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Perspective of social change in voluntary sport institutions in Portugal

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Summary

The ecological approach allowed the researchers to appreciate the historical, contextual and social nature of changing and to discuss the role of managers and various forces in shaping its course and outcomes. The aim of this study was to explore the ecological perspective in different levels of practice and organizations with different social backgrounds to determine social change in youth athletes. The study used 21 semi-structured interviews, field diary and participant observation with significant others (coaches, directors and parents) in two contrasting football clubs, a social oriented and a professional oriented club to record their perceptions and attitudes to being expected to serve social change and the current pressures on themselves and their clubs. It is clear that social clubs have a very important role in their communities and are in need of more attention from political parties.

Key words: sport organizations; volunteer activity; social change; youth athletes

Introduction

Australia, Switzerland and Sweden are among the countries that have a high amount of members in voluntary sport organizations. In Europe the sports organization grounded in culture and practice of the voluntary action represent the social backbone of the sports system at large. In fact it is well understood that, in many countries, voluntary sport organizations make up the largest part of the voluntary sector in western countries [Seippel 2006, p. 172].

A difficult task emerges in an attempt to measure different types of voluntary work and various kinds of club characteristics [Seippel 2002, p. 257]. This is to say that the nature of voluntarism/professionalism varies significantly between sport organizations.

Portuguese football organizations are based on traditional voluntary work quite different from new waves of approach where voluntary work is applied to create some kind of commercial profit. Portugal has a specific design very different from the system-wide trends toward increased professionalization and bureaucratization [Kikulis, Slack & Hinings 1992, p. 349]. Portuguese voluntary sport organizations (nature of organizations) are among the most ancient and constitute a specific national heritage of high value where volunteering continues to be dominant and where the primary source of funding

continues to be the city halls. Portugal has a large part of sport participation dedicated to football, an increase of public funding to national federations, it is characterized by poor and traditional directors; there is a need to clarify governmental interventions regarding policies towards the normal club or the elite.

There exist two different profiles regarding leadership in sport associativism according to Portuguese reality. First, the professional profile possesses the advantage of accumulation of experience and knowledge, but sport directors tend to eternize in power. The amateur/social profile, normally tend to have a person, which is an essential figure with passion for the sport. Although lacking in formation, time availability and often common and specific knowledge about the role serve as obstacles to the development of sport programs.

In fact, involvement with any extracurricular activity has been associated with lower rates of delinquent behavior, but in regards to risky behaviors, only the protective value of sports [Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soulé, Womer, Lu 2004, p. 256; Lipsey & Wilson 1998, p. 347] and church activities reached statistical significance. Although the sporting context reveals to be important in determining the direction of these behaviors research shows that some particularities might even foster rather than diminish delinquency [Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Sabo & Farrell 2007, p. 718; Shields & Bredemeier 2001, 592; Weber,

Miracle, Rosicky & Crow 2001, p. 324]. The delivery of sport for development at a community level represents more importantly the role that traditional sports clubs and local government have in delivering social inclusion programs [Skinner, Zakus & Cowell 2008, p. 260] in order to foster character development.

Furthermore, context in professional sport organizations has become an important area of research in youth sport development in recent years. Recent studies claim that three aspects of sport organizations (not only organizational but the interpersonal relations in the club) are crucial in life skills development at a micro level in professional environments: practice settings, social relations in the club and success factors in sport [Domingues & Gonçalves 2012a, p. 30; Domingues & Gonçalves, in press].

Following up on Mintzberg's work [1989, p. 45–53 & 1992, p. 87–98] he dedicated intensive research in analyzing organizations in terms of their fluxes and internal structure. It is known that a number of sport organizations depend on their physical surroundings for success; ecological factors are an important part of their general environment [Slack 1997, p. 40–45]. Perceived environment also comes into play when different actors operating in the club may perceive differently the sporting context, considering it dynamic with opportunities for growth or, on the other hand, passive organizations for the goal directors intend to achieve. That is, while the actual environment affects the sport organizations, it is the perceived environment to which significant others respond.

Specifically, Ecological Systems Theory suggests that both human development and behavior is the product of reciprocal interactions between human agents and the objects, symbols and people in their environments [Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 23–45; Bronfenbrenner 1994, p. 44–53]. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory holds that "development" is influenced by several environmental systems and since 1950 he has been engaged in addressing questions that emphasize the dynamic interplay of processes across time frames, levels of analysis and contexts, in which time and timing are central.

Within a Portuguese context and drawing on the ecological approach to organisational change [Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998, p. 118; Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000, p. 128] this paper focus on two types of sport organizations (professional and social oriented). This approach tries to ascertain how perceived and general environment make up of social change in young athletes, namely social competence [Malina & Cumming 2003, p. 11; Petitpas & Champagne 2000, p. 121] and the sense of belonging [Walseth 2006, p. 450; Weiss & Stuntz 2004, p. 33–42].

It is hypothesized that a more Professional Oriented Club (POC) necessarily has different characteristics and social meaning than a more Social Oriented Club

(SOC). It is hypothesized that from the professional perspective, social change is a product of a more caring and nurturing environment that compels personal development in young athletes. On the other hand, the SOC tries to provide a social environment, heavily dependent on volunteers, in order to avoid delinquency and at risk behaviors. Finally, in terms of the club's volunteer activity the SOC is more dependent on social relatedness and mutual help of its members, while the POC is more formal and structured and therefore less dependent on human relations.

Methodology

The following methods served to enhance the researcher's understanding of the processes taken in each club in order to promote and develop social change, and concomitantly, the role that these volunteer organizations with different characteristics play in promoting such a change in young athletes.

Participants

Participants ($n = 21$) were selected according to their representativeness and importance in two contrasting football environments, a Professional Oriented Club (POC) and a Social Oriented Club (SOC), such as parents with managerial roles, directors, coaches with a rich past serving the club, former senior players and youth coordinator. The term POC refers to a club with a senior professional squad with wide history in the Portuguese first division. The club is located in the center area of Portugal and has sixteen youth teams competing at a national and regional level.

Data Collection

Data was collected and analyzed longitudinally during two sport years. Several methods of data collection were used, namely, 22 semi-structured interviews, participant observation (accounted for more than 145 hours of direct observation, with the construction of a field diary (see Table 1) and completion of observation grills which served the purpose of cross checking the interviewers statement) were employed to provide a thick description of the reality of a professional club. This multi method approach allowed a cross validation and added emergent descriptions [Lessard-Hérbert, Goyette & Boutin 2008, p. 12–35].

Procedures

Various meetings were held prior to data collection to introduce procedures and establish further visits. Participant observation was partially co-organized on a weekly timetable with the youth coordinator in order to observe training sessions and arrange the interview meetings with the coaches. The scheduled observations were distributed

Table 1. Field Descriptive Analysis

Denomination			Time	Reference
Physical Time	Month	Day	Hour	Temperature
Context (Mycosystem)	Structure		Physical Characteristics	Internal Organization
				Planned
				Not Planned
Person in context	Race		Sex	Age
Individual Behavior (Person)	Competence		Dysfunction	
Interaction Patterns and Group Activities (Proximal Processes)				
Communication	Content			Intensity
	Time and language routine			Function
Non verbal behavior and linguistic properties	Young athletes			Adults
Motivation and Goal Achievement	Individual			Group
Influence of other social systems in context	Proximal (Mesosystem)			Non Proximal (Exosystem)

Note. Based on Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998) and Bronfenbrenner & Evans (2000)

in different competitive phases throughout the sport season in order to capture diverse informational cues.

Interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and tape recorder confirmation followed the procedure. This study was approved by the ethic board committee of the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education in Coimbra. In fact, ethical guidelines followed the work towards protecting the individuals, communities and environments involved in the studies against any form of harm, manipulation or malpractice

Data Analysis

Researchers used conceptual analysis in the study to check for concepts and its occurrences, and relational analysis by examining the relationships among concepts in the gathered information provided by the semi-structured interviews as well as the field diary.

The researchers proceeded with a thematic analysis of text in which a qualitative content analysis was employed with four successive and interdependent steps [Bardin 1988, p. 25–48; Krippendorff 2012, p. 33–51]. First, interview transcription (discourse reproduction); second step, careful reading and analysis (including second and third reading) from both the main researchers and senior researcher. In the third phase, identification and descrip-

tion of specific themes through deductive analysis (unitizing); and lastly, inductive qualitative analysis with the identified themes and the creation of categories.

All of the categories were reviewed and ascertain whether some categories could be merged or if some needed to be sub-categorized against pre-determined codes [Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 33–45; Atkinson & Hammersley 2007, p. 20–28]. Finally researchers returned to the original transcripts and ensure that all the information that needed to be categorized had been so. Similarly, field diary and observational grills were analyzed sequentially to semi-structured interviews which allowed crossing data and statement verification. Content analysis was made by hand and the usage of several methods by which data was collected in order to assure multiple forms of information served to enhance possible limitations of this data analysis method.

Validity

The researcher’s used the following four criteria rather than Cook & Campbell’s [1979, p. 45–58] framework of validity because they better reflected the underlying assumptions involved in much qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability [Guba & Lincoln 1981, p. 45–67].

Table 2. Turbulence and Behavior

Social Oriented Club	Professional Oriented Club
Reinventing day to day situations	Weekly approach planning
Reconstruct opportunities	Reconstruct opportunities
Attempt to take advantage of situations	Attempt to take advantage of situations
Day to day surprise management	Weekly Term Planning
Hunch and intuitive based knowledge	Rational management

Table 3. Rate of Change and Complexity

Social Oriented Club	Professional Oriented Club
Simple organizational structure	More complex organizational structure
Rapid change	Slow pace of change
Unpredictable scenario	Not predictable scenario
Community based interventions	Hierarchical based interventions
Informal flow management	Formal flow management
Horizontal based relations	Mixed based relations
Ad hoc decision making (moments)	Purposeful decision making

Table 4. Major categories and groups of responses

Dimensions	Major Category	Statement group label
Sport Context and Achievement	Club and Identity	Club's Social Goal's Social Reality Professionalism
	Community and Social Integration	Sporting Culture Social Context Status and Recognition
	Organization and Structure	Structure and Resources Internal Organization
Personal Development and Self-Improvement	Climate and Social Values	Sport Goal's Social Integration Youth Identity Personal Development
	Social Relations	Adult's Significance Youth Sport Role Youth Identity

After complete interpretation, emerging data was delivered to the significant others for feedback check and cross validation. Peer review was assured by an external research specialist in content analysis and with extensive experience in conducting qualitative studies. This was a way to transfer the findings to other sport organizations and confirm the results. Furthermore, the extensive time spent on participant observation was crucial to fully characterize these two clubs in terms of organization, structure and providers of social change.

The thick description provided (Field diary and observational grids) helped in generalizing the results to other context or sport settings providing in that sense the transferability criteria. The dependability criteria, known in quantitative terms as reliability was more difficult to ascertain. In that sense the ever-changing context within which research occurred and how these changes could have affected the conclusions that were reached were described.

Results

From the field diary and participant observation two tables emerged based on the work on organizational studies of Mintzberg [1992, p. 75–88 & 2009, p. 45–68], and with more specific detail on sport organizations contributed the work of Pires [2007, p. 62–75] and Slack [1997, p. 95–112]. Two dimensions arose from this content analysis, they are summarized in table 2.

Despite the difference in orientation and competitive dimension, the two clubs under study presented clear structural deficits with few resources for the respective sport demands. Both clubs showed few consistent training structures, although different in nature with few resources available for the amount of teams involved in the professional club as well as the social club.

There was some difference between the two organizations; the “professional” club was clearly composed of two contrasting inner realities, youth academy and the professional squad with its specific organization.

Following on the theoretical background of Bronfenbrenner initial work [1979, p. 32–43] and subsequent reformulations [Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 67–75; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 120]. The following table illustrates how the categories and dimensions were elaborated both inductively and deductively using the BioEcological Theory.

Club and Identity

The club’s orientation reveals social intervention capacity and accessibility for sports, “... the club is training youngsters and tries to get them out of the wrong ways [...]” (PJBMM). The other significant resemble the club to a family structure in which the driving force of the

small club is their human heritage, through the support for young people growing up in poor neighborhood social environments:

“... Maybe it makes more work and is more fruitful in relation to these new athletes who often have nowhere to go and X here is almost their second house ...” (CFJ)

This fact differentiates the SOC from other teams who live from sponsorship in their work, “... it is a club from a neighborhood but there is more union. It’s what’s happening here, based upon people [...] in a city club [...] lives more from sponsorship ...” (PJBMM). The club embodies itself on creating a context of interdependence often dubbed by the term “mystical” where close relationships strengthen the sense of unity: “... in social neighborhoods is easier to get these mystical behaviors because people are simpler, humbler and turn out to join up more often ...” (CFJ).

This social context where the club is immersed represents a degrading and problematic reality where several neighborhoods coexist, “... I know some kids playing here that if it weren’t for the club they were already tucked into trouble [...]” (PJBG); a reality that is inherent to a certain kind of fragile family structure:

“... The reality is a bit degraded [...] the drug circulates [...] the social function of the club is to call the youngsters, take them out of this reality and insert them in another, perhaps these youngsters are lacking in terms of family organization, many of them, this is the reality of this club.” (PJDCSE)

Two main difficulties are found at the POC: financial and infrastructural;

“... The club became used to live on public benefits and therefore have not established their own sources of revenue, and that’s why from time to time the club is shaking like now in financial terms.” (TJB1)

Community Integration

The other significant concerns that sport maybe linked to the economic capacity of parents to provide these experiences to the child with a different sporting environment are a charging reality of this club:

“The big club looks for the athlete, they are trying to take economic advantages from them [...] because they have great conditions and parents pay for it, you will automatically be paying for your child, he will play, since my son is from a neighborhood will not be able to play...” (PJBMM)

The club’s standing given by its significance represents a space for social change, “... here they aren’t getting bad habits [...] there exist social neighborhoods that are, drugs and stuff [...] I had friends that died because of this (drugs).” (PJCPA).

Adults from the POC refer to the existence of an attempt to mobilize people to the club and promote a bigger intervention in society, “The club, at a senior level is

starting to do something like regular visits to hospital, little promotions..." (PJA); however, there are few promotions that link decisively these social actions to the community: "... I have been participating in some actions of the Food Bank and I have never seen the X club, for example, involved with two or three teams..." (PJA2).

Structure and Organization

The SOC organization is based on immediacy and casualistic relation with the sport environment; the ongoing change of the sporting context provides constant challenges: "...more voluntarism and free work, perhaps there doesn't exist any planning, with no goals, it is a question of managing the present [...] a fight for survival." (PJDCSE)

Structural and organizational deficiency represents day to day difficulties, especially when talking about basic needs of the club, "difficulties of every order, from difficulty arranging money for gas, water, light, dress rooms with problems, everything, and everything is a problem for us." (CFJ)

The club's situation demobilizes youngsters and can only secure the most problematic with more negative behaviors. "... We always keep with what gives us more work, those youngsters that are socially more irreverent, sometimes more undisciplined..." (CFJ). The work that is being done here is based on these rejected youngsters from surrounding clubs.

"...we have a lot of difficulties because at a sport level we are almost considered the garbage dump of Porto City [...] any young athlete that wants to play football [...] goes to anywhere but here..." (CFJ)

There is a general consensus that the infra structural deficit carries difficulties in the overall organization namely, logistic, youth mobilization and practice conditions, "...it is the problem of the infra structures. This is a club that doesn't have, at this moment, a proper base that could allow regarding training conditions, organization, equipment a proper work..." (CFJ); a clear separation and difficulties in linking the professional with the academy, "...bad, because there still are a lot of things that are channeled to the professional side as there is a very big distance between these two." (TC2)

The new reality of the SAD as a means to improve the academy and general conditions for the club, especially at an organizational level doesn't present real solutions, "there's a SAD that I'm unaware of! I only know the the coaches and the coordinator." (PJA)

Climate and Social Values

According to the other significant, interpersonal relations are positive; players don't distinguish between socioeconomic statuses and social stratification. Fathers are careful regarding social differences that tend to blind in the pitch and equal treatment.

"Whether the players come from a social neighborhood or don't come from there, we have sons from medical doctors, here we have, graphics like me, we have sons from locksmiths [...] they (players) don't make that distinction. Here they are players and friends; they don't make that distinction..." (PJBG)

People in the club resemble the main relationships as a family structure, the absence of organizational and structural barriers facilitate this approach. There is a worry, among other significant, to occupy the youngsters in an attempt to deviate them from dangerous paths, football functions as a specific space that has social meaning. The other significant refer to the role that the sport organizations have in implementing team spirit, solidarity, sharing values, with youngsters from different social backgrounds and understand each one's habits.

"I think that the role the club's play is very important [...] to implement, team spirit, solidarity... I think its fundamental [...] social integrating the players and seeing different realities from different social strata." (PJCCVIF)

Football is considered a space of social construction that is useful in the community, whilst the recognition and status of the POC shows specific behaviors. Youngsters' perception of the sport context carries them to different behaviors: "... when they arrive to the club, they modify completely there sense of being, and become super dedicated and committed athletes, with high standards of assiduity in training." (CFJ)

"Team spirit, sacrifice, humility, sharing, I think there are some values that they carry with them outside to the community and the club is making a real effort to get closer, they have, for example, marketing in schools." (TJC2)

The other significant refer to the existence of a different orientation as soon as they arrive at the club, "... rigor, goal definition [...] they will have to be able to deal with setbacks [...] in our life we will be confronted with things that aren't going to go well." (DJA)

Social Relations

Social support provided by the club represents a transition to another mesosystem in the youngsters' life following the athlete's life span and an attempt of inclusion in society. The directors of the club feel the need to try to compensate the lack of family support.

"We have a kid that was in need and addicted [...] the youngster is here, continues to work and therefore, he has a history of drugs as well as his parents were consumers and the athletes is clean now." (PJBMM)

The richness of the club and the real work is in providing an exchange of experiences that mix the positive points of every each part of the social line that comes together in the club: "the social kid helps the one that has it all and good grades, and sometimes know part of life that he is not aware of." (CFJ)

Recognizing that some social neighborhood youngsters are at risk with negative behaviors turns adults more careful: "Being sent off is exactly what he wanted, is what suits him, because these kids [...] their role is to claim for negative attention." (CFJ)

Coaches are responsible for group cohesion and youngsters affectivity: "The coach is not just a coach; it is an older friend, a life living experience that they not yet had..." (TJB2). Relations among adults in the club and voluntarism are considered positive assets with high impact on their lives outside of football, "There are people in which the club has an important impact [...] I see that the club has that impact on their social life." (TJC1)

Discussion

These findings make the social mechanisms outlined (sense of belonging and sense of competence) reasonable. There is a positive effect of more connected relations in being a member of the professional sport organization and of the level of activity in that organization. Surprisingly, and although having different sport orientations both clubs have a predominance of volunteer activity, showing fragile structures and difficulty in organizing daily activities.

Giving the positioning of the POC in Portuguese reality, the professional club is inexistent regarding more formal social responsibility. Indeed, the growing corporate social responsibility in sport organizations is put in evidence by a growing number of "giving" initiatives and "charitable" programs [Bradish & Cronin 2009, p. 692]. The professional environment felt not only by the young athletes but by significant others (parents, coaches, directors) were conducive to clear achievement behaviors of commitment and effort.

In fact, the ecological environment as conceived by Bronfenbrenner is highly influenced by the developing person, differentiated in nested structures [Bronfenbrenner 1994, p. 111–124]. One of the most important benefits reported in the interviews of the SOC was that without volunteers there would not be so many opportunities for youngsters to participate in sport. The opportunities for young athletes to participate were also felt to be important to the local community where delinquency and at risk behavior was common.

These results stress other findings, for example, results from the study of Gottfredson, Soul, Womer and Lu [2004, p. 260–264] imply that participation in sports reduced delinquent behavior for middle-school but not for elementary-school-aged youths. This reduction was not achieved by decreasing time spent unsupervised or by increasing involvement in constructive activities, but by increasing intentions not to use drugs and positive peer associations. Effects on these outcomes were strong-

est in programs that incorporated a high emphasis on social skills and character development.

Conventional wisdom suggests that organized sport deters adolescent's delinquency by building character structuring their time and providing incentives for socially approved behavior as confirmed by this paper and other studies [Lipsey & Wilson 1998, p. 220–223; Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Sabo & Farrell 2007, p. 715–722]. This study partially reinforces the fact that delinquency prevention and structured preventive interventions such as sport must focus on social competency in the sense that doing something valuable and noteworthy will impede these behaviors.

In fact, in the bioecological model, development is defined as the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups [Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998, p. 87]. As child develops, the interaction within these environments becomes more complex [Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000, p. 119]. In this particular Bengoechea and Johnson [2001, p. 25–28] highlight youth sport interaction (coaches, parents) and consider time as an intricate element with context developmental characteristics.

Concerns have been voiced regarding the highly competitive nature of youth sports; they are becoming "professionalized," with year-round training, early specialization, ranking, and a focus on the outcomes of success rather than on educational goals or life skills development [Gould & Carson 2004]. When scientific evidence is examined athletic development research shows that many of these "professionalized" practices may not be optimal approaches for fostering athletic talent development [Gould & Carson 2004, p. 23].

From early as 1975 sport has been put into question concerning its socialization effects [Stevenson 1975, p. 297]. Shields and Bredemeier [2001, p. 586–590] are sometimes cautious in drawing conclusions from their findings, noting that selection effects may be at work rather than anything intrinsic to sports play itself. In this sense, Malina and Cumming [2003, p. 9–13] outlined social competence as possible benefits of participation in sports. Taken into consideration that social competence is the condition of possessing the social, emotional, and intellectual skills and behaviors needed to succeed as a member of society, appropriate management and guidance was highlighted by Petitpas and Champagne [2000, p. 117–120] as crucial in developing optimal behaviors in youth.

Once again, the results reveal that the effects of the proximal processes as defined by Bronfenbrenner are more powerful than those of the environmental contexts in which they occur. Furthermore, issues of personal development and life enhancing skills are better constructed and developed in the POC, with visible qualities

such as self-confidence, the building of social relations and sense of belonging. In fact, sport can provide peer interaction through both teammates and healthy competition [Weiss & Stuntz 2004, p. 101–123]. In line with Walseth [2006, p. 449–452] the analysis presented here establishes a line of separation between traditional community sport clubs that produce social support in the forefront of social change and resemble themselves to a family structure [Domingues & Gonçalves 2012, p. 73–75] and a more “professionalized” sport club, with its oriented structure that contributes to more personal and life enduring skills.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the ecological perspective in different levels of practice and organizations with different social backgrounds to determine positive links to attitudes and behavior in youth athletes. Sport organizations as shown here with different levels of achievements and orientations tend to show major difficulties in maintaining a proper structure that can fulfill their day to day goals. More formal and professional institutions tend to have better scores in social indicators among young athletes. It is clear however that more social institutions as described here have a very important role in their communities and are in need of more attention from political parties.

What is clear from this study is a case analysis of two types of structures in Portugal sport system: a “professional” and a social club and how they present themselves in the social spectrum as volunteer organizations. In combination with other public forces, social change from the SOC may represent an opportunity for different actors to transform and implement important sport programs in sensible areas of certain communities. Putting this clear, the POC, can introduce a particular environment that enhances personal development and assure at the same time, the necessary acquisition of social enduring skills. In both cases, volunteer activity resembles an important feature in sport development, thus contributing to a better understanding of these particular sport contexts.

Sport must constitute itself a social agglutinate and, in some cases, prophylactic with important social significance as well as a transversal response between educative, institutional and federative world. Further studies should include a more in depth approach (ethnographic) to community clubs with a strong social meaning in order to realize how organizational and contextual cues can be fostered to help young athletes that are struggling in life.

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