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Young Athletes Social Networks in Different Sporting Contexts

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to determine which "pathway" the athlete follows and how outcomes (positive or negative) are acquired. The results demonstrate that careful attention must be made to the interpersonal network of relations, independent of sport settings. The youth athletes in the professional club reveal a tendency to aspire for professionalization as they consistently show higher achievement goal perspectives and a clear notion of sport career. To date, little work has been done to ascertain what characteristics or features of the youth sport environment combine to produce either a positive or negative experience. More disrupt behaviour was accounted for in the SOC, meaning less social structure and more aggressive playing. Although participation is often linked with developmental benefits, mere participation does not confer benefits. The study stresses the importance to develop an understanding of the contextual factors or features of specialized youth sport environment(s) that are having positive impacts on youth growth, development and long-term commitment to sport. The findings of the current study provide support for the fact that it is not so much the "type" of sport trajectory that youth participate in, but what is happening in those environments that is important.

Keywords*: Youth Sport, Social Relations, Ecology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth participation in organized sport can be regarded as an established aspect of society. Several studies have demonstrated the potential for organized youth activities like sport, to provide for experiences that ultimately nurture childhood growth and development (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000).

In addition to the development of sport-specific skills and competencies, sport is commonly considered a medium or tool through which other life skills are taught, including, but not limited to persistence, teamwork, leadership, and character development (Baron, 2007; Weiss, 2004). The transferability of these skills to other life domains makes the study of the interpersonal and intrapersonal processes within sport an exciting and productive research agenda (Danish & Gullotta, 2000; Danish, Taylor, & Fazio, 2003; Smoll & Smith, 2002). As all youth sport programs have the potential to positively contribute to youth development and long-term

participation, this does not occur automatically and is ultimately a product of the socially constructed environment within which the sport takes place.

In Addition, contemporary developmental science has come to recognize development as a bidirectional relationship between individual and context (Garcia Bengoechea & Johnson, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Specifically, Ecological Systems Theory suggests that both human development and behaviour are the product of reciprocal interactions between human agents and the objects, symbols and people in their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1999). 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. The first systematic comprehensive expositions of the model appeared in 1970 and 1979 and since then followed integrative formulations (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

By their very nature, youth sport programs are ecological systems as they engage multiple facets of the physical and social environment (Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2009; Stokols, 1992) and have the potential to contribute to positive development (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). To date, little work has been done to ascertain what characteristics or features of the youth sport environment combine to produce either a positive or negative experience. This main objective of this study is to determine which "pathway" the athlete follows and how outcomes (positive or negative) are acquired.

2.   METHOD

Participants

 6 interview groups (n=34) from under 16 and under 14 youth soccer players were conducted in two different environmental sport practices, a social oriented club (SOC) and a professional oriented club (POC). The group of participants were chosen according to specific intra-team roles and with previous knowledge of each coach: captain and sub-captain, best player, more disciplined, more irreverent.

Procedures

A prior data arrangement was established with the coordinators to inform them about the procedures of the interviews. After the approval, coaches and directors were informed in order to arrange date and place. Deliberate consent form to the parents of the athletes involved were secured, it was also assured confidentiality and data anonymity. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sport Sciences of the University of Coimbra.

Data Collection

The tape recorder used was Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-8600PC. Data was collected prior to training in a reserved place, avoiding disturbances and third party influences. They lasted 35 through 45 minutes and during the interviews the researcher adopted a non-critical and non-evaluative posture, intervening only when was strictly necessary to clarify some subject.

For data collection were used various methods such as participant observation, camp diary and group interviews. The combinations of methods permitted cross validation and emerging descriptions were added (Lessard-Hérbert, Goyette, Boutin, 2008). The intent in research is to use two or more aspects of research to strengthen the design to increase the ability to interpret the

findings (Denzin, 1989; Kimchi, Polivka, & Stevenson, 1991; Polit & Hungler, 1995). The respondents were asked about Identity and Experience, Initiative, Positive Relations, Social Skills and Teamwork, Social Integration and Adult Network, Significant Others and Experiences.

Data Analysis

At the end of the day, the interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and confirmed again with the recorder. Further the transcribed texts were confirmed with the respondents, they were identified by particular age group, under 16, under 15, under 14 and under 13.

Content analysis was elaborated according to procedures suggested by specialist in qualitative methodology in various contexts, including sport (Gould, Eklund & Jackson, 1992; Dugdale, Eklund & Gordon, 2002). This qualitative analysis followed four successive steps: 1) interview transcription (discourse reproduction; 2) careful reading and analysis (including second and third reading) from the main researcher, key researcher and participants; 3) identification and description of specific themes; 4) inductive analysis of the themes identified and creation of dimensions.

Data was analyzed both inductively and deductively, according to standard interpretive techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Patton, 2002;) as it constitutes the most pragmatic way of conducting content analysis (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005). Analysis first proceeded inductively by coding based on the themes and categories inherent of the athletes" descriptions of their experience. Following this inductive approach, the eight setting features were used as a framework for deductive inquiry to understand how the athletes" experiences materialize or relate to the eight setting features. Specifically, the eight setting features were mapped onto the emergent themes during the latter stages of data analysis.
Groups of statements were formed when the researchers considered there were sufficient statements to saturate a category (Glaser, 1978; Shapiro, Markoff, 1997; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is important to refer that dimensions emerged through thorough reflexions and posterior consensus between researchers and participants. Some groups of statements and some major categories contained more statements than others, providing a measure of the strength young athletes views on major standpoints.

3. RESULTS

From the study emerged three great dimensions that allowed better understanding and definition of each club: personal development and self-improvement proximal processes social interactions and sport setting and achievement. The primary researcher and independent analyst demonstrated high agreement. 6 over-arching categories of youth sport experience emerged from the themes generated by the interviews. The groupings and major categories are outlined in Table 1: Major Categories and Group of Responses

Table 1 Major categories and groups of responses	
Major Categories	**Statement group label**
Identity and Experiences	Sport Involvement
	Sport Adherence
Iniciative and Experiences	Physical Benefits
	Personal Benefits
Positive Relations	Interpersonal Relations
	Intra-Team Role
Social Skills and Behavior	Group Climate
	Social Benefits
	Coach Efficacy
Social Integration and Adult Network	Professionalism
	Status and Recognition
	Community Integration
	Other significant Support
Other Significant and Experiences	School Relations
	Support and logistics
	Club's Structure
	Adult's Role

3.1 Personal Development and Self-Improvement

The findings point out that initiation is due primarily to family influences (specially the father) and peers. Youth sport involvement and participation is related to two different but complementary causes: pleasure and attractiveness of soccer and the physical benefits that it disclosures.

This involvement entails personal development grounded on three beneficial dimensions: Personal benefits (time management, resilience, sense of autonomy, discipline and rule fulfillment, responsibility/maturity, identity and balance); social benefits (teamwork, adults relationship, competitive spirit and friendship bonding) and physical benefits (healthy habits, mastery, stress relief).

POC athletes recognize the status and historic importance of the club where the constant drive for victory and visibility enhances a different perspective of sport career in the search for social recognition. Similarly, SOC is considered one of the oldest clubs in the region and despite its decadence youth athletes recognize its social role as it avoids the adoption of risk anti-social behaviours, reinforcing the concept of social responsibility of sport clubs.

Intra-team climate clearly distinguishes the role of captain as athletes point out some characteristics such as responsibility, readiness in helping others, communication skills, leadership and maturity, respect for others, ability to maintain group cohesion and work effort.

3.2 Proximal processes and social interactions

The SOC presented more dysfunction behaviour in sport setting compared to POC, poor physical conditions, unstable management, poverty in social surroundings, less competency in training. In consequence the study revolved around the social interactions they experienced in sport in which could be determined dyadic relationships differently according to the environment. Parents, coaches, peer provided a range of information, opportunities, and support which influenced the quality of sport experience.

The SOC presented a more intense parent-club support relation although no significant differences appeared in parent-athlete support relation and peer-group relations in both clubs.

Also of notice, was the more structured and directional dyadic relation between coach-athlete in the POC although the intensity of this relationship wasn't determined.

In short, the athletes understood tangible support and monitoring as the perception that others provided concrete assistance to them either in the form of material aid or other forms of assistance. In each case, parents were heavily involved in their child's sport experience as they provided athletes with the necessary equipment with which to train, logistic requirements and emotional support:

> "…if it wasn't for the help of parents I think (club) didn't have minimal conditions to participate in competitions!" (Youth SOC)

Peer relations appear as very positive, similar to a family structure and an opportunity to build bonds in both clubs. The cultivation of camaraderie indicates that sport environments provisioning of opportunities to engage in social and recreational activities which fosters relationship building and a collective sense of group as stated by SOC athlete: ("…we are like a family here."). Athletes from the professional club demonstrate a higher capacity to distinguish recreation from the capacity to generate work mentioning concentration and workload as the main outcomes.

3.3 Sport setting and achievement

Analyzing the two clubs, they both reveal lack of a common focus and of coordination between social systems at the mycro-level of immediate settings, especially school. The school system and sport setting tend to mutually misrepresent the importance of each and consequently in the dynamic mesosystem relations between these settings.
The youngsters differ consistently in the concept and consequent sport career engagement. Athletes in the SOC, with its marked downsizing mobility and predominant recreational and social aspects of sport adherence contrast deeply with the notion of career and superior achievement goals of the POC athletes.

> "…we are here because coaches and people who are in charge think we have quality enough to be here."(Youth POC)

The professional oriented club differs heavily from the social club as the up mobility with a clear notion of sport career transmits positive feelings of superiority, sense of belonging and responsibility in demonstrating ability and effort in competition. Achievement recognition represents the perception that others, either by what they did or said, acknowledged athletes efforts as well as challenged them to do or achieve more:

> "…we were chosen and with the players we have and our goals, we have that responsibility, to be better than the opponent…" (Youth POC)

The athletes of both clubs had a well understood notion of self-perception in terms of competence and future progress in sport. Athletes self-appraisal of competitive quality in the POC grounded on the perspective of a task oriented work and a professionalism aspiration promotes more competitive differentiated behavior than from SOC.

Despite the difference in orientation and competitive dimension of the two clubs under study they both present clear structural deficits with few resources for the respective sport demands. The few resources provided available to feed the youths structure have a considerable impact on the sport preparation according to the athlete's statements. Both clubs show few

consistent training structures, although different in nature; the training days/times and practice breakdown were little consistent to allow for the development of a routine, alongside with few resources available for the amount of teams involved in the professional club as well as the social club.

4. DISCUSSION

The main focus of the results seems to imply that the resultant experiential outcomes afforded by these particular soccer settings are dictated by differences in how the environment is constructed. This proposition is consistent with the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), which provides for the fact that different social settings produce different learning environments, resulting in different experiences from one activity to the next.

From a sports perspective this means that some sport environments will inevitably produce more positive outcomes than others – depending on the features of the environment. This finding, however, in the study of ecological approaches to sport activity is a comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal nature of the person-environment interrelation (Nitsch, 2009).

In response to being asked about the positive aspects of being in the club, most youth athletes focused on the social dimensions of membership, learning social skills, making friends and learning to be part of a sport community. The overall quantity of social exchanges in the POC dictates a more positive environment that develops and fosters personal and social positive outcomes. Accordingly, the study highlights personal benefits presented in both settings that are consistent with the literature namely: sense of autonomy (Gonçalves, Carvalho and Light, 2011), time management (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005) and resilience (Kirk, 2005). In the POC there is a major predominance of identity and balance (Morgan et al, 2011) and attitude control (Coakley, 2011).

Bronfenbrenners' definition of proximal processes (interaction between the person's attributes, the characteristics of the environment, and the properties of time) function as the engine of development and the key to understand bioecological paradigm (Krebs, 2009). They are distinguished in terms of the two major kinds of developmental outcomes they produce: Competence (development of knowledge, skill or ability) and dysfunction (difficulty in maintaining control and integration of behaviour).

More disrupt behaviour was accounted for in the SOC, meaning less social structure and more aggressive playing. Although participation is often linked with developmental benefits, mere participation does not confer benefits; it is the quality and implementation of sport programs that are the likely causal mechanisms of enjoyment and development (Theokas, 2009). However, other research posits that youth who spend a greater number of hours per week engaged in an organized activity report higher rates of initiative, identity formation, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions (Hansen & Larson, 2007).

Sports tend to be a public performance, which fosters a sense of community among people-participants. The work of Bengoechea and Strean (2007) suggest that this comment is consistent with a conception of social support as information to the individual that others care about and value him or her. Other research has shown the positive influence of perceived support from parents (e.g., Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Trost & Loprinzi, 2011), coaches (e.g., Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007) and peers (e.g., Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel, & Simons, 1993; Weiss and Smith, 2002) on young athletes'' self-perceptions, affective responses, and motivation.

The study also demonstrated a connection between family and youth engagement and participation in sport. The notion of family socialization appears to be a central part on

youngster's perception of meanings in the sport club confirmed by some literature (Kay, 2000; Visschler, Elferink-Gemser & Lemmink, 2009; Welk, Babkes & Schaben, 2009).

Balduck and Jowett (2011) examined the triadic peer leader-coach-athlete relationship with the 3Cs model and its accompanied CART-Questionnaire. The results indicated that athletes and coaches exhibited interpersonal relationships to a different extent to coaches/athletes and peer leaders. Although it exists in the study some intensity in peer relationship and a predominant social role around the captain figure, we could not verify the intensity of the coach-athlete relation as the authors point out.

In both clubs, athletes demonstrated a sense of belonging to the group and showed the potential of feeling together as a force to drive and achieve. Literature says that group cohesion may influence athlete performance and team success in goal achievement (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, Stevens, 2002; Carron, Bray & Eys, 2002; Sénecal, Loughead & Bloom, 2008) just as the reflected appraisal process (i.e., perception of how others see us) in a sport setting in such indicators as future progress and competence (Trouilloud & Amiel, 2011).

Youth athletes from SOC give some special attention on sport commitment as a way of getting out of trouble, avoiding in-risk adolescent behavior and see environmental action as an opportunity for positive development in line with the words of Schusler and Krasny (2010). Some research suggests that competitive and performance oriented social contexts actually promote antisocial behaviour (Anderson & Morrow, 1995; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996); risk behaviours, including alcohol use and perpetration of negative acts against nonparticipants (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Fauth, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). In addition, the empirical evidence for an association between organized youth sport and juvenile antisocial behaviour, however, remains equivocal (Vazsonyi *et al*., 2002; Duncan *et al*., 2002).

Moreover, some have noted that youth sports 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). In a consistent way, youth need the interaction of multiple processes in the development of elite performance in sport (Côté, Lidor and Hackfort, 2009).

The findings suggest that, although having professional football in the clubs structure, alongside with the natural tendency for youth to aspire in becoming professional players, it seems that no visible pathway and structure exists for youth to achieve it. Therefore, there is a need to the understanding of youth's experience in sport as it would help explain how and why positive or negative effects are found, for which youth and under what conditions (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Kreager, 2007).

Indeed, Coatsworth and Conroy (2009) suggested that sport leaders can actively structure the sport context in a way that can help participants develop in both the physical and psychological domains, especially considering that different exosystems lead to different institutional level policies (Holt, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

In specialized environments, where there is often a greater emphasis on performance, careful attention needs to be paid to the construction of the sport environment. This sport construction may produce an important potential counterforce for reduction and possible reversal of the growing breakdown of social development in modern societies.

The findings of the current study provide support for the fact that it is not so much the "type" of sport trajectory that youth participate in, but what is happening in those environments

that is important. Further longitudinal work needs to be completed in this area examining specialization environments, in order to obtain a clearer picture of the developmental outcomes and experiences at various stages and ages of development.

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