11.7%) of the 11,376,070 total population are foreign nationals, i.e. having a non-Belgian passport. Additionally, 991,031 (8.8%) are of foreign nationality at birth, but have meanwhile acquired the Belgian nationality (Federal Migration Centre, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. It is difficult to fully grasp the context and situation of migration from a national level, because the collection and analysis of data take place both at a federal and at a regional level in Belgium<sup>2</sup>. Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking region, is the most populous region with 6,552,967 inhabitants, 548,910 of which are foreign nationals<sup>3</sup> (Flemish Government/Statistics Department, 2017). Furthermore, the southern French-speaking region known as Wallonia is a society consisting of 3,624,377 inhabitants, with roughly 358,190 of Walloon residents being foreign nationals (Walloon Institute of Evaluation, Forecasting & Statistics, 2018). Lastly, the Brussels-Capital Region is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Illustrating this is the fact that 71.4% of the estimated 1.2 million inhabitants of the Brussels-Capital Region are of foreign origin, which in this context implies that either the current or first nationality of the person is non-Belgian or the first nationality of the father or mother is not Belgian (BRUZZ, 2018).

Despite the advancements that have been made concerning the integration of foreign nationals and those of foreign origin into Belgian society, forms of racial and ethnic oppression both in everyday life and within the political arena are impeding this social development. The latter being particularly evident through the discourse and policies of the right-wing populist party

Vlaams Belang (Billiet & De Witte, 2008). More critically for this study, discriminatory undertones in the labour market have and continue to be a persistent issue in Belgian society (European Network Against Racism, 2018; Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training, 2017). For example, in 2017, the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities (UNIA) opened a total of 2,017 cases of situations where people felt they were subjects of discrimination in the workplace, which is a 6% increase from the previous year. Moreover, of those particular cases, 27% concerned discrimination based on one's race and ethnicity, followed by disability (20.7%) and age (15.7%) (Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2018).

One particular domain and working industry, the Belgian Pro League (Division 1A/1B; consisting of sixteen and eight football clubs, respectively), has not been immune to acts of racism. For example, micro-level football actors (i.e. players, coaches and supporters) are one group of stakeholders that have established and sustained racial and ethnic divisions in Belgian football. These (groups of) individuals have manifested racial and ethnic discriminatory attitudes and behaviours overtly, whether impulsively or consciously, particularly against those of African origins, which seem to be deployed for the purpose of triumphing over the athlete and/or as a tool to distract and alter the performance of the footballer (Beloy & Van Laeken, 2016; Heim et al., 2018; Kassimeris, 2009; Scheerder, 2006). Indeed, the 2018–2019 Belgian Pro League campaign was occasionally blemished and overshadowed by racist conduct. This was apparent when Paul-Jose M'Poku accused both K.S.C. Lokeren and Club Brugge K.V. supporters of discrimination in consecutive matches, and additionally when R. Charleroi S.C. defender Francis N'Ganaga was a victim of similar abuse in the forms of monkey chants. Discriminatory conduct has also transpired on the sidelines, as coaches have perpetrated and have been victimised by such intolerance. This was the case when Frederik Vanderbiest of K.V. Mechelen, who was ultimately banned for three matches and fined 1,500 euros, racially abused Royal Union Saint-Gilles assistant coach, Abder Ramdane, in a First Division B match (The Guardian, 2018).

Given that it has been confirmed and determined that discrimination is a relevant topic in the specific industry of Belgian professional football by the aforementioned scholars and media outlets, this chapter serves as a starting point to unravel the extent and prevalence of its nature, and therefore as a basis for a prospective, in-depth study. Thus, we extend our examination on the intersection of race, ethnicity and football to the otherwise under-researched subject of institutional/structural racism: '*As a structured system, racism interacts with social institutions, where the discrimination itself shapes and reshapes institutions to reinforce, justify and perpetuate a racial/ethnic hierarchy*' (Williams et al., 2019: 106). While the discrimination on this level can materialise in an overt manner, this chapter approaches institutional/structural racism by addressing the undertones of implicit racial bias. This

denotes the partialities that humans do not know they have towards people of different races and ethnicities. Such ideologies are embedded in people's subconsciousness, which is formed and developed through their everyday experiences and interactions in society (Banakou et al., 2016).

Within this context, we scrutinise if and how the Belgian Pro League is an example of how a community, organisation and sub-culture is structured in a way in which a dominant racial and/or ethnic group possesses more social, economic and cultural benefits and value compared to a socially subordinate group, or if (and how) the Belgian Pro League is an organisation that provides equal opportunities to people of all races and ethnicities. More precisely, the question is raised whether the professional Belgian football industry is a cultural agent that implicitly socialises the population to accept 'as true' the superiority of dominant racial/ethnic groups and the inferiority of non-dominant racial/ethnic groups in the form of restricting the access of elite coaching positions, i.e. head coaches and assistant coaches, to those non-white individuals and those of African origins. Or, conversely, is it an arena that mobilises racial and ethnic minority individuals to become socially and vocationally integrated in terms of equally allocating jobs, elite coaching positions, to non-white individuals and those of African origins? This chapter first situates the Social Dominance Theory (SDT) as an appropriate theoretical framework to address this matter because it offers ways of exploring the structuring of a social system along the lines of group-based hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In order to examine the questions above, this study conceptualises the notions of race and ethnicity, and then proceeds to collect and analyse the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the professional head coaches and assistant coaches juxtaposed to those backgrounds of professional footballers and Belgian societal demographics. To conclude, policy recommendations are put forward that aim to stimulate stakeholders to build on their responsibility to combat all forms of discrimination in the game and beyond where needed.

## **Theoretical framework**

In Belgium, there appears to be a distinct set of preferences on issues of inequality among social groups, or in other words the varying degrees of one's social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994). Social Dominance Theory (SDT), viewing human societies as systems, is a theory of intergroup relations that theorises how socio-structural, ideological, sociological, psychological and institutional factors work together to produce the systematic effects, whether negative or positive for particular racial and ethnic groups (Sidanius et al., 2004). Indeed, according to SDT, any society can be interpreted as group-based hierarchies, in which at least one particular (usually male-dominated) racial, ethnic and/or religious group holds a positive social value and enjoys special privileges, and at least one other group has a

negative social value (Pratto et al., 2006). Such societies are formed and preserved through the deployment of legitimising myths, or widely accepted ideologies that can be used as an instrument to help promote and maintain a certain predisposition that endorses discrimination and group inequality. Ethnic prejudice, racial bias, cultural elitism, nationalism and meritocracy are hierarchy-enhancing legitimising myths that promote the degree to which social inequalities exist. Contrarily, civil rights, social integration and anti-racism policies are hierarchy-attenuating legitimising myths that aim to make societies more balanced (Pratto et al., 1994).

In the labour market and within organisations, dominance and racism are created and sustained through the interplay between the (policies from) macro, meso and micro levels (Pratto et al., 2013). All designations of what constitutes a 'level' are arbitrarily based on population size. First, (macro-level) societal features, such as economic and employment activity, can be key indicators of the social norms and status of a particular society. For example, in Belgium, the fact that the gap between the employment rate of Belgians and non-EU citizens amounts to 27.5% is an alarming statistic that corresponds with the characteristics of a hierarchical society (Statbel, 2018). Racial and ethnic oppression can also be detected through the examination of the policies from, as well as the racial/ethnic structure of, the (meso-level) institution, organisation or industry itself. Laying claim to this in Belgium is the fact that policies for integrating first- and even second-generation immigrants into the general labour force are claimed to be insufficient or ineffective (Sustainable Governance Indicators, 2018). Also, in Belgium, research shows that job applications with foreign sounding names have 30% less chance of being invited to a job interview compared to applicants with a similar profile but with a Flemish sounding name (ENAR, 2018). Lastly, discrimination at a (micro-level) individual basis is noticeable through overt racist rhetoric and the detection of subtler attitudes and beliefs of specific individuals. Reflecting this in Belgium is the fact that, according to 22% of 307 delegates of three Belgian trade unions, regular discrimination amongst staff members in their companies was noticed (RTBF, 2016).

Concerning discrimination in football, while all three levels are of critical importance to exhaustively understand how dominant hierarchical societies are generated and preserved, the following section will focus on the meso-level dimension. At this level, racial and ethnic dominance is established and maintained in society through institutional discrimination, particularly in the allotment of basic vocational resources. For instance, public and private institutions tend to prefer members of (racial and ethnic) dominant groups, rather than members of subordinate groups when determining a job candidate (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). From and within this perspective, this study reveals the diversity levels among head and assistant coaches in professional Belgian football in comparison to those of professional football players. By determining the participation level of racial and ethnic minority individuals

in football coaching in the form of a census, we can acquire more insight into whether race and ethnicity are aspects that influence the availability and accessibility of employment for certain (racial and ethnic minority) individuals to become elite coaches. We do realise that these statistics alone can reveal only a limited picture of inclusion, albeit an important starting point for the discussion around issues that may prevent certain individuals from obtaining jobs and becoming integrated into society.

## **The presence and interconnection of race, ethnicity and football in Belgian society**

In Belgium, as in many other European countries, the game of football reigns supreme in terms of popularity along with socio-economic value compared to any other sport in the country. With its long-standing history, traced back to the 1860s, the influence of football weaves its way through the social fabric of contemporary Belgian society. The presence of this realm is embraced by many of its cohorts, including but not limited to its 440,107 licensed players who play over 340,000 matches per season on the 8,000 nation-wide football pitches, as well as the 3.8 million people who attended Belgian Pro League matches in the 2016–2017 season (Deloitte, 2018; Helsen et al., 2018; Royal Belgian Football Association, 2018). Further emphasising the impact of football, both from a grassroots and professional viewpoint, the sport acts as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue, and moreover, it facilitates the integration of foreign nationals and those with foreign origins into Belgian society (Heim et al., 2018; Kassimeris, 2009). As mentioned above, while it is a catalyst for economic, social and cultural development, racist ideologies have undermined the game's soft powers. Moving forward, the remainder of this study is dedicated to delving deeper into this subject by illustrating how race and ethnicity operate on the playing field and within the socio-cultural sphere of professional Belgian football coaching.

## **Methodology**

### **Conceptualising race and ethnicity**

Prior to presenting the racial and ethnic backgrounds of professional Belgian footballers and coaches, it is imperative that the terms race and ethnicity are conceptualised. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, according to its etymological origins, the word race denoted kinship and group affiliation. It was not until the 17–18<sup>th</sup> century, during the Age of Enlightenment, when the word race acquired alternative connotations. Throughout this period and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European biologists and philosophers who were keen to classify human beings created the process of *racial categorisation*. This refers to a taxonomy-

based system where skin colour, amongst other phenotypic features, was used as the key biological marker to stratify human beings (Richeson & Sommers, 2016). In many cases, this process has been interpreted and manipulated as an organising principle that has resulted in hierarchical societies, stereotyping and racism. Race indeed is an important category in everyday discourse (in terms of skin colour), although it is not a scientifically valid concept. Even though scientific consensus is that the social phenomenon of race does not exist as a biological category among humans (Claire & Denis, 2015), race and human variation do have value in the sense that they function as a categorising principle in everyday life and – as such – also function as a relevant starting point for the investigation into racial injustices in contemporary society. In this study, in line with previous research (Scheerder, 2006), we compartmentalise the racial backgrounds of players and coaches into two distinct categories, e.g. white and non-white.

Ethnicity like race is a concept that has been socially constructed and is constantly evolving. In addition, ethnicity is also frequently used as a categorising principle – e.g. in terms of cultural (group) affiliation. While ethnicity and race are overlapping concepts that are often used interchangeably, they are quite distinct in the sense that ethnicity signifies more of a concentration and linkage towards citizenship and family origins, but not biology like race does (Bhopal, 2004). At the same time, race and ethnicity are often used in a conflated manner in everyday discourse. Also, there appears to be a seemingly perpetual fluidity of ethnicity, more so compared to race. From this point of view, it can be stated that the way in which people ethnically identify themselves has proven to be complex in nature as people may have a connection to multiple ethnicities, at times disconnecting from one and attaching themselves to another, and constantly alternating between these identifications (Adair & Rowe, 2010). For instance, one individual may have a passport from one country, e.g. Belgium, but could also have a parent or grandparent who was born in another country, e.g. Morocco, thus that person has Belgian citizenship and origins that can be traced back to (North) Africa. Another case that could reflect this view is that an individual was born in one country, migrated to another country and was consequently naturalised in the host country. In sum, ethnicity refers to a group of people, usually within particular geographical borders, who hold a common cultural identity that is based on a shared (perceived) history and is expressed and identified through (a) communal language(s), religion(s), food/diet, music, art and sport (Ferriter, 2016). Elaborating on the categorisation of race, in this study, the ethnicity of non-white footballers and coaches is determined by both discovering one's passport (citizenship) and tracing one's family origins (ancestry/bloodline). We then classify the ethnicity of these individuals into clusters on a (sub-)continental basis with a keen focus on those with North African and sub-Saharan African<sup>4</sup> ethnicities, as these individuals are the most visible (non-European) ethnic minorities in Belgium (Myria, 2018). Like

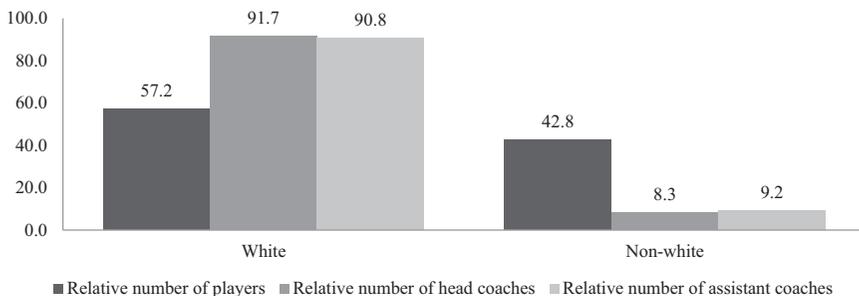
the concept of race, we treat ethnicity as Brown & Langer (2010) do in the sense that it can be utilised as a gauge to measure concepts such as diversity and social distance.

## Data collection and analysis

The data pertaining to the racial and ethnic backgrounds of players and coaches were collected through the process of content web-based desk-research of the 24 professional football clubs that comprise the Belgian Pro League (i.e. the two highest divisions of Belgian football), along with browsing the ‘squad’ and ‘staff’ section of each professional Belgian football club on [www.transfermarkt.com](http://www.transfermarkt.com). First, the backgrounds of 530 players were revealed. This population consists of players who were included in the squads’ selection during the season 2016–2017, regardless of their playing minutes. Regarding coaches, we collected data on the 24 head coaches (T1). Additionally, information of the assistant coaches (e.g. auxiliary and goalkeeper coaches) was gathered. Unlike head coaches, the number of assistant coaches varies from one to three coaches per club, accumulating to 65 assistant coaches.

## Results

First, in terms of race, Figure 3.1 illustrates the distribution of white versus non-white players, head coaches and assistant coaches in the Belgian Pro League. A clear difference is noticeable between the racial background of players compared to that of the two (head and assistant) coaching positions. More specifically, 57.2% (or 303 out of 530) of the footballers have a white racial background and 42.8% have a non-white racial background, whereas the proportion of non-white individuals for head and assistant coaches is 8.3% and 9.2%, respectively.



**Figure 3.1** Racial backgrounds of players, head coaches and assistant coaches in the Belgian Pro-League

Source: Adapted from Corthouts & Scheerder (2017)

In relation to ethnicity, Figure 3.2 illustrates a breakdown of the ethnicity of the non-white minorities from Figure 3.1 in professional Belgian football. Specifically, Figure 3.2 depicts the constitution of the relative share of all non-white players (42.8%), head coaches (8.3%) and assistant coaches (9.2%) into three identifiable visible minority categories according to their ethnicity, i.e. North African, sub-Saharan and other minorities. These statistics embedded in Figure 3.2 are based on ethnicity as a multitude linkage between one's nationality and family origins. Thus, a non-white individual that has the Belgian first nationality and a North African heritage is included within the North African minority group. From the proportions shown in Figure 3.2, it can be deduced that 24.2% of all players in the Belgian Pro League belong to sub-Saharan minorities, accounting for more than half of all non-white players. In total, only 4.3% of all players in the Belgian Pro League (2016–2017) belong to non-white North African minorities. Other non-white players of, for example, American or Asian heritage, constitute 14.3% of all football players. Another – more balanced – image is noticeable concerning the division of head and assistant coaches. In terms of the former category, we see that the North African minorities as well as the sub-Saharan African minorities represent 4.2% of the total number of head coaches. Additionally, as opposed to the distribution of non-white players, individuals with a North African ethnicity make up a larger proportion of the assistant coaches, in particular 6.2% in comparison with 3.1% of assistant coaches with a sub-Saharan African ethnicity. Both for non-white head and assistant coaches, there is no other visible minority present in the professional Belgian football league, year 2018–2019.

The culturally vibrant playing landscape of professional Belgian football is comprised of various ethnic groups. On a continental basis, those with sub-Saharan African and North African backgrounds combine to make the highest representation of ethnic minorities. However, there is an under-representation of sub-Saharan coaches when compared to players of the same origins,

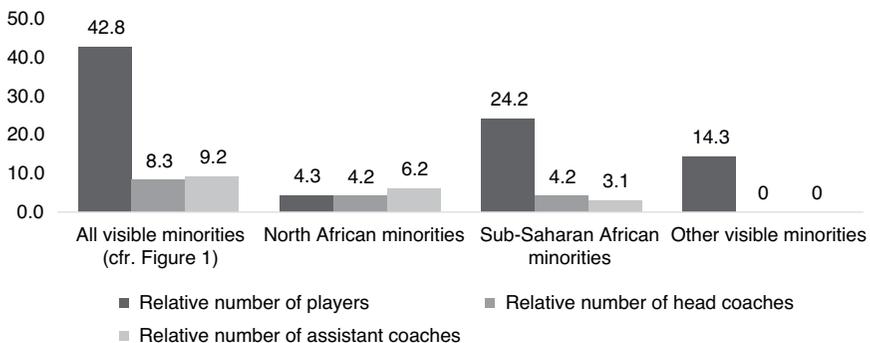


Figure 3.2 Ethnic backgrounds of non-white minority players, head coaches and assistant coaches in the Belgian Pro-League

Source: Adapted from Corthouts & Scheerder (2017)

respectively. Finally, the playing field is shaped by other visible minorities coming from the Americas (mainly South America), Asia and Oceania. These particular backgrounds are not represented within the coaching staff.

### **Discussion**

In today's Belgian football game, Belgians and Europeans constitute the overwhelming majority of the ethnic spectrum of both footballers and coaches, whereas players of, in particular, a sub-Saharan African ethnic background are the most frequently represented ethnic minority group. However, in terms of coaches, this latter demographic is barely visible. Concerning players, the representation of North African and sub-Saharan footballers appears to be a dynamic and ever-growing concept, as over the last six decades, more and more footballers of African origins have launched their football careers in Belgium (Heim et al., 2018).

First, the increases of players with ethnic ties to North Africa could be paralleled to the massive immigration wave during the 1960s when many Moroccans presumably came to Belgium on a temporary basis when the Belgian government passed bilateral immigration agreements. This agreement was primarily for the purpose of bolstering Belgium's precarious mining industry at the time. Eventually a majority settled in the country on a permanent basis, and gradually acquired Belgian citizenship. Nowadays, these naturalised individuals and even those of Moroccan ethnic backgrounds who were born on Belgian soil are still perceived by society as the children of Moroccan migrants. Often this stigma has resulted in that person feeling as a lesser citizen, and caused identity crises, or in other words, 'an illusionary decision concerning what they are with respect to their parents and society' (Odasso, 2016: 82). From a Belgian sub-Saharan African historical perspective, (Darby, 2013:15) states that '*the pace at which football has developed in Africa, both as a European venture and a locally organised pastime, was centrally linked to the nature of Belgian colonial doctrine in the Congo*' with football ironically proving to be an instrument for protest against colonial rule. Today, as a consequence of European colonisation, turmoil and unrest continues to exist throughout sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it appears that, more than ever, more sub-Saharan Africans are using professional European football as a channel to escape such humanitarian crises. While, indeed, this specific working industry has been successful in reversing ethnic stigmas, and has also provided a plethora of vocational and economic opportunities to footballers of all races and ethnicities, especially those of African origins, from a more critical standpoint, it can be interpreted as an appendage of the economic imperialism of the colonial epoch (Darby, 2013). Certainly, professional Belgian football has had a reputation for its high player turnover rate, as clubs have considered young foreign players as an investment, to be bought cheaply and sold to a top tier European league for a significant profit (Pannenburg, 2012).

Moving forward to the coaching sector, based on the data above, preliminary results suggest that professional Belgian football is, to a certain extent, a social system that is premised on the fundamentals of a hierarchy group-based society where (white) Belgians and Europeans are those with a positive social value both in playing and coaching positions, and those (non-white) individuals of African ethnic backgrounds appear to hold a negative social value in terms of coaching positions. Nevertheless, those with African backgrounds hold a positive social value when it comes to playing opportunities. Such an approach and association with both football and leadership skills may have negative consequences when players want to become a coach after their football career, as it sends a message that specific racial-ethnic groups are targeted solely for playing opportunities, while other racial-ethnic groups are privileged to occupy playing, coaching and executive positions.

This social system seems to be compromised by hierarchy-enhancing legitimising myths in the sense that group-based inequality is created and sustained by directly specifying who is entitled to rights and jobs. Indeed, (white) European men continue to dominate leadership and coaching positions which in turn preserves the status quo of the social status of the coaching sector and reinforces the hegemonic institutionalised ideologies and practices of the white dominant group over non-white people (Kilvington, 2019). Even if there is a proportionate representation of racial/ethnic minority coaches, we could not imply that diversity produces equity. This is because minority workers follow a more restricted pathway to high-level positions where they are limited to formal channels of mobility based on their credentials and skills. Contrarily, whites not only have access to formal channels of mobility but also benefit from the subjective and sometimes biased assessments of their skills and abilities (Day, 2015).

It is with this insight that we posit that the professional Belgian football industry is a cultural agent that implicitly socialises the population to normalise the idea that it is acceptable to view (non-white) people with African ethnicities as inferior to native Belgians and Europeans. In this context, this means that non-white ethnic minorities are perceived incapable of holding leadership positions, while white Europeans continue to hegemonise these roles. However, in order to more precisely determine if this scarcity of racial-ethnic diversity is emblematic of a profounder set of social problems, and to understand the varying degree of social dominance orientation of football stakeholders, a more in-depth study must be executed. Such a qualitative ethnographic study would have to become engaged in discourse analysis pertaining to the rhetoric of the various Belgian football stakeholders. Through this process we can more thoroughly examine the communication of these actors with respect to (institutional) discrimination, stereotypes and racial banter, and better gauge the perceptions of those seeking employment and those in charge of the hiring process, and moreover, the interaction

between these groups (Bradbury et al., 2016; Sidanius et al., 2004). All in all, by identifying and understanding the conditions and factors that contribute to the reproduction and the potential spread of racist attitudes and group-based dominance, we can promote a more thorough and active approach against it. In other words, we can enhance the understanding of racism for those whose role will be to identify, report and analyse such phenomena, and in turn, the Belgian football community can then more efficiently create and implement anti-racism and social inclusion and corporate social responsibility (CSR) -related policies.

### **Policy recommendations**

Such CSR-related policies and initiatives have displayed the potential to break down racial and ethnic barriers. For example, at the macro level, the so-called Belgian Football Law ('Voetbalwet/ Loi Foot') is a landmark regulation that provides and clarifies the guidelines and underlying principles for security protocols at football matches. The so-called Football Unit ('Voetbalcel/Cellule Football'), within the Belgian Ministry of Home Affairs, oversees the application of the Football Law by implementing sanctions and advising stakeholders how to handle concrete racist behaviour. However, in this legislation there is no reference to the internal processes of hiring coaches and executives. Thus, it is recommended that legislation is proposed, which expands the parameters of the law, so that it is inclusive of this subject. In this way, a specific unit would be responsible for overseeing the collection of data related to this issue and monitoring it consistently (Bradbury et al., 2014). From a meso-level perspective, the Royal Belgian Football Association (KBVB/URBSFA) has been keen on offering diversity workshops, seminars and conferences on the issues of discrimination and social inclusion (Heim et al., 2018). Also, professional football clubs<sup>5</sup> invest responsibly in social projects that aim to safeguard the cultural richness and enhance the social cohesiveness of Belgian society<sup>6</sup> (Deloitte, 2018). However, there appears to be a shortcoming from both the national football federation and clubs when addressing the topics of institutional/structural racism. It is suggested that the national football association and the respective professional football clubs broaden their educational strategy in a way that focuses on the topics and subjects of this study. Elaborating on this, given that the KBVB/URBSFA has already established social infrastructure, such as the Belgian Football Coaches Association (BFC), it is recommended that this entity first subsidises training courses for (racially and ethnically) marginalised and less privileged individuals, and secondly implements a mentoring/buddy programme. In turn, these programmes would teach management and leadership skills, thus acting as a vehicle for racial and ethnic minorities

to access the top tiers of the game (as coaches) in a way that is currently unavailable. Lastly, it is advised that the 'Rooney Rule' is adopted both on a national and club level, where the KBVB/URBSFA and professional Belgian football clubs must interview at least one racial and ethnic minority candidate in case of a vacancy on a managerial level (NFL, 2018).

## Conclusions

In the foregoing analysis, the aim was to explore how the social phenomena of race and ethnicity function within the professional Belgian football industry. This was executed through the collection and analysis of the racial and ethnic backgrounds of footballers, head and assistant coaches. Ultimately, when the demographics of coaches were compared to that of professional footballers, individuals with a non-white racial background and people with sub-Saharan African ethnicity appear to be marginalised in terms of their access to the necessary resources and skills to become coaches. Moreover, while the presence of players of (non-white) African ethnicity has flourished over recent decades, it appears that this demographic is struggling to break into the upper echelons of coaching positions. Thus, we posit these (player/athletic) competencies are not transferred to the coaching sector and leadership positions, as individuals from, in particular, sub-Saharan Africa are over-represented on the playing field, but are under-represented on the sidelines and in the executive boxes. While these preliminary results indicate the features of a group-based hierarchical society, these statistics alone cannot fully explain the inequalities that are apparent within the context of coaching positions, and we do not claim to fully understand the mechanisms that are turning this social phenomenon. Nevertheless, this study serves as an open message and a critical starting point to stimulate dialogue and raise awareness that there is a glass ceiling in professional Belgian football, and moreover, racial and ethnic barriers are currently prohibiting African nationals and people of African origins from obtaining coaching and leadership positions.

## Notes

- 1 Of this combined 20.5%, some of the key ethnic identities living in Belgium are the 311,772 Moroccan, 273,350 Italian, 213,619 French, 186,069 Dutch, 155,488 Turkish, 95,801 Polish, 92,746 Romanian, and 60,257 Congolese (Myria, 2018).
- 2 Also, the sharp contrast amongst each particular region, with regard to their respective socio-historical development, languages, contemporary economic status and political movements requires Belgium to be situated according to its three regions.

- 3 This is a strong increase from 2005 when there were 297,289 who did not have a Belgian passport.
- 4 The designation sub-Saharan Africa is commonly used in correspondence with the UN Statistics Division to indicate the whole of Africa except North Africa, which consists of the countries Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Arab Democratic Republic of Sahara, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (United Nations Statistics Division, 2019).
- 5 22 of 24 clubs have a social inclusion strategy, 16 of 24 clubs have an education strategy, and 15 of 24 have a health strategy (Deloitte, 2018).
- 6 298 social projects during the 2016–2017 season. Falling under the responsibility of ‘Community Manager’; 1.7 million euros budget, 58,000 participants in these projects (Deloitte, 2018).

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